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**The intimacy trap:  
Navigating the commercial friendships of luxury**

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Navigating the commercial friendships of luxury**

**Abstract**

Given that commercial friendships between luxury salespeople and customers tend to elicit great loyalty from customers, it is relevant and timely to study how luxury salespeople manage these relationships. We build on ethnographic fieldwork in luxury stores, focusing on the interaction between salespeople and habituated luxury customers, to offer an analysis of commercial friendships in these settings. Our findings suggest that luxury foregrounds the importance of secrets and gifts in commercial friendships. Furthermore, the luxury context brings out the darker, more challenging side of commercial friendships. As intimacy develops between salespeople and customers, another kind of relationship emerges in which salespeople are often at the beck and call of their wealthy customers, leading them to fall into the intimacy trap. We propose some pathways to help salespeople manage these critical relationships and to avoid the intimacy trap.

*Keywords:* Commercial friendship, Gift, Intimacy, Luxury, Power asymmetry, Secrets

## **1. Introduction**

Salespeople are pivotal to the success of luxury companies (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). They play a key role in articulating a distinctive brand identity at the point of sale (Ward & Dahl, 2014) and they help establish long-term relationships with customers (Michel, Merk, & Eroglu, 2015). Despite the rise of digital channels, salespeople remain critical to a luxury brand's success (Merk & Michel, 2019), and luxury brands continue to need their salespeople.

But we still know little about the relationships salespeople develop with luxury customers, especially commercial friendships. Given the commercial importance of close relationships between customers and salespeople (Price & Arnould, 1999), a better understanding of how luxury salespeople handle these relationships is paramount.

To understand these relationships, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork inside high-end luxury stores. We focused on habituated luxury customers, i.e., customers who frequent luxury stores on a regular basis. We paid specific attention to their interactions with salespeople, observing and capturing the subtleties of these interactions.

Focusing on habituated customers is important if we are to extend our understanding of the luxury world. The experiences of habituated luxury customers are distinctive and do not resemble the experience of novice consumers (Clarkson, Janiszewski, & Cinelli, 2013). Yet luxury research has rarely attended to these consumers (for exceptions, see Merk & Michel, 2019; van Marrewijk & Broos, 2012). This omission is problematic because a brand's most loyal and frequent customers constitute a large part its profits. Moreover, habituated customers help build the brand's luxury credentials (Chevalier & Gutsatz, 2013).

With this study, we offer the following theoretical contributions. First, although gift-

giving and self-disclosure already feature in commercial friendship studies (e.g., Price & Arnould, 1999), we show the importance of gift exchanges and self-disclosure for luxury commercial friendships. In addition, our findings extend current understandings of commercial friendships by showcasing the importance of secrets and conspiracies that luxury salespeople must manage and safeguard. While gifts and secrets infuse other commercial friendships too, the world of luxury foregrounds the importance of this intimate work (McGuire, 2007).

Second, we show that commercial friendships represent a darker, more challenging side for luxury salespeople. As customers develop intimate bonds with them, another kind of relationship emerges in which salespeople are often at the beck and call of their wealthy customers. Indeed, in this world of affluence and privilege, intimacy can transform into servility, with salespeople potentially turning into butlers. Commercial friendships in luxury can thus lead to what we call the intimacy trap: a relationship where customers take advantage of their intimacy with salespeople to subjugate them. These findings on the subjugation of luxury salespeople advance our knowledge of power and domination in the luxury world (Dion & Borraz, 2017), and more specifically, highlight the power games of luxury commercial friendships.

Third, we provide several paths for luxury salespeople to manage this intimacy trap, showing that commercial friendships in luxury require much more than short-term practices and strategies. Instead, top salespeople or “grands vendeurs,” as they are known to the French luxury brands, manage the ambiguities of intimacy by becoming indispensable while foregrounding their role as salespeople. Finally, we show that luxury salespeople have to

navigate the treacherous terrain between intimacy and servility, requiring a very particular set of skills that go beyond impersonating the brand.

## **2. Theoretical foundations**

### *2.1. Commercial friendships*

The idea of friendships arising in a business context is not new. Research has long documented the importance of social networks in facilitating commercial exchanges (Gao, Liu, & Qian, 2016). Historians even argue that economic dependence on friends is prehistoric, so that the notion of friendship as a purely affective relationship only arose with the development of capitalism (Ingram & Zou, 2008). It is thus challenging to cleanly separate “pure” friendships from commercial ones. Today, while many organizations attempt to keep the intimate and affective from polluting the commercial, this separation makes little sense in a world where the affective and the economic are so entangled. Economic sociologists have shown that this entanglement leads people to engage in various kinds of boundary work to demarcate affective from commercial relations (Zelizer, 1996). But it is this entanglement of the affective and the commercial that makes the study of commercial friendships so fascinating.

Commercial friendships refer more specifically to the friendships customers develop with service providers. Evidence suggests that repeated service encounters in which customers and service workers open up to each other about their lives can lead to deeper, more affective relationships, imbued with a less instrumental, more communal orientation (Price & Arnould, 1999).

Consumers and service providers have been found to benefit greatly from such friendships (Rosenbaum, 2009). On the consumer side, people turn to commercial friendships to overcome loneliness (Rosenbaum, Ward, Walker, & Ostrom, 2007). On the provider side,

commercial friendships involve knowing more about customers, allowing the kind of service personalization that ensures satisfaction and loyalty (Price & Arnould, 1999). In the luxury fashion industry, for instance, it is crucial for the customer and salesperson to connect, as this type of retail environment requires high involvement and customization, and “customers are willing to pay premium prices for it” (Sresnewsky, Yojo, Veloso, & Torresi, 2020, p. 252). With such personalization, we can expect various kinds of deep commercial relationships to emerge, including commercial friendships.

In seeking to identify the practices that lead to commercial friendships, past scholarship has recognized self-disclosure as an important factor in friendship formation and intimacy development (Arnold, Nguyen, & Hartley, 2011; Price & Arnould, 1999). For instance, in the financial services industry, the long-term nature of the relationship between consultants and customers means that the latter feel comfortable sharing very personal information with their advisors, leading to expressing care and concern for each other (Bäckström, Pitt, Campbell, & Nel, 2009).

Salespeople and customers also enter into gift-gifting practices to solidify social ties and create social obligations (Arnold et al., 2011; Darr, 2006). Commercial friendships are thus “reciprocal relationships in which employees provide customers with individualized attention and social support and customers provide employees with social support, compensation (i.e., increased tips, loyalty), and gifts, in return” (Rosenbaum, 2009, p. 63). Salespeople offer their customers gifts, but they also receive gifts. As Ruthie, a server in Rosenbaum’s (2009) survey stated, “My regulars usually give me presents for my birthday and for Christmas. It’s nice” (p. 63). Regular gifts nourish a feeling of mutual debt, further cementing the relationship between the salesperson and customer (Godbout, 1998).

To sum up, past research documents that commercial friendships are built through self-disclosure and a sense of mutual debt. In addition, these practices are shown to positively

impact customers and service providers who benefit from these relationships in multiple ways (Bäckström et al., 2009; Rosenbaum, Russell-Bennett, & Drennan, 2015).

