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Author(s): Kauppinen-Räisänen, Hannele; Mühlbacher, Hans; Taishoff, Marika

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Exploring consumers' subjective shopping experiences in directly operated luxury brand stores

Hannele Kauppinen-Räsänen ^{a*}, Hans Mühlbacher ^b, and Marika Taishoff ^b

^aUniversity of Vaasa, School of Marketing and Communication
Wolffintie 34, FIN-65200 Vaasa, FINLAND
hannele.kauppinen-raisanen@uniwaasa.fi

^bInternational University of Monaco, INSEEC Research Center
2, Avenue Albert II, MC-98000, Monaco
hmuehlbacher@inseec.com
mtaishoff@inseec.com

*Corresponding author: Email: hannele.kauppinen-raisanen@uniwaasa.fi

Hannele Kauppinen-Räsänen works as Associate Professor at the University of Vaasa, Finland. Dr Kauppinen-Räsänen has authored articles published in the *Journal of Business Research*, the *Journal of Service Management*, *Tourism Management* and the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*.

Hans Mühlbacher is Professor of Marketing, Research Director and Academic Director of the DBA program at the International University of Monaco. He held visiting positions in Austria, France, Switzerland, and the USA, and has published widely in academic journals, including the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, the *Journal of Management Information Systems*, the *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, the *Journal of Business Research*, and the *European Journal of Marketing*. Dr. Mühlbacher has been the Associate Editor for International Business of the *Journal of Business Research* and is an honorary fellow of the European Marketing Academy.

Marika Taishoff is Professor of Strategy and Luxury, and the MBA Program Director at the International University of Monaco, where she also teaches Luxury Services at the MBA and Masters levels. Prior to joining IUM, she held research and teaching positions at leading business schools in Switzerland, Italy, and the UK. She has also led conferences, such as the Monaco Luxury Symposium, and consulted widely in the field of services management and marketing, and customer experience management, in particular in a luxury environment. She is the co-author of the book, *Competing through Services: Strategy and Implementation*, and has also written numerous award-winning case studies in these domains.

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ABSTRACT

Customers' in-store shopping experiences are critical for luxury brand success. Research on the creation of experiential value in retailing finds clear differences in the cues contributing to delightful consumer experiences depending on the retailing sector. A management perspective dominates research in luxury retailing, while research on consumers' subjective luxury shopping experiences is scarce. This study contributes to filling the gap regarding consumers' subjective experiences through a qualitative inquiry into shoppers' accounts of experiences in luxury brand stores. The study finds that the major determinants of a delightful shopping experience in luxury stores are extraordinary service excellence, unique multi-sensory emotional stimulation conforming to the brand, and a feeling of personal importance and assurance. The study demonstrates the importance of a holistic individual experience in helping shoppers become immersed in the brand universe through all their senses.

Keywords: Brand store; Emotions; In-store shopping; Luxury; Service excellence; Shopping experience

1. Introduction

Building, enhancing, and celebrating brand relationships in directly-operated stores has become a highly important goal for luxury brand management (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Ko, Phau, and Aiello, 2016). Traditionally, researchers have explained the desire for luxury consumption as the consumers' goal of maintaining or advancing status (Kim et al., 2018; Prentice and Loureiro, 2018) through the heritage and exclusivity of luxury goods, as well as their legacy, rarity, and craftsmanship (Heine and Phan, 2011; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). However, in affluent societies, in which consumers are increasingly searching for strong experiences (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010) and meeting customer expectations is no longer sufficient (Arnold et al., 2005; Chitturi et al., 2008), the desire for luxury consumption goes beyond owning and displaying branded luxury goods (Cristini et al., 2017; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2019; Roper et al., 2013). Attracting and emotionally binding customers with delightful experiences has become a pivotal aspect of luxury management. Dion and Borraz (2017, p. 67) observe that "it is not the objects or the brands themselves that define luxury but the social relationships that develop around them". Strong brand relationships can be built and reinforced through interactions with customers in directly operated stores.

Research on service encounters generally demonstrates the importance of customer delight for positive word of mouth, loyalty to the service provider, and re-purchase intentions (Chitturi et al., 2008; Kim and Lee, 2015; Meyer et al., 2017). Consumer delight, defined as a profoundly positive emotional state (Oliver et al., 1997), can arise throughout all consumption stages (Voorhees et al., 2017), such as during the activity of shopping in or even simply visiting a luxury store. Collier et al. (2018, p. 151) suggest that delightfulness comes from "a perceived unique service experience in which the interpersonal interaction between service provider and customer creates value in an unexpected way to meet the individualized needs of the customer." As one of the most important touchpoints with consumers for any luxury brand, directly operated stores can greatly contribute to

the experiential delight (Akaka et al., 2015), while also providing opportunities to build, enhance, and celebrate brand relationships (Dion and Arnould, 2011).

Although attracting customers with delightful experiences has become a pivotal aspect of luxury management, current knowledge of consumers' experiences in directly operated luxury stores is incomplete. Research indicates that consumers are driven to patronize luxury brand stores by the aesthetic appeal of the stores, the trust conveyed, and the overall experience provided by these exclusive stores (Liu et al., 2013). Once inside such stores, the importance of material and social cues of the service context strengthens consumers' enactment of their status position (Dion and Borraz, 2017). However, while previous studies show the peculiarities of context, they do not explicitly address consumers' subjective shopping experiences and offer little insight into the elements of service encounters in luxury brand retailing that create delightful experiences. Studies focusing on service settings other than luxury stores contribute with insights into consumers' shopping experiences (e.g. Terblanche, 2018; Woodside and Walser, 2007), explaining such experiences as the gained brand knowledge and social behavior. Other studies contribute by revealing that experiences are delightful when consumers perceive employee effort, surprise, and empathy (e.g. Arnold et al., 2005; Collier et al., 2018). Research in the fields of luxury hospitality (Wu and Liang, 2009) and luxury health care (Klaus, 2018) point in the same direction. However, as Arnould et al. (2002) and Becker and Jaakkola (2020) note, experiences are contextual processes. Findings from other service and retail sectors cannot simply be transferred to luxury brand retailing.

Most research on luxury brand retailing takes a management perspective (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Batat, 2017; Okonkwo, 2010) or analyzes psychological factors influencing luxury re-purchasing behavior (Kim and Joung, 2016) to make suggestions as to what luxury brand and store managers should attend to in particular. Prior work gives plausible hints to managers but lacks a sound empirical knowledge base of what customers experience while they are shopping in luxury stores. The important question that remains to be answered is how luxury shoppers perceive their experiences

in directly operated luxury brand stores, and what makes them experience a level of delight that enhances their emotional bond with the brand. Thus, the aim of the current study is to address this issue by exploring consumers' experiences in luxury stores.

We gathered rich data through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 104 purposefully sampled luxury consumers in the Principality of Monaco. Interpretive data analysis reveals that extraordinary service excellence, unique multi-sensory emotional stimulation conforming to the brand, and the feeling of personal importance and assurance contribute to delightful shopping in luxury stores. Luxury shoppers want to be immersed with all their senses in the brand celebration within the stores. They want to feel that they are a part of the luxury brand universe, together with and potentially guided by empathic staff who help them feel welcome and secure in this exceptional environment. Such an experience strongly reinforces the consumers' emotional bonds with the brand (Choi et al., 2016).

The findings contribute to extant knowledge in the field of experience-centric services, such as service encounters in luxury brand retailing (Dion and Borraz 2017; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010), by focusing on a sector that, to date, has been studied mainly from a managerial perspective. The findings contribute to literature on luxury consumption by providing a consumer perspective on the experiences lived in directly operated luxury brand stores. Such in-depth knowledge of how customers perceive shopping in luxury brand stores provides managers with useful information on how to supply effective cues to consumers for the co-creation of delightful experiences that reinforce the consumer-brand relationship.

Section 2 provides a brief overview of extant literature in the field, followed by a description in Section 3 of the method applied to empirically investigate luxury customer experiences in directly operated stores. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 discusses the study's academic and managerial contributions and concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

Retail literature contains three research streams that are relevant for consumer experiences in directly operated luxury brand stores. The first stream focuses on drivers of the shopping experience in various retail environments, the second involves the (co-)creation of the service experience in retailing, and the third examines the specifics of luxury retailing from a managerial perspective.

2.1. Drivers of delightful shopping experiences

Research in retail environments shows the strong impact of store atmosphere expectations (Machleit and Eroglu, 2000) and perceived social class of other customers (Chebat et al., 2006) on the emotional reactions and experiences of shoppers. Woodside and Walser (2007) explain the attraction of shopping for mass-market brands in retail stores by the brand knowledge gained, the experienced brand legacy, and the direct or observational sharing of brand experiences with peers. Other studies, including Machleit and Eroglu's (2000), Singh and Prashar's (2014), Terblanche's (2018), and Wu et al.'s (2014), find that drivers of positive shopping experiences vary across retail type and also change over time. These studies investigate experiences in various service settings, ranging from restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters to medical practices, but not within luxury stores.