However, we must also consider that commercial friendships can become challenging. The intersection between the commercial and the intimate is never straightforward, presenting several issues for companies to manage. This complexity is likely to be amplified in contexts such as luxury where the level of service personalization is greater, as are the economic consequences of purchasing decisions.

## *2.2. Challenges of commercial friendships*

While the focus of existing research on the positive dimensions of commercial friendships means we know less about the dark side of these relationships (Rosenbaum, 2009), once we get a little closer to the topic of commercial friendships, we can sense the dangers and ambiguities that these relationships potentially entail. Specifically, there are three major concerns with the notion of commercial friendships: 1) the contradictory expectations of commercial relationships and friendships, 2) the complexities of gift exchanges between salespeople and customers, and 3) the suspicion from customers that the friendship may not be real because it lacks mutual altruism.

First, research suggests that managing the boundaries between the affective and the instrumental dimensions of commercial relationships requires hard work from service providers (Grayson, 2007; Heide & Wathne, 2006). This is at least partly because the norms that govern these two realms are very different (Price & Arnould, 1999). For instance, Cederholm and Hultman (2010) show that in a context where service providers have to manage the intermingling of the intimate and the commercial, as in the case of guesthouses, they engage in intensive boundary work. This boundary work involves trying to negotiate the ambivalence that comes from mixing the intimate with the commercial, without ever falling into extremes.



Second, although gifting is important to commercial friendships, it unearths various complexities that are difficult to negotiate. For instance, salespeople may resist the customer's desire to form commercial friendships, because at least for some, such attempts to form deeper relationships might be perceived as an imposition (Rosenbaum, 2009), an added responsibility that is inappropriate in the business context. Moreover, we know that gifts can damage relationships, even diminishing the recipient's self-esteem (Caillé, 2020), a negative dimension and thorny challenge in the context of commercial friendships.

Third, commercial friendships suffer when the strategic interests of one party becomes clear, leading to "the expectation of altruism, although the relationship has not developed into a full friendship" (Oppen, 2020, p. 144). However, when one party provides a semblance of friendship but acts as if driven by a strategy with economic interests, it can have devastating consequences (Oppen, 2020). Self-interest seeking episodes and role conflicts negatively impact commercial friendships in service settings (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010).

To this list of challenges, we add the issue of power and domination rarely tackled in commercial friendship analyses. This omission is surprising given the subordinate nature of frontline service work, which is bound to complicate commercial friendships (Sherman, 2003). Here we take inspiration from organizational scholarship that highlights the many tensions that ensue when superiors and subordinates become friends, suggesting that intimacy can have a range of negative effects between organizational members working together (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003).

Thus, a core issue likely to affect commercial friendships in luxury is the power asymmetry on which these relationships are based. Here, we conceptualize power asymmetry as "the difference between two actors' dependencies, or the ratio of the power of the more powerful actor to that of the less powerful actor" (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005, p. 170). Specifically, we borrow from relational power perspectives whereby power only exists when

considering interactions between and among individuals and groups (Selg, 2018), especially the fear of deprivation that one actor might experience when interacting with another. Indeed, “a power relationship exists when (a) there is a conflict over values or course of action between A and B; (b) B complies with A’s wishes; and (c) he does so because he is fearful that A will deprive him of a value or values which he, B, regards more highly than those which would have been achieved by noncompliance” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963, p. 635).

If we apply this framework to luxury sales, it helps shine a light on power asymmetry between wealthy customers and salespeople. In fact, a key issue in commercial friendships between luxury customers and salespeople is the impact of potentially losing a wealthy customer and the consequent loss of the sales commission. While losing a customer may have little impact in other domains, in high-ticket purchases, these losses can have deep life consequences for salespeople. Given that a power relationship “exists only if B actually bows to A’s wishes” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963, p. 633), and this case is very likely in the case of luxury, we can start to understand the popular saying “*no* does not exist in luxury” (Hesley, 2018).

Indeed, issues of power and domination infuse luxury stores. On the one hand, luxury brand managers have been advised to dominate their customers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012), using rejection and other tactics to enforce this domination to increase the brand’s aura (Ward & Dahl, 2014). This power mechanism is particularly useful to elevate the status of luxury brands by sacralizing the store space and the objects presented therein (Dion & Borraz, 2017). On the other hand, luxury brands often have to deal with wealthy customers who are used to dominating service personnel (Sherman, 2003). Moreover, if we take the case of habituated luxury consumers, such as watch collectors, i.e., “customers with brand expertise, experts on a product category” (Merk & Michel, 2019, p. 340), these customers are unlikely to experience the domination of the luxury brand in the same way as novices.

In this context, it becomes important to study the power and domination games that luxury salespeople and habituated customers play, especially as they form commercial friendships. We therefore address the following three research questions: 1) How do self-disclosure and gift-giving practices contribute to sustaining commercial friendships in the luxury context? 2) What are the challenges of commercial friendships in the luxury context, especially given the subordination that these relationships entail? 3) How do salespeople navigate these power games?

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research design*

While recent research has started to study luxury ethnographically (Abélès, 2018; Dion & Borraz, 2017; Joy, Wang, Chan, Sherry, & Cui, 2014), luxury scholarship often studies luxury from a distance using experimental and survey methods (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Ward & Dahl, 2014). However, there is much to gain from attending to the luxury world ethnographically to complement these insights.

Ethnographic work is especially suited to understanding the luxury world for at least three main reasons. First, luxury companies are notoriously secretive. Immersion in the luxury store context allows us to access the practices and interactions that luxury companies rarely talk about, including those between salespeople and customers. Indeed, publications written by luxury managers and consultants tend to emphasize prescriptions of what luxury brands should do (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012), rather than covering what really happens in the luxury world. Luxury stores are bound to be more complex and messier than the orthodoxy of luxury marketing textbooks. As in other settings, such as ad agencies, which are designed to produce polished representations of their inner workings (Mazzarella, 2003), it is often difficult to disentangle the glossy discourse of luxury brands from the reality of luxury as it occurs in retail outlets.

Second, an important but overlooked dimension of the luxury world is the interaction that takes place in luxury stores. Recent research has started to bridge this gap, highlighting the limitations of brand-centric models for training luxury salespeople (Merk & Michel, 2019), as well as the messy and at times conflictual interactions with customers in luxury retail settings (Joy, Belk, Wang, & Sherry, 2020).

Third, an ethnographic approach to studying the interactions between salespeople and customers is especially appropriate as it allows us to capture the lived experiences of social actors as they interact in context-bound settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this focus on detailing the activities of human actors, already proven valuable in sales settings (Darr, 2006), ethnographic research allows us to study how the relationships between salespeople and customers form and evolve.

Our research is thus designed to develop an insider perspective of the interactions between salespeople and customers, combining participant observation and interviews to study how habituated luxury customers come to form commercial friendships with salespeople. Our fieldwork also allows us to examine the darker side of these commercial friendships. We next describe our methodological approach, including 1) how we secured ethnographic access, 2) our participant observation protocol, 3) the interviews with customers, salespeople, and managers, and 4) our data analysis.

### *3.2. Ethnographic access*

Our collaboration with a large multinational luxury company allowed us unique access to the secretive world of luxury retailers, including participant observation in the stores and interviews with their customers and store managers.