Many scholars agree that the experiential value and delightfulness of services are essential for customer preference (Collier et al., 2018; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Oliver et al., 1997; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Verhoef et al., 2009; Voss et al., 2009). Research implies that consumers' experiences in and emotional reactions to service encounters depend on the amount of energy they perceive service providers invest in the situation (Specht et al., 2007). According to Collier and Barnes (2015) and Wang (2011), and that the level of customer delight depends on employee effort, the ability of service personnel to surprise clients, and the perceived empathy exhibited to customers (Collier et al.,

2018). Arnold et al. (2005) show that salespeople's behavior, other customers present in the store, product-related issues, customers' time constraints, and mood can lead to either delightful or disappointing experiences in retail shopping. However, researchers such as Chebat et al. (2006), Collier et al. (2018), or Machleit and Eroglu (2000) point out substantial variations of elements affecting experiences across settings.

2.2. (Co-)creation of the service experience in retailing

In line with the findings that experiential delight and delightfulness in service settings derive from social interactions, Arnould (2007) urges researchers to think of consumers as proactive partners and co-creative actors. From a service experience perspective, McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015, p. 431) describe service experiences “as co-created by customers with other actors at the service encounter and in their own service ecosystems.” According to Vargo et al.'s (2008) “value-in-context” concept, retail customers determine and evaluate the value of an experience on the basis of the service exchange influenced by the particular physical, symbolic, social, and cultural context. From a brand experience standpoint, luxury retail stores provide a service context in which service personnel and customers can experience the physical, sensorial, social, and spiritual elements of the brand (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). These brand experiences serve as subjective, multi-sensory episodes in consumers' lives (Carù and Cova, 2003; Helkkula et al., 2012) resulting from “sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments” (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 52).

As two of the few scholars focusing on social interactions in luxury retail stores, Dion and Borraz (2017) demonstrate the role of social dynamics in consumers' luxury retailing encounters. They find that brand and store managers try to manipulate the power of physical and social cues to intimidate consumers and to discern whether they are “legitimate” visitors or not. The given

behavioral etiquette embodied by salespeople often obliges consumers who are visiting the store to adopt the role of being luxury consumers. That is, salespeople educate consumers in how to properly enact their position in the social hierarchy. However, a subjective perspective of shoppers is still missing in the literature, leaving the question of how customers can have a delightful experience under these conditions unanswered.

2.3. Luxury retail shopping service design

Directly operated luxury brand stores provide what Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) call “experience-centric service” in which management attempts to proactively craft the customer experience so as to create distinctive offerings (Voss et al., 2009). As “brandsapes” (Thompson and Arsel, 2004), luxury stores must perform the task of conveying the inherent characteristics of luxury brands. To fulfill this task, stores engage customers in a personal, emotional, physical, intellectual, and even spiritual way (Choi et al., 2016; Dion and Borraz, 2017; Pine and Gilmore 1998).

In line with this thinking, researchers in the domain of luxury retailing tend to focus on managerial aspects. Besson and Gurviez (2000) examine the training of sales personnel for affordable luxury and find a particular emphasis on the individualization of relationships with customers visiting the shop to create and nourish the feeling of proximity. Atwal and Williams (2009) present entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics as the experiential areas, which managers can use to delight customers in luxury shops. Okonkwo (2010) suggests consumer immersion in the aesthetic and creative world of the shop, the prestigious ambiance, and the opportunity for shoppers to interact with products as the drivers of consumer experience in luxury shops. Batat (2017) recommends that managers make the luxury retail experience ultra-customized, highly fluid, and deeply immersing via storytelling and “storydoing” and by integrating digital facets as well.

In sum, research on the drivers of delightful or highly positive customer experiences in retailing provides substantial knowledge on elements contributing to the generation of customer delight. However, the variation of elements affecting experiences across retail settings preclude direct transfer of findings from one retail context to another. Very few scholars focus on individual perceptions and on social interactions in luxury retail stores. They make managerial recommendations based on psychological drivers of repurchase behavior or on practical experience. Empirical evidence from the subjective perspective of luxury consumers is missing in the literature, leaving the question of how customers can have a delightful experience in directly operated luxury brand stores unanswered. Consequently, the research presented in the following attempts to provide answers to two questions:

- 1) What constitutes consumers' in-store experiences in directly-operated luxury stores?
- 2) Which elements of the physical and social environment in luxury retail stores mainly contribute to customer delight?

3. Method

3.1. Study context

The study population comprises consumers shopping in various areas in the Principality of Monaco. Monaco has a total population of approximately 38,000 residents representing 125 nationalities, with only approximately 8,000 locally born inhabitants. Monaco's luxury prestige attracts roughly five million tourists who visit annually from all over the world. The country provides a suitable setting for the study because of the density of shops of world-famous luxury brands from all sectors and the large number of international consumers visiting these shops. Many luxury fashion, jewelry, and cosmetics brands have directly operated stores in Monaco, though none of the brands at

the time the research took place had opened a flagship store. Given this, the findings are not biased by the emphasis of luxury brands on the atmosphere of flagship stores and the training of sales persons in these shops.