Our research collaboration began in 2008 when the first author was approached by the organization's marketing team. At the time, the company had been opening new retail outlets at a frenetic pace, notably in new markets like China. Expansion had raised several questions,

especially for a company that until then had focused more on brand creation and product design than distribution. The marketing department realized they needed insights to address the strategic and operational challenges associated with the company's growth, specifically, improving the customer in-store experience and their role in crafting the experience. In this study, we focus on a particular aspect of the customer experience that featured prominently in our fieldwork, namely the interactions between salespeople and customers.

### *3.3. Participant observation*

The first author conducted 21 days of participant observation, with an average of 3 days in each of the 7 stores (each dedicated to a specific brand) in 2 countries (3 in France and 4 in the US between 2008 and 2016). The wide range of stores observed allows us to generalize our findings to a variety of contexts.

The first author conducted all observations in the luxury stores as an active member and participant alongside the salespeople, dressed and acting as a salesperson. He attended training sessions on how to drive effective sales, how to address customers, how to talk about products to customers, and how to get a store ready to open. The first author then conducted preliminary visits to two luxury stores in Paris: one on the Champs-Élysées with a large volume of transactions, and the other in the more exclusive Place Vendôme. During these pilot observations, he was integrated into the sales teams (customers were routinely informed that he was an apprentice salesperson), allowing him to be an active participant (Adler & Adler, 1987) and spending extensive time on the premises in a non-distracting role. During these observations, the author conducted informal conversations with store managers and salespeople. While short in duration, these repeated informal interviews with managers and luxury employees provided a deeper understanding of luxury retail relationships. Specifically, salespeople were asked about their interactions with customers, especially regular customers,

and how they managed their relationship with them. Table 1 provides the list of salespeople and managers interviewed in-store.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

With respect to ethics, the first author clarified the research scope, purpose, and outcomes with each salesperson participating in the study, ensuring their anonymity by using pseudonyms in our fieldnotes. Concerning customers, the large number visiting the stores made it nearly impossible to obtain their consent. As in other service contexts, we also judged that obtaining consent from each customer would compromise their experience, hence tempering the quality of the collaboration with our partner. However, we sought to limit any negative consequences for customers and salespeople by removing any identifying details, again using pseudonyms, and omitting references to brand names that might identify our research participants.

#### *3.4. Customer interviews*

To supplement our observation of interactions as they took place in-store, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 customers in the US (Los Angeles, Costa Mesa, and New York) and 11 in France (see Table 2 for the respondents' profiles). We recruited respondents from a database of existing customers provided directly by the stores, using a snowballing technique designed to single out wealthy customers. The purpose of our interviews was to understand the customers' broader experience within the stores. Questions pertained to customers' emotions in the store (best/worst experiences, their perceptions of the quality of service), and their relations with staff in general and salespeople in particular. Our customer interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by a professional translator where necessary.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

### *3.5. Interviews with managers*

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 luxury managers with retail management responsibilities or previous experience working in stores. We sought to better understand the way luxury brands approach their relationships with customers, and how they saw the role of the store and salespeople in the context of an increased focus on digital channels. Although we attempted to interview the managers of the brands whose stores we had visited, access was often difficult to obtain. Instead, we relied on existing contacts within the luxury industry through snowball sampling to secure interviews. Our interviews with managers lasted between 40 and 120 minutes and were conducted in French, thereafter transcribed and translated by a professional translator. All interviewees are experienced luxury managers having worked for more than 5 years in the luxury industry (see Table 3 for a list of the managers we interviewed).

(Insert Table 3 about here)

### *3.6. Data analysis*

To analyze our data after assembling our qualitative material (fieldnotes, transcribed interviews, and photographs of the premises), we sought to identify the analytical categories that would best capture the variety of observations (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In the first data analysis phase, we focused on the experience of habituated customers in luxury retail using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

In the second phase, we realized that the luxury retail relationship differed considerably from scholarship enjoining salespeople to impress and dominate customers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). We thus proceeded to isolate and analyze these relationships, focusing more specifically on luxury retail commercial friendships. To build our analytical categories, we

relied on Price and Arnould's (1999, p. 50) definition of commercial friendships, namely "Commercial friendships, similar to other friendships, involve affection, intimacy, social support, loyalty, and reciprocal gift giving." We recoded all the interviews (with customers and managers) and observations accordingly, to map the categories of practices and behaviors structuring commercial friendships. The authors then discussed their coding and interpretation of the data until they reached agreement.

In the third and last phase, we sought to highlight the distinctiveness of luxury commercial friendships and the challenges faced using selective coding to refine our theorization of commercial friendships in the luxury sector (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

In this phase, our theorization began to emerge in three sections categorizing our findings: 1) an inside look into the world of luxury stores and the commercial friendships formed therein: a world of gifts and secrets; 2) the darker side of commercial friendships in the luxury world, i.e., when intimacy becomes servility, what we call the "intimacy trap;" and 3) how skilled salespeople manage this intimacy trap.

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1. The luxury store as second home*

For habituated luxury customers, the store can become a familiar and convivial space, a kind of second home where they regularly chat with salespeople, often forming deep relationships with them. In the interview below, luxury executive Alain talks about the practices of habituated customers who stop by the store almost every day to chat with the salespeople:

*We had this very loyal customer. There was this time, he wasn't coming to buy a watch, to spend money right away. He was just passing by the store, passing by just to chat with the salesman who usually serves him, just to spend a little time, you know. And he would do this regularly, just to chat with him, spend a little time ... We knew that one day or another, he will come, he will buy or he will order, ask to put a watch aside and get it back later when he comes to the store. (Alain, Operations Manager)*



What the quote above confirms is that luxury is also a world of relationships (Sresnewsky et al., 2020), and that some buyers are mostly drawn to the store because of the interaction with salespeople. Moreover, we start to see that habituated luxury consumers have a distinctive relationship with luxury retail outlets. This is consistent with research affirming that for regular customers, luxury stores can become home-like places (Debenedetti, 2021). In this case, Alain works for a brand of expensive watches, retailing at between between Euros 10,000 and 20,000. The habituated customer he refers to is wealthy, but also passionate about watches. For him and other watch collectors, the relationship with salespeople is important to access information on the brand's latest products. While their frequent visits to the store are driven by passion, these visits can also transform the purely commercial relationship into deeper, almost binding connections with salespeople.

Our findings unveil a kind of relationship we rarely see described in luxury scholarship, a type of deep, intimate relationship between salespeople and customers. These friendships may be different from the commercial friendships described elsewhere (e.g., Rosenbaum et al., 2015). As we will see, luxury salespeople often end up being more like servants than real friends. But even though the customers we interviewed did not necessarily describe salespeople as their best friends, we will see that there is a hidden world of gifts and secrets being exchanged, people opening up and willingly seeking each other out. Our research is designed to better understand these relationships.