3.2. Data collection

Much of the research in the field of high-value retailing encounters uses regression-type methods for quantitative analyses and, as such, takes a rather static view on factors influencing consumer experience. By contrast, the research stream on the co-creation of experiential value in retailing suggests a process perspective that emphasizes the role of various actors in the dynamic creation of delightful experiences. To trace the course of experiential processes, researchers need to apply qualitative research methods (Helkkula et al., 2012).

To obtain deep insights into consumers' shopping experiences in directly operated luxury stores, we designed an exploratory qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews (Hine, 2000). Interviews can uncover detailed information about beliefs and related feelings of individual consumers (Rowley, 2012) by delving deep into sensitive or personal issues (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Twenty carefully selected and intensively trained interviewers conducted individual face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face interviews provide an opportunity for further probing, which is essential to uncover rich insights (Rowley, 2012).

As luxury brand stores do not allow indoor interviewing, the interviewers approached potential informants outside the shops. They informed potential respondents about the study's purpose and the exclusively academic use of the data. Informants were assured that the interviews were confidential and that their responses would be anonymous. Interviewers asked those who were willing to respond to choose a convenient time and interview location. The interviews took place in private spaces and in public areas, such as cafés and shopping malls.

The research questions functioned as a general guide for data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The design allowed for probing (i.e. questions inviting personal reflection) to obtain deep insights into consumers' experiences (Rowley, 2012). The informants' responses determined the sequence of questions as well as the level of probing. As such, each interview diverged from the interview guide (see Appendix 1) to some extent. The interviewers did not ask informants to imagine shopping for a specific category of luxury goods because some brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Chanel, and Prada, have a variety of product categories. Because of the general scarcity of empirical evidence on luxury shopping experiences from consumers' perspective, the interviews focused on informants' general accounts of shopping in directly operated luxury stores.

According to Veal (2006), the length of qualitative in-depth interviews can be between 30 minutes and several hours. As the study had a narrow research theme, conversations with informants lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, with an average duration of 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and literally transcribed.

3.3. Sample

The study employed a purposive sampling procedure, to obtain informants who could provide comprehensive and detailed information about their shopping experiences in directly operated luxury brand stores (Quinn-Patton, 2015). Equally important, informants had to consider themselves as being regular luxury consumers (i.e. purchased luxury goods in physical stores every now and then), be available, be willing to respond (Spradley, 1979), and feel comfortable in talking about their luxury shopping experience.

In total, 104 informants were interviewed. The determination of sample size followed the principle of identifying the point of redundancy (Charmaz, 2006). Data collection ended when no new information came from interviewing additional informants (Kumar, 2005). This point was

reached at 84 interviews. However, we decided to conduct another 20 interviews to ensure that the point of redundancy was indeed reached (Quinn-Patton, 2015). The final sample consisted of 98 informants; we removed six informants from the original sample who failed to perceive themselves as luxury consumers. Informants were citizens of 20 different countries (see Table 1), and their ages ranged from 19 to 81 years, with an average age of 35. Most of the respondents were women. Informants spent between €3 000 and €96 000 annually on luxury items.

INSERT Table 1 HERE

3.4. Data analysis

The unit of observation was respondents' experiences in physical luxury stores, while the unit of analysis was the experiences and the elements within the retail context that contributed to the experiences. The data analysis process encompassed two steps. In the first step, two researchers independently analyzed the individual data to develop analytical categories (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) according to the principles of inductive data analysis (Spiggle, 1994). The researchers compared the findings for each individual respondent and discussed diverging interpretations until a common understanding of the data material was reached. In a second step, the researchers analyzed the narrations of the respondents to detect general elements leading to a delightful shopping experience. Cross-case analysis allowed the researchers to find gradually emerging typical patterns of shared characteristics for each element (Quinn-Patton, 2015). The socio-demographic diversity of informants in terms of age and nationality enabled us to challenge the validity and scope of emerging interpretations by triangulating the data across respondents and the transferability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4. Results

The results showed that in-store experiences stem from (1) extraordinary service excellence, (2) unique multi-sensory emotional stimulation conforming to the meaning of the brand, and (3) personal importance and assurance. The study also detected several elements that not only characterize the experiences but also reveal the nature of the elements in a luxury retail store that contribute to the delightfulness of the experiences.

4.1. *Extraordinary service excellence*

Delightful in-store experiences come from service that reaches the highest quality. The informants called such service “outstanding” or “extraordinary”. In evaluating service quality and expressing service excellence, the informants’ experience of delight came from *human* (perceived technical and emotional competencies, empathy, and responsiveness of sales persons) and *technical* (immediacy) *aspects* of the store.

The human aspect of extraordinary service excellence comes from a desire to form relationships with sales persons. The informants indicated that such relationships included an expectation that the assistants hold superior technical competence, which they also perceived as a unique characteristic of luxury stores. For example, a female consumer from England (aged 53) mentioned that she feels delight when salespeople demonstrate their technical competence by sharing heritage insights, deep brand knowledge, and product information in a sophisticated and well-educated manner:

The staff is very nice, give a lot of information, are very polite, and they know what they are selling. They [sales persons] know their products very well. They are usually charismatic and knowledgeable.

A 35-year-old French shopper added:

When we purchase in luxurious shop[s] we don't just buy the product, we learn about the brand, the product. It is an interesting experience.

In addition to technical competence, the informants stressed the importance of the store personnel's emotional competence. As a Russian shopper indicated, sales persons who acknowledge the emotional states of customers entering a store, who understand the emotions evoked in the store, and who make customers feel valued contribute to a delightful experience:

Even though I am not rich, when you walk in, they [sales persons] make me feel rich [because of] the way they treat you.

A 19-year-old Italian shopper added:

You feel like you are being put on top of the world.

The French female shopper (aged 35) also noted the importance of sales persons helping customers dream:

[The service] is not the same as [in a non-luxury] shop. When we shop in luxury [stores] we feel that the salesperson wants to give us a unique service. They are very sensitive to our desires. Even how they speak is different [...] they use other words to describe the product and they use words which [stay] in our heads. They try to make us dream.

The empathic behavior of staff is what allows shoppers to experience extraordinary service excellence and delight. The essence of empathic behavior derives from the perception of authentic caring and sensitivity.

You do feel welcome, [it is] important, [to feel] taken care of. [...] That is why I go shopping [in physical luxury stores]. To relieve myself from stress and to enjoy myself. This is one of the things [that] I enjoy most, because they [the sales staff] turn the shopping experience into a completely new experience. You are not just going to shop. You are going there to enjoy

yourself, so I know for many of us shopping can be really tiresome, so a cup of coffee or cup of tea is always welcome. [Female, 53, English]

As this respondent indicates, she expects the sales person to not simply recognize and identify her emotions but also to understand those emotions. Luxury sales persons' responsiveness to the even unspoken wishes of shoppers, such as their need for respite, also triggers delightful experiences.

Service immediacy and prompt availability of desired items are technical aspects that help consumers experience extraordinary service excellence and delight. Some informants, such as this 30-year-old French shopper, stressed the importance of not having to queue in luxury shops:

I feel relaxed that is for sure, well served and happy. Relaxed because there is no crowd in the shop, I can take my time and if I don't have time, I can be served very quickly. Well serving luxury staff adapts to [my] needs, one-to-one interaction.

A 19-year-old Italian female consumer added:

In a luxury store you do not have to queue, everyone is completely at your service and it is like going out with a friend for a cup of coffee. [...] The other customers do not bother you at all, you won't have to fight for an item of clothing for example and there won't be large crowds.

4.2. Unique multi-sensory emotional stimulation conforming to brand meaning

The informants indicated that they want to see and feel the products, to smell the leather or perfumes, to admire the sales associates' attire, and to attain a positive mood from the sounds in the store. Thus, the specific characteristics and cues of the physical and social context appear to trigger all human senses, eliciting unique multi-sensory stimulation, and so contributing to experiential delight by evoking pleasure (aesthetic and physical), happiness, and intimacy. In particular, experiences in luxury stores evoke emotional stimulation in concert with the brand meaning. The

stimulation of multiple senses in a brand-conforming manner makes the luxury shopping experience unique.

The act of shopping, and the store itself, also evoke *aesthetic* and *physical pleasure*. Many informants noted how they experience pleasure as they enter a luxury store:

[As you enter] a luxury store you get the feeling that you come to an art exhibition rather than a “point of sale”. That is what makes the buying experience so exciting and unique. I pay attention to the smell inside the store, the interior, and how well everything matches a certain [brand] style. [Female, 22, Russian]

[I] can feel that the atmosphere is not the same. How the store appears, the atmosphere, the smell, and the sound. [...] For me it is very important how the store [is in appearance]. I give importance to the design of the store, how the products are presented. [Female, 35, French]

Informants also stressed the stores’ beauty and gracefulness, in terms of balance, symmetry, clarity, and contrast:

[It is] the overall feeling you get when you go in a store like this where you know you are in the middle of something beautiful, sophisticated, and unique. [Female, 19, Italian]

There is more order. [Female, 26, Italian]

The presentation of the products [in luxury stores] is more clear [*sic*] [than that in non-luxury stores], visibility of the goods is much better. [Female, 30, French].