#### *4.2. A world of gifts*

It is widely understood that the luxury world is characterized by personalization, deference, and attention (Sherman, 2003). From this perspective, the circulation of gifts that takes place in luxury stores helps the development of commercial friendships with customers. Through these gifts, salespeople tell customers that their relationship is important, even if

they have just met. In the following quote, Michi mentions the way Samantha, a salesperson, invited her to a VIP event, even though they had only just met:

*That was very special because we didn't buy anything from Samantha and yet we got invited to their big party. Very special. That is why we continue to come back to the store and buy. It was a big event. This is a once-in-a-year event and you only invite VIP types of customers to them and here we are just thinking about buying. "Come on board" and full-scale VIP treatment, you know? (Michi, Newport Beach)*

In this specific case, Michi was not expecting to be invited to an event because she had not bought anything from Samantha yet. However, Samantha's offering takes the relationship beyond the expected script. Salespeople use the freedoms they are given by their management to surprise customers, and these surprises help them build rapport (Sresnewsky et al., 2020).

These gift exchanges work because they deviate from a purely transactional script. Surprise was a major element for Pierre in terms of the way he approaches and describes his relationship with the jewelry store where he bought his watch:

*I recently went to have a strap on my watch changed at a jewelry store. They fixed it for me for free, but what pleasantly surprised me was that they gave me another free strap. I did not expect that. For the repair of the watch, I might have found it too much, if they had decided to charge me. But to offer me another strap, that was unexpected. This is something that has left a mark for me: what I remember, even though the quality is not similar to the strap I had. I was touched by this little detail. It's the same when I buy a hat from Hermès and they tell me to drop by when I want to get it back into shape. (Pierre, Paris)*

In this case, it is the unexpectedness of the gift that transformed the interaction from a scripted exchange into something else. As in other settings, the surprise element is part of an elaborate drama of gifting (Visser, 2009). The value of the gift itself has little importance; it is the surprise that matters, the perception of a favor extended by a seller not obligated to do anything. The unpredictability of the act sets it apart for customers (Godbout, 2008). These giveaways are strategies to foster customer engagement in the relationship.

What is more surprising in our data is the way customers also initiated their own gift-giving. Some of these gifts can be attributed to the desire of habituated customers to gain

access to rare items. For these customers, it is important to have access to and possess limited-edition items unavailable to the wider public. Beyond this kind of instrumental interaction, we also noticed how gifts circulating between salespeople and customers helped deepen their relationship. For example, during one of our observations at a luxury store in Paris, we saw a customer come back a day after his visit to offer a gift to the salesperson who had helped him. He was hoping to return the favor after the salesperson had gone to great lengths to source a pen for him from another store:

*What is perceived as a gift from the salesperson calls for a counter-gift from the customer, and the relationship is set up that way. He [the customer] is a famous actress's father, so he comes back to offer a DVD of Casino Royale dedicated to the salesperson. (Fieldnotes, Paris)*

Gifts are thus part of the commercial exchange in luxury and the development of relationships. Salespeople purposely adopt friendship sale “strategies” to engage customers and build a relationship that is not strictly commercial.

#### 4.3. *The secrets of luxury*

Luxury salespeople become good at their job, in part because they acquire skills in creating and maintaining intimacy “bubbles,” namely a particular interactional frame in which customers feel at ease in sharing intimate details of their lives. In the following quote, Bertrand evokes the skill of salespeople in creating and maintaining a “confidentiality pact:”

*There are relationships in luxury stores that are like confessions. It's things that even people's best friends don't know, so it's a relationship that can be very special [...] And confidentiality in our profession is a primary and fundamental quality. When I was working in stores I didn't talk to my wife or my parents about the people I saw who had somewhat public profiles. And it's part of the confidentiality pact. (Bertrand, Manager, NY)*

For Bertrand, knowledge of his customers means that a key part of his job is managing the secrecy and confidentiality that these relationships entail. One could even argue that the skills

and competencies involved in dealing with these secrets are critical to the role of luxury salespeople.

Once the relationship deepens, once the confidentiality pact becomes clearer, customers and salespeople start exchanging stories about their lives in more detail. In the following quote, Elizabeth recounts the way she became close to a salesperson. At a high-end jewelry store in New York, this is how Elizabeth's exchange transpired:

*It is exciting to get your engagement ring somewhere and to get it serviced and the people always ask, "how did you get engaged?" It is not just, "do you need this to be polished?" They will ask, "how did you get this?" They invest in the background of how you got the jewelry. Then you end up telling them these personal stories about yourself. Inevitably you ask them questions about their puppies, significant others, and whatnot. You have this little backstory. You can make connections. You can always ask about their dogs. I have a dog. Sophie [the salesperson] just got her first puppy. It was supposed to be small but it is getting much bigger apparently. I don't have kids. I have dogs. You find commonalities. Once you find commonalities with people in this world then you want to explore those. (Elizabeth, NY)*

Exchanging gifts and personal attention are ways to transform the relationship between luxury salespeople and customers. However, sometimes they go beyond these exchanges to create a sort of sharing space where they open up to each other. The above example of Elizabeth offers a glimpse into the many personal stories exchanged on luxury sales floors. With jewelry, in particular, we are flung into a more intimate world where salespeople and customers share stories about love and relationships that are bound to blur the boundaries between the realms of the commercial and the intimate. In the context of romantic gift-giving where a customer wants to offer something to a loved one, salespeople can help them devise romantic plots, such as planning a surprise for a loved one:

*A customer has just come in with his wife to buy her earrings. She also tries on a bracelet that she likes. Katia, who already knows them, advises them. They buy the earrings, and the wife goes to the bathroom while her husband is paying. He takes the opportunity to buy the bracelet that he leaves with Katia. He will pick it up a month later for her birthday. (Fieldnotes, NY)*

Hence in the quote above, we have the example of a man surprising his wife with a bracelet he plans on giving her later. Importantly, luxury salespeople are key in the organization of these gifts. And as salespeople organize these gifts, they also become part of a couple's intimate circle:

*In the NYC store, the manager is proud to share the story of one of his salespeople, Eric. A young customer wanted to give her father, Michel, a watch for his birthday. She didn't know how to surprise him. Eric had an idea: he arranged for the words "Happy Birthday Michel" to flash on the electronic signage in the window, for half an hour, just around the time he knew they were going to be visiting. (Fieldnotes, NY)*

We see that the hushed conversations and secrets of luxury facilitate the development of interpersonal knowledge, potentially strengthening the connection between the salesperson and customer. These interactions, based on secrecy, are far removed from the interactions of domination and intimidation described in marketing scholarship (Ward & Dahl, 2014). They are not dominated by the brand either. Instead, these interactions are more personal relationships sustained by secrets and gifts. Through these exchanges of gifts and secrets, salespeople and customers co-create the "hidden architecture" of social relations in the luxury domain (Grey & Costas, 2016, p. 12).

Yet, as we show below, the skills required to build this social architecture are very specific and difficult to acquire. They amount to performing a distinctive type of intimate work with customers.

In addition, we show that even as they perform this intimate work, entering the intimate sphere of wealthy customers can result in an uncomfortable position for luxury salespeople. As they are admitted into the intimate world of customers, they can become subordinated to the customer's wishes and whims, going from intimacy to domination.

## **5. Entering and managing the intimacy trap**

As previously noted, luxury sales entail a fair amount of personalization. And as our findings reveal, this personalization also involves the development of a more intimate side to luxury, the secrets and gifts that customers and salespeople share.

However, the power asymmetry between salespeople and their wealthy customers means that these relationships are quite different from more equal commercial friendships in other settings (Price & Arnould, 1999). What we find in the luxury world is that intimacy can quickly lead to domination and servility, in other words, customers using their privileged rapport with salespeople to benefit from their work.