While pleasure through environmental aesthetics can uniquely stimulate all the senses, luxury shoppers’ *happiness* appears to be a state of mind. Customers reported being delighted and feeling happy from the moment they stepped into a luxury store to the time they left the store. Luxury shopping appears to be an act that “flavors” and enhances an existing state of mind.

I feel relaxed that is for sure, well served and happy. [...] After [the shopping] I feel happy, [I] always [feel] happy [because I] have something new. [Female, 30, French]

Happiness does not necessarily stem from buying a luxury product. Instead, it can result from a joyful feeling of contentment, from the stimulation of a pleasant mood, and from the ability to escape from reality into a more pleasant world:

[T]he employees are always so [...] beautifully dressed. [In doing so, they] represent the brand they work for [and that is done] very well. The shop itself makes you feel special because it is very exclusive. [Female, 81, Italian]

They [sales persons in luxury stores] serve coffee and champagne, it's like an open bar. So, while you are trying [on] evening dresses for example, you can get in the evening mood with a glass of champagne. [Female, 33, French]

When I shop in a luxury store, I feel regenerated and I [escape] into a more pleasant world. Luxury shopping is a way to escape the hard realities of life. [Female, 25, British]

The level of consumers' emotional stimulation depends on the arousal of feelings of pleasure and happiness resulting from perceived *intimacy with the brand*. For luxury shoppers, brand intimacy comes from a sense of deep immersion into the universe of the brand. The informants talked about "feeling the brand", feeling "attached to the legacy of the brand", and becoming "part of the brand":

When I shop in a luxury store, I feel part of a history of a community, hence, buying that product I become inside that community too. [Male, 23, American]

An Italian female customer (aged 55) expressed how she wishes to "feel" the brand and how the social characteristics and cues make her dream. She continued to describe how a delightful experience derives from a feeling of both emotional and physical closeness with the brand.

I feel well when I am in a "luxury brand". When I enter the shop, I have to feel there is a nice atmosphere and I [want to] feel the identity of the brand.

4.3. Personal importance and assurance

Delightful experiences when shopping in luxury stores depend on feelings of *personal importance* and *assurance* that arise when shoppers feel individually welcomed, are provided with individual time and personal attention from the salespeople, and feel socially legitimized to become immersed in the brand universe:

[A luxury store is] more enjoyable, [because] when it is more appealing to the eye. [...] Listening to good music with welcoming store keepers that are helpful makes [me] feel relaxed, [worthy], welcomed. [It is] an attraction and escape for the mind. You feel specific. The attention [the service personnel pays to me] is personal. There is a face-to-face communication. [Female, 25, American]

Of note, the informants were not interested in other shoppers. Instead, they wanted to be treated as important by the salespeople. One British female informant (aged 53) stressed:

Nobody likes [standing in a queue] or being left for another customer so it's very important that they have enough staff to take care of each customer in turn.

An 18-year-old Finnish female informant also said:

You want to feel that you're not just another transaction ... you want to be in the store, it's not just a get-in, get-out type of feel, which is very common in my country.

In addition, the informants stressed that they want to feel assured, though they do not visit luxury stores simply to be assured of the items' authenticity to reduce monetary or social risk. Instead, they want to feel they are in the right place purchasing the right item and feel assured that their time is not wasted. As a 24-year-old female consumer from Hungary stated:

I really hate the online purchasing, because I cannot touch the products and their materials. Sometimes I am not sure that the size will be good, and if it is not good there are a lot of difficulties to exchange with the convenient product. [...] In a luxury store the staff help you with any questions and try to pass you the knowledge about the brand, they give you confidence and outstanding care.

The informants also stressed that they want to feel socially assured through individual treatment. A 24-year-old Italian shopper noted that she “loves shopping luxury” and must “be able to touch” the item but that delight comes from the assurance given by the staff:

The shopping experience of a luxury brands make me feel special. It’s totally different than if you go to a “normal” shop. Probably in a “normal” shop nobody will have time to help you, and in a luxury shop it’s totally different, it’s more sophisticated. [...] The employees give all attention [...]! When I go to a luxury shop they are very focused on me, to help me, and to make me feel comfortable there [in the store].

Being able to see and inspect the items in the shop, in addition to being advised by knowledgeable, empathic, and sophisticated service personnel, provides shoppers with the level of assurance they need to feel delighted by shopping. Informants stressed the need for social assurance by being welcomed and accepted by the salespeople, being tutored by them in brand etiquette, and having them represent the brand properly in accordance with their role as luxury consumers.

It is the welcoming, the salesperson takes care of me, guides me through the store and sometimes makes suggest[ions] on potential items that I might like. The kindness of the salesperson [is important] and that they are most of the times smiling. [Female, 55, Italy]

5. Discussion

In response to the lack of empirical evidence on consumers’ actual experiences in luxury retailing, this research focuses on consumers’ perceptions of delightful shopping experiences in physical luxury retail stores. The aim was met by answering the questions of (1) What constitutes consumers’ in-store experiences in directly-operated luxury stores? and (2) Which elements of the physical and social setting of luxury retail stores mainly contribute to customer delight? The findings show that consumers’ delightful shopping experiences stem from extraordinary service excellence,

unique multi-sensory emotional stimulation conforming to brand meaning, and the feeling of personal importance and assurance.

The research contributes, first, to extant academic knowledge in the field of experience-centric services by identifying differences unique to the luxury retail sector that until now have been rarely studied from a consumer perspective compared to other service settings. Second, the findings contribute to the existing literature on luxury service consumption by providing the first consumer perspective on delightful experiences encountered in directly operated luxury brand stores. Third, the findings contribute to management knowledge by being the one of first sources of recommendations to luxury brand and retail managers as to how to make their directly operated stores become particularly successful brand touchpoints based on empirical evidence related to consumer experiences.

5.1. Academic implications

Collier et al. (2018) underscore the importance of service excellence for consumers to experience delight in diverse non-luxury services encounters. The current study confirms this finding by further augmenting the level of expected service excellence. “Extraordinary” service excellence was of utmost importance for the respondents. In contrast with what Collier and Barnes (2015) and Wang (2011) found, however, none of the respondents mentioned surprise as an essential element of delightful luxury shopping. This may be due to the high expectations of habitual luxury shoppers, who instead would be surprised by a lack of service excellence. In luxury shopping, delight does not come from a higher level of service than expected but from the sensual, intellectual and emotional immersion in a beloved brand universe (Oliver et al., 1997).

Dion and Borraz (2017) discuss the social dynamics occurring in luxury retailing encounters. Here, the symbolic power of physical and social cues perpetrates a “symbolic violence” (p. 8) for

occasional customers who view themselves as not fitting in with a shop's atmosphere. The narratives of consumers in the current study did not confirm this perceived lack of social legitimacy; instead, the consumers indicated that they appreciate the sales persons' friendly and professional help in understanding their "role" while within the luxury shop. Consumers respect the behavioral etiquette embodied by sales persons, the selling ceremony, and the multitude of physical cues that help them "dream" and enhance their cultural capital. Respondents did not feel forced into the role of luxury consumers; they were open to being educated by sales persons on how to properly play their role as part of the enacted brand universe. Submitting voluntarily to the rules of the brand was integral to their delightful experiences.

In luxury in-store shopping, extraordinary service excellence goes hand in hand with the physical environment. Luxury customers particularly appreciate the stimulation of all their senses through the physical stimuli of the shop environment, which create the stage for the enactment of the brand by the salespeople. In contrast with empirical evidence from retail studies examining fast-moving consumer goods (e.g. Ainsworth and Foster, 2018), not all atmospheric elements influence consumers' comfort levels in luxury consumption (e.g. other customers). In line with the findings of Delcourt et al. (2016), that luxury service personnel need to understand and manage emotional relationships, our results show personnel in the role of potential creators of customer emotions. In-store luxury shoppers want to fully experience the legacy of the brand in a "celebration" enacted together with the sales associates who orchestrate the event. They want to be immersed in the brand celebration through all their senses. The unique multi-sensory cues offered by luxury shops help shoppers feel as if they are legitimately participating in the enactment of the brand universe.

Shoppers greatly appreciate the personal assurances they feel when being treated in an individualized manner by welcoming, guiding, and trustworthy service personnel. In contrast with the suggestions of Akaka et al. (2015) and the findings of McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) that co-creation with other customers triggers in-store shopping, luxury shoppers do not expect salespeople

to include other visitors in the creation of a delightful experience. Direct or observational sharing of brand experiences with peers (Woodside and Walser, 2007) is of little or no value to luxury consumers. Instead, luxury shoppers value the efforts that salespeople expend to welcome them specifically, give them individualized advice, teach them brand-specific etiquette, and make them feel unique, all of which lead to an individually engaging and rewarding experience.