### *5.1. Falling into the intimacy trap*

On the surface, the relationships we studied looked like regular commercial friendships. As they exchange gifts and secrets, luxury salespeople and their customers come to develop the kinds of commercial friendships evoked in past research. The first author's fieldnotes describe the case of Linda, a regular customer of a luxury store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills (California), and her close relationship with the salespeople there:

*We were chatting with Nancy [one of the salespeople] when suddenly Linda, a customer, entered the shop and came straight to Nancy. Linda went down to Rodeo Drive this morning to do some shopping and took the opportunity to say hello to the saleswomen. Nancy stops talking to us immediately and approaches Linda, offers her a coffee and listens attentively as she recounts her latest holiday. Linda, who looks very comfortable and at ease, sits down in an armchair and asks about Adrian [another salesperson who was on holiday that day]. She finally leaves the shop, announcing in a conspiratorial tone that she will return soon with her husband to buy cufflinks: "He needs to dress well, so you can help me find him some cufflinks that match his watch." Nancy walks her to the door of the shop. Linda gives her a smiling "see you soon." After she leaves, Nancy tells me that Linda is a VIP to be pampered, a "friend," and that we could meet her during our interviews. (Fieldnotes, LA)*

Linda's experience demonstrates that the efforts of luxury companies to create homely spaces for habituated customers where they can lounge are not in vain (Debenedetti, 2021). What we want to emphasize in our work, though, is the way these wealthy customers develop privileged relationships with luxury salespeople. Not only does this customer (Linda) have a

privileged relationship with Nancy (who calls her a friend), but she also seems familiar with different salespeople in the store.

However, when the first author conducted an interview with Linda, a more nuanced picture of her relationship with Nancy emerged. As affable as ever, she talked about Nancy and the other shop assistants by emphasizing their efficiency rather than their commercial friendship:

*What I like about Nancy in particular is that Nancy is efficient. Whether it's me or whether it's Dave, you can go in and you know Nancy is going to bust her fanny to get whatever it is that you need in the timeframe that you need and she's going to send you the documents that you need and the receipt or whatever and take care of it (...) Alita [a former salesperson at this store] was exceptional. She knew, she was innovative in that, whatever I needed or wanted at that time, she could do or create or get. Whether it was coming from New York, it was not a problem. Nothing was a problem, which was nice. That's a great thing to do. Then there was Adrian, then Nancy. (Linda, LA)*

This quote suggests that the commercial friendship between Nancy and Linda may be unbalanced. Linda seems especially appreciative of Nancy's efforts when she "busts her fanny," but in the same quote she mentions other assistants (Alita and Adrian) who help her procure goods. Linda seems only weakly committed to her commercial friendship with Nancy. For this wealthy customer, the commercial friendship appears instrumental (Oppen, 2020). This is consistent with observations we made in other luxury stores where customers would cultivate relationships with salespeople to access limited-edition goods. Commercial friendships can become ways for luxury customers to maximize transactional efficiency.

This instrumental approach to commercial friendships is also at play in the following quote in which Laura talks about the way she enrolled the salespeople to talk her husband into buying a second high-end watch:

*The second time with my husband, she [Sophie, the saleswoman] probably sold him more than I could because I wanted him to get a good watch. He is a partner in a company. They were giving all the partners the Tiffany watches with their company name on the inside. He was wearing the watch. It was really a good time. He said everybody is wearing this same watch. Normally my husband could not care less. He had seen like 100 people wearing it. He said maybe you were right. Maybe I should get a watch. I had told Sophie*

*to hold these two watches for him, which she did. Women have a way of talking men into it. I got him to stop by. She backed me up on it. (Laura, NY)*

Laura's husband started to consider buying a new watch because he did not want to wear the same Tiffany watch as the other employees in his company. Laura thus plotted with their favorite saleswoman, Sophie, to hold two watches for her husband and to convince him to buy one of the two watches.

The world of luxury thus entails entering people's intimate sphere. But while some salespeople enter this space willingly, others can experience discomfort in mixing the intimate and the commercial. In the following fieldnote, the first author mentions the way a salesperson became involved in a couple's conspiracy, but also how her involvement triggered feelings of embarrassment:

*Helen [the saleswoman] was worried. One of her more regular customers bought a necklace to celebrate his tenth wedding anniversary. But he asked Helen to keep the necklace and give it to his wife the next time she came in. Helen was really embarrassed and wondered whether the customer was doing this to send a message to his wife about their own (strictly professional) relationship in case she had any doubts. (Fieldnotes, LA)*

The above fieldnote describes how the saleswoman, Helen, became involved in a lovers' game, and as we interviewed the gift's recipient, she talked about the salesperson as a "collaborator" in a "sneaking thing:"

*It was a bracelet that he had ordered to match the necklace he had given me. She [Helen] is kind of like the participant with him in this sneaking thing. I was sitting there, floored. They had collaborated in this. (Tina, LA)*

In this example, the customer made the saleswoman intervene in an intimate exchange with his wife, albeit rather unwillingly. This case reveals the customer's domination in a situation of self-seeking interest (Oppen, 2020). Helen found herself in an embarrassing situation, in the midst of a family story that was difficult to manage because she was being manipulated by the customer. She could not get out of this situation without the risk of disappointing or even losing her customer (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963).



This “intimacy trap” involves extremely detailed knowledge of the customer, but also leads to increased dependency. Here we see that the benefits of customer intimacy, such as customer satisfaction and loyalty (Yim, Tse, & Chan 2008), also lead to issues of subordination and domination.

Indeed, the sales assistant who succeeds in forging a commercial friendship with a customer is paradoxically in a relationship of subordination to this customer. The salesperson may never become the wealthy customer’s best friend, especially given the social class differences between salespeople and customers. Nevertheless, the salesperson is meant to gradually enter the customer’s world, participating in more and more intimate parts of this world.

Thus, the intimacy of relationships in the luxury sector can become a trap for salespeople, and by extension, for the luxury brands employing them. As their relationships with customers evolve, salespeople tend to commit additional time and emotional resources, but with the risk of having wealthy customers abruptly end this relationship, the power asymmetry between customers and salespeople only grows (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005). The intimacy trap thus becomes more poignant as the relationship between salespeople and customers develops.

In the quote below, a manager refers more broadly to commercial relationships, nevertheless highlighting the dangers of very intimate relationships between a customer and salesperson for luxury salespeople and the store:

*The salesmen are so afraid of their customers because there are customers who have changed the life of a salesman, that’s clear (...) When you sell them millions and millions, it changes your life. Well, your heart doesn’t go out to the company, it goes out to the million. (Louis, Regional Director)*

Louis manages a high-end jewelry brand where some rings and watches fetch hundreds of thousands of euros. For this type of purchase, as he highlighted, the commission earned on the sale can quickly change the salesperson’s life. At this level of luxury, there is no denying

that the economic weight of the purchase dramatically changes the relationship, so that even as salespeople are drawn into their customers' intimacy, they are also left in a tenuous position between friend and servant (Maza, 2014), right in the middle of the intimacy trap.

For these types of retailers and the customers they attract, relationships are made even more complex by the type of purchases made. As mentioned, while the sale of an item beyond a million euros can significantly change a salesperson's life, the prospect of not making the sale creates a particular kind of relationship between luxury salespeople and their wealthy customers that has not been documented in prior luxury research.