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings help brand and retail managers to make their directly operated stores become particularly successful brand touchpoints. At a time when e-commerce is the fastest-growing retail market, a highly distinguishable product promoted in a creative manner is not enough to guarantee business success (Hernaes Fourrier, 2017). In addition, even the most sophisticated physical environment (Okonkwo, 2010) that gives shoppers the opportunity to interact with desired products is not enough. Although other retail environment-specific factors, such as store atmosphere (Machleit and Eroglu, 2000) and salesperson behavior (Arnold et al., 2005), can affect the emotional experience of luxury shoppers, regular luxury shoppers mainly appreciate total immersion in the luxury brand universe by participating in the enactment of the brand as orchestrated by professional salespeople. Therefore, luxury retail management must reinforce the individualization of relationships with shoppers (Besson and Gurviez, 2000) to create and nourish the feeling of personal proximity. Consumer narratives indicate that luxury brand managers should train their store salesforce to focus on using education, escapism, and aesthetics to delight customers (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Okonkwo, 2010). Consumers welcome salespeople as dedicated instructors and guides, who activate their senses and help bring the brand to life. Rather than proactive partners (Arnould, 2007), luxury shoppers tend to be passive co-creators (McCull-Kennedy et al., 2015), who evaluate the value of their shopping experience not on a service-for-service exchange influenced by the physical, symbolic,

social, and cultural context (Vargo et al., 2008) but on the behavioral etiquette in the store, which helps them properly play their role in the enactment of the brand (Dion and Boraz, 2017).

Customers who want to become immersed in the universe of luxury brands often search for a shopping experience that uniquely stimulates their senses. Store managers must ensure an extraordinary level of personal service in an environment that evokes unique brand-conforming sensations and provides feelings of comfort and understanding to achieve customers' intense delight. As luxury shopping is highly emotional, individual, and sensitive, the service personnel who represent the brand need to appear highly knowledgeable and technically competent, as well as socially and emotionally intelligent during their personal interactions with customers. Thus, store managers need to select empathic individuals, who can make customers feel exceptional and assured of their welcome, as staff members. Brand knowledge and technical competence are more easily taught.

Customers want to celebrate brands together with and staged by service personnel. In this sense, big brand flagship stores are able to attract and impress thousands of occasional shoppers but can be problematic when it comes to providing delightful shopping experiences to habitual luxury consumers. Brand managers must also find ways to ensure consumer individuality in the enactment of their favorite brands despite the increasing number of occasional shoppers. In contrast to the large flagship stores, smaller directly operated stores with less traffic of simply curious visitors allow for a substantially higher level of intimacy and enhanced personal treatment.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations that might open new avenues for research. The interviews took place in one geographic location. Despite the significant internationality of Monaco's population and the large number of visitors from many parts of the world, Monaco attracts customers who are not necessarily representative of the global population. Future research should be conducted in major

cities on other continents to test the generalizability of the findings. Luxury shoppers might also have varying perceptions of a luxury shopping experience, depending on the product category and types of stores they are visiting. Flagship stores of luxury brands did not exist in Monaco at the time this research was conducted. Future research could select different types of shops and categories of luxury products to detect potential differences in consumers' perceptions of delightful shopping. For example, becoming immersed in the universe of a luxury watch brand might demand a kind of service that differs from that for a fashion, cosmetics, or jewelry brand. Follow-up quantitative studies might also be useful to determine the necessity for each of the detected elements related to delight and what configurations might be sufficient for providing consumers with a delightful luxury experience.

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Table 1. Sample description

Item	Variation	Average
Age	19–81	35 years
Gender	75% female 25% male	
Nationality	22–France; 20–Italy; 7–USA; 6–UK; 6–Russia; 5–Monaco; 4–Romania; 3–Finland; 3–Ukraine; 2–Azerbaijan; 2–Hungary; 2–Sweden; 1 each from Tunisia, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Canada, Spain, Bulgaria, Israel; 14–n.a.	
Yearly expenses on luxury	€3 000–96 000	€30 000
Shopping online	95% rarely or never, 5% occasionally or more often	

N=98

Appendix 1: Interview guide

The interview guide contained five general themes, which set a guideline for the interviews:

1. Introduction

The first theme was aimed at helping the interviewees to project themselves into the scenario and mood of luxury shopping by asking introductory questions such as “What does luxury mean to you?”, “How often do you purchase luxury?”, “Where do you usually purchase luxury brands?”, and “Do you purchase luxury brands online?”.

2. Stimulation

The second and third themes were aimed at stimulating attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about luxury shopping with questions such as “Do you think that in-store shopping for luxury brands differs from in-store shopping for other kinds of brands?”, and “In what respect?”

3. Probing

If the informant did not express any thoughts about luxury stores and their influence on the shopping experience, the interviewer asked questions like “What is the role of the store in shopping for luxury?”, “Does the shop influence your feelings?”, and “How?”

4. Additional thoughts

To elicit additional thoughts, the fourth theme allowed the interviewer to ask an open-ended question such as: “What else would you like to add about in-store luxury shopping?”

5. Background information

Finally, the interviews ended by obtaining background information about each informant’s age, nationality, and luxury spending.