## 5.2. *Managing the intimacy trap*

Our findings suggest that overcoming the intimacy trap is challenging for salespeople, and cannot be managed with short-term practices and strategies. Instead, our findings show that top salespeople (what luxury brands call "grands vendeurs") manage the intimacy trap through a long-term commitment to preserve the intimacy they have with luxury consumers while also ensuring customers continue to see and respect their commercial role. Two main ways of dealing with the intimacy trap emerge: 1) becoming indispensable and 2) foregrounding their salesperson role.

Top salespeople manage the intimacy trap by subtly but surely making themselves indispensable to customers, becoming someone who can handle the most intimate secrets, but also someone who can solve everyday problems, as Marie reveals:

*"Un grand vendeur", what we call top salespeople, are people who manage VIP customers with purchases ranging from 500,000 to several million euros. They have a very particular relationship, that is to say, they even go as far as going to the opera with them, there is a very intimate relationship. And the grand vendeur's intelligence is knowing that they will never be the customer's best friend. But on the other hand, they will be there to reassure them, to present them the preview pieces to know their tastes, to gradually enter their world. And it is also a profession of extreme service, we must not forget that a "grand vendeur" can be called at any time of the day and night, because Madam decided she wants... a new brooch and that she absolutely needs it for dinner. And there is also this capacity for empathy and availability too. (Marie, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

Marie analyses the salesperson and customer relationship through the master-servant prism (the word “madam” is used by servants to describe their mistress). However, by making themselves indispensable and unavoidable for customers, “grands vendeurs” redress the state of imbalance, as Dimitri explains with his relationship with a Russian customer.

*I worked for a long time as a salesman in a luxury store in Madrid. I bonded with a Russian customer because I speak Russian. She came once to buy a diary for her husband. I followed up with her the following year, quite naturally. I offered her to come and buy the refill. It was a pretext of course, because I felt she was interested in other products. I made her try on a pendant that she bought, since I felt she was interested in watches. I did not force her to buy anything, only asked her some questions. I was doing her little favors. For instance, once when it was raining, she had forgotten her umbrella, I lent her one, knowing that she would have to come back. We both knew why we were there. One day, she came, she was interested in a watch for 20,000 euros. She tried it, and left. I then sent her a picture of the watch to ask her if she was interested, emphasizing how this product was likely to sell out quickly. She asked me to put one aside for her. A few days later, she picked it up. (Dimitri, Salesperson, Paris)*

What we want to emphasize here is the way Dimitri manages to become a useful but not overbearing presence. He showcases his products, but above all, strives to solve problems. What emerges from our interviews is that top luxury salespeople manage their relationship with wealthy customers by effectively resolving their challenges by being considerate of them, not by being indentured servants. The power asymmetry is played out on several levels, and if the customer’s account is indispensable to the seller to ensure his/her future, the seller’s expertise is indispensable to the customer to solve his/her problem. At the same time, and this also emerges from Dimitri’s interview, top salespeople subtly manage to constantly evoke their commercial role.

Even as they nurture an intimacy bubble with customers, top luxury salespeople never completely abandon their role as salespeople. Even as they stay close to customers, they keep the commercial dimension alive.

*One does not apply to be a “grand vendeur.” Becoming a top salesperson requires experience, seeing enough customers, having spoken enough about your brand, to eventually resonate with the richest customers, who are, indeed, very demanding*

*customers. Yet, they never underestimate or underplay the sales dimensions. Actually, it is like top salespeople manage to harpoon wealthy customers, without letting them go. When I visit them in luxury stores, sometimes I find myself thinking, “But these are carpet merchants. They are car dealers!” (Gabrielle, Marketing Director).*

Maybe because so much of the luxury literature emphasizes the glamorous, symbolic aspects of luxury brands, we might fail to discern the more pragmatic, commercial aspects of luxury sales. Yet, what Gabrielle emphasizes here is the way luxury salespeople manage to be both intimate and commercial, always taking them into their confidence, but also negotiating, listening to stories, presenting and trying to sell products. Even as salespeople become more intimate with wealthy customers, they avoid becoming servile by foregrounding their role as salespeople. They are not just friends who solve problems, they are salespeople seeking to make a sale.

Managing the intimacy trap thus involves a distinct kind of boundary work where salespeople assert their role as salespeople. Boundary work has been described as a set of ordering practices that allow actors to maintain some distance between different cultural realms, such as the borders between economic and non-economic spheres (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010). Our research features a specific kind of boundary work that the “grands vendeurs” deploy. To avoid falling in what we call the “intimacy trap” in which they become so intimate that they become almost like servants, they tend to foreground their expertise and professionalism. Such boundary work is important in asserting legitimacy, and is appreciated by luxury customers.

In the following quote, Melany describes her relationship with the saleswoman, Aline, who has become her confidante. Yet Aline also knows how to show that she is above all a saleswoman trying to “close” a deal, and this impresses Melany:

*I work with this woman called Aline. She is a saleswoman. She is fabulous. We were walking down 5th Avenue around Christmas time around two years ago. We walked in the store. I had sort of in my mind designed a watch I wanted. I saw the watch in the window. I am an interior designer. These things would come into my head. She let me try the watch. I thought about it. About three months later, I was walking by and she sees me looking in*

*the window. She comes out and she says I remember you looking at this watch at Christmas. I was really impressed with that. Then this past year, we bought two more watches. We bought my husband a watch again through Aline and she was lovely. Then I had developed an allergy and could not wear stainless steel watches... In about a year and a half, I bought three watches from her. (Melany, Customer, NY)*

We see here that top salespeople like Aline are careful not to fall into the intimacy trap. They cultivate the skills and competencies of the luxury salesperson—the ability to create an intimacy bubble, or to subtly impersonate the brand—but always careful to maintain their identity as a salesperson. If the intimate world of luxury involves wealthy customers and salespeople getting close to each other, it also entails a fair amount of boundary and relational work to avoid the intimacy trap.

## **6. Discussion**

While commercial friendships have featured in other settings, our research allows us to unearth a distinctive feature of these relationships in the luxury context, what we call the “intimacy trap.” We show that while luxury commercial friendships require the same intimate labor as other settings—the accumulation of knowledge about customers, the sharing of gifts and secrets—luxury also entails a different power dynamic between salespeople and customers. We show that by entering the innermost world of their customers, salespeople can quickly find themselves at their beck and call. In the next section, we show how these findings help advance what we know about commercial friendships in a luxury context.

### *6.1. The intimate world of luxury: Gift-giving and secret-sharing*

Consistent with what has been observed in other contexts, the world of luxury is replete with gift-giving (Arnold et al., 2011; Darr, 2006) and self-disclosure episodes (Arnold et al., 2011; Price & Arnould, 1999). These moments generate the kind of intimacy that can lead to commercial friendships.

These types of intimate bonds between luxury salespeople and customers may surprise, though. After all, luxury salespeople are usually advised to keep their distance with customers (Ward & Dahl, 2014), and they are regularly used as boundary-makers, establishing the distance that is supposed to elicit desire in luxury stores (Dion & Borraz, 2017). They are advised to be friendly with customers but avoid becoming friends with them (Sresnewsky et al., 2020).

Yet, in the world of luxury, there is also an intimate world of individualized attention and gift-giving that resembles friendships found in other settings (Rosenbaum, 2009). These practices initiate a cycle of mutual debt (Godbout, 1998) that contributes to developing intimacy. However, it is worth mentioning that beyond establishing this mutuality between salespeople and habituated customers, a power imbalance could be at play in the very act of giving. In some cases, the customer's gift obliges the salesperson so much that it has the negative effects (Caillé, 2020) of diminishing his/her self-esteem.

Intimacy is also visible in the ways habituated luxury customers share their secrets with salespeople. Usually, when someone lets another person in on a secret, it is because she/he trusts this person and wants to create a strong bond (Crinquand & Liard, 2019). In the context of luxury, salespeople and customers routinely build the "hidden architecture" (Grey & Costas, 2016) of their relationship using the powerful glue of shared secrets (Simmel, 1906) and the sharing of personal stories (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2011). The sharing of these secrets in the luxury store induces a distinct kind of commercial relationship, advancing what we know about the luxury world. Indeed, luxury salespeople practice a kind of "intimate work" (McGuire, 2007) with habituated customers, thereby facilitating the building, development, and maintenance of the commercial friendship.

Yet, the skills required to perform such intimate work are not off-the-shelf purchases and are not easy to develop through luxury sales management manuals (Chevalier & Gutstatz,

2013). Maintaining mutual debt and trading secrets with habituated customers is not easy to achieve. These practices require improvisational skills. For instance, salespeople offer gifts to their customers in a bid to take the relationship out of the expected transactional script and help them build and develop rapport. These gifts are often improvised and creative. They thus allow salespeople to create a space of their own, away from branded scripts, and provide a way for them to further their relationship with customers and increase their engagement. Telling stories to customers and listening to their stories allows salespeople to create a more intimate interaction (Crinquand & Liard, 2019). As they switch to a more intimate interaction, salespeople are able to distance themselves from the brand's script while establishing a new kind of connection with customers.

As they enter this intimate sphere, luxury salespeople must learn an entirely new set of skills. They need to learn how to deal with the plots and secrets linked to the intimate realm. This more intimate realm requires a set of competencies beyond what brand guidelines could ever prescribe. In addition, they must navigate the dangers of the intimacy trap when entering the customer's intimacy potentially leading to a relationship of dependency and subordination.

## *6.2. The illusion of intimacy of commercial friendships: The intimacy trap*

Intimacy does not protect against the risk of experiencing a power relationship (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963). Indeed, the development of intimacy between two people holding completely different social positions (such as luxury salespeople and their customers) results in an ambiguous intimacy that resembles the ambiguity of the servant/master relationship. Salespeople know that in accepting to play the part of servants they increase their intimacy with customers (Crinquand & Liard, 2019), thus improving their sales performance. However, this might result in an illusion of intimacy.

The servant is at once a familiar companion and an inferior being. Even when the servant acts as a close confidant, friend, or personal attendant, thereby becoming an eyewitness to private matters, ambiguities as to her/his status remain. Relying on novels and archival material, historical research on servants (Clegg, 2015; Maza, 2014) and feminist studies focusing on maid–mistress interactions (Romero, 2016) have highlighted the ambiguity of these intimate relationships between master and servant. One of the most troubling findings is the illusion of intimacy supported by the master’s benevolence, which is a false generosity or an ideological camouflage that conceals the nature of the self-interest-seeking nature of the relationship between servant and master. The servant’s fakeness betrays this camouflage, and given the historical link between the roles of servants and salespeople, it is possible that the sharing of secrets in the context of luxury stores between habituated customers and salespeople is driven by the need for the same illusion. One could say that salespeople live a fake friendship with luxury customers. The salesperson’s truth is to be a fake friend and to mask the person she or he is under the guise of servility.

The habituated luxury customer is placed in a position of domination, with the salesperson adopting the role of servant, even if unwillingly. These apparent contradictions make commercial friendships in the luxury sector difficult to manage, probably even more so than in other settings (Price & Arnould, 1999). Salespeople tacitly accept the subordination that the intimate relationship with wealthy customers implies. However, luxury salespeople are not complacent, redressing the power imbalance with their wealthy customers by playing on other levels if they can. This is the case of “grands vendeurs” whose expertise in certain areas and ability to solve customer problems makes them indispensable to their customers. This is known as the hallmark of the servant’s triumph (Fleishman, 1974): by making themselves indispensable to their master, they make their service a power and their master a conquest.



Accepting the intimate master–servant relationship that binds salespeople to wealthy customers can also give salespeople power over the luxury company. In the salespeople’s hierarchy of luxury *maisons*, the “grands vendeurs” who take care of rich habituated customers are an independent group that can move from one *maison* to another, eventually taking their customers with them. Similar to key account managers in business-to-business sales, the relationship between these “grands vendeurs” and their customers can involve unique challenges and tensions that are hard to reconcile with traditional customer relationship management frameworks. They cannot just be managed as “classic” salespeople.

Our research further helps lift the curtain on the hidden world of luxury. Behind the well-polished discourses of luxury brand managers, there is a hidden world of intrigues, secret plots, unexpected gifts, and intimate relationships. Luxury managers may be busy polishing their brand’s image with glamorous models and spectacular stores. But the luxury world is messier, more ambiguous, and probably more interesting than these polished representations. Our work further details this messiness, including the messiness of intimate relationships that encroach onto the commercial. Or is it the opposite?

### *6.3. Managerial implications*

The skills required to perform the intimate work of luxury demonstrates the need for distinctive sales training in this area. Recent research has highlighted the dangers of salesforce training focused exclusively on brand orientation without considering the importance of customer orientation (Merk & Michel, 2019). We would go further and argue that the focus on branding in luxury scholarship and salesforce training may have gone too far, since helping salespeople acquire and improve their relationship skills seems equally important in the development of luxury brands.

Many luxury companies already integrate this aspect of salesforce management in their training, but with the rapid global expansion of luxury brands, some evidence suggests that these relationship skills may have taken a back seat, replaced by brand storytelling and brand alignment (Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013). Indeed, by adding stores around the globe, major luxury *maisons* have spent significant resources in creating brand-aligned sales representatives (Merk & Michel, 2019), but have spent considerably less in helping luxury salespeople understand how to nurture friendships with habituated customers.

However, as we have seen in the present study, the creation and management of commercial friendships is both important and challenging. In the end, using the brand as a guide to develop and export luxury brands has equipped marketers with a useful structuring device for their global development. But one wonders if in this process luxury marketers and scholars may be losing sight of an important yet rarely talked about aspect of luxury sales interactions: knowing how to navigate the world of secrets and connivances that luxury purchasing entails.

As we have shown, salespeople need specific skills to avoid falling into the intimacy trap. Indeed, interacting with wealthy and privileged customers (Pinçon-Charlot & Pinçon, 2018) requires being able to decipher that beyond a friendship exterior, some customers expect salespeople to become more like butlers. Salespeople must be trained to counterbalance the effects of the power asymmetry to 1) become indispensable to their customers and 2) foreground their role as a salesperson.

If the customer's greatest source of power over the salesperson is being indispensable in terms of sales figures, the salesperson can redress this by being indispensable to the customer in terms of providing solutions to the consumer's needs. The seller's expertise can become key to solving the customer's problem, whether it is product selection or more situational. Problem solving is thus not only a key feature of functional sales funnels (Ferguson,

Gironda, & Petrescu, 2021), but also a way to counterbalance the negative effects of commercial friendships.

In addition, salespeople must always foreground their role as salespeople. Contrary to many other sectors where the salesperson tries to erase any commercial dimension in order to develop a friendly relationship (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010), in the luxury sector, the salesperson must assert and maintain his or her commercial dimension, which is the basis of his or her legitimacy in this unbalanced customer–salesperson relationship. Emphasizing this role seems especially important for salespeople to avoid the intimacy trap.

## **7. Limitations and future research**

As we have seen in this research, the issue of power asymmetry seems important in analyzing interactions between salespeople and customers. A more comprehensive analysis of the way power asymmetry works in the luxury sector would be useful, especially since luxury services and retail offer contradicting pictures. While luxury services seem designed toward power for customers (Sherman, 2003), luxury retail is a more hybrid domain forcefully excluding some customers while accepting the power of wealthier customers. Future research could fruitfully analyze how customers relate to the power of luxury retail, especially by taking into account differences between customers. Our research suggests that habituated luxury customers relate very differently to the domination that luxury *maisons* seek to impose, going as far as reversing the relationship of domination. However, future research is needed to contrast novice and more habituated luxury customers. Our research suggests that the recommendation that luxury brands create exclusivity through exclusion (Dion & Borraz, 2017) works for a certain segment of consumers, but not habituated luxury consumers.

Finally, the study of commercial friendships would benefit from more cross-cultural research designs. In their seminal research, Price and Arnould (1999) acknowledge the

cultural dimension of their study, stating that “in North American contexts, friendship serves as an important metaphor and normative framework through which informants define and understand marketing relationships” (p. 50). While here we have similarly focused on a Western contexts in our analysis of commercial friendships, the field would benefit from understanding how commercial friendships develop in other settings. Given the globalization of the luxury industry (Chadha & Husband, 2010), attending to these nuances would undoubtedly help luxury brands better understand and manage the relationships that are so critical to their success.

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**Table 1**

List of salespeople and store managers interviewed.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Store</b>
Isabelle	31	F	Paris
Stéphane	35	M	Paris
Aurélie	29	F	Paris
Jacques	38	M	Paris
Emmanuel	42	M	Paris
Dimitri	33	M	Paris
Sonia	27	F	Paris
Pauline	29	F	Paris
Helen	31	F	Los Angeles
Nancy	33	F	Los Angeles
Romiko	29	F	Los Angeles
Patrick	39	F	Los Angeles
Maria	41	F	Costa Mesa
Suzie	27	F	Costa Mesa
Aline	31	F	New York
Sophie	35	F	New York
Dany	33	M	New York
Katia	51	F	New York
Bertrand	48	F	New York

**Table 2**

List of customers interviewed.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Purchases/year</b>
Tina	45	F	Lawyer	Beverly Hills	10k–15k
Linda	38	F	Housewife	Orange County	20k–25k
Moji	42	F	Housewife	Beverly Hills	10k–15k
Bridget	31	F	Housewife	Beverly Hills	100k–150k
Lisa	48	F	PR Agent	Beverly Hills	10k–15k
Michi	32	F	Sales Manager	Newport Beach	5k–10k
Frank	53	M	Entrepreneur	Orange County	5k–10k
Viktor	51	M	Entrepreneur	Orange County	10k–15k
Susan	61	F	Event manager	Orange County	5k–10k
Alison	38	F	Physician	New Jersey	5k–10k
Melany	55	F	Interior Designer	New York	5k–10k
Julia	41	F	Fashion Manager	New York	5k–10k
Karen	55	F	Lawyer	New York	10k–15k
Rudy	41	M	Sales Manager	New York	5k–10k
Patrick	37	M	Sales Manager	New York	5k–10k
Louisa	55	F	Interior Designer	Beverly Hills	5k–10k
Conrad	45	M	Unemployed	Los Angeles	10k–15k
Denise	35	F	Creative Producer	Los Angeles	5k–10k
Jason	48	M	Entrepreneur	Los Angeles	5k–10k
Jessica	32	F	Fashion Manager	Los Angeles	5k–10k
Jimmy	46	M	Designer	Santa Monica	5k–10k
Lindsay	34	F	PR Manager	Beverly Hills	5k–10k
Jessie	51	M	Mortgage Banker	Brentwood	10k–15k
Barry	55	M	Financial	New York	5k–10k
Bill	55	M	CEO	New York	10k–15k
Elizabeth	52	F	Nutrition Coach	New York	5k–10k
Laura	37	F	Analyst	New York	5k–10k
Zahit	57	M	Financial Analyst	New Jersey	5k–10k

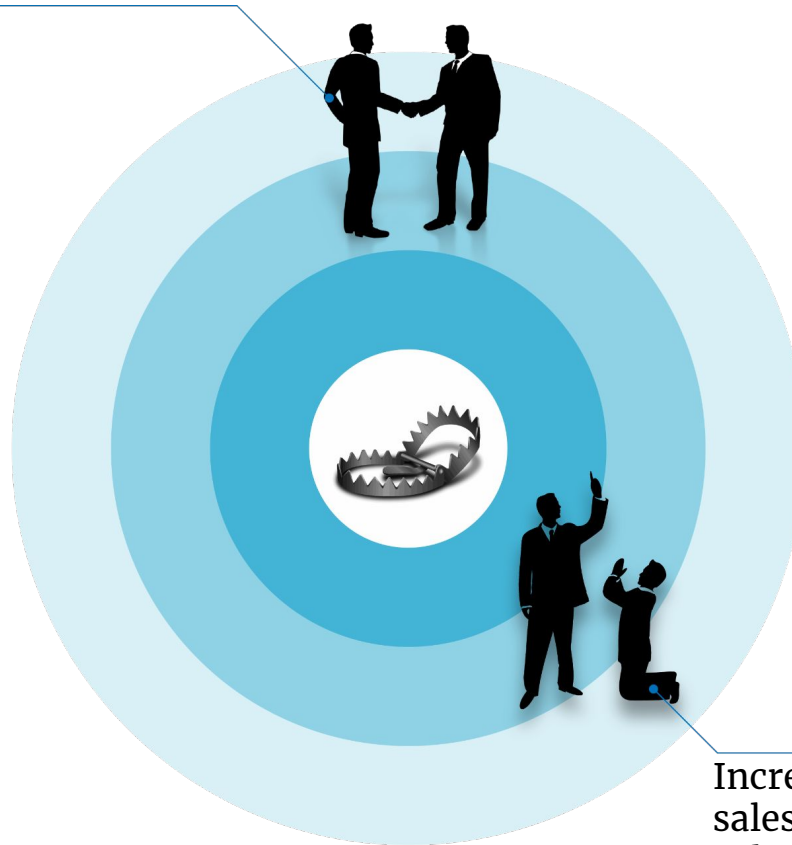
Whitney	35	F	Home Designer	New York	5k–10k
Stella	37	F	Hotel Director	Genève	5k–10k
Gregory	36	M	Attorney	Paris	10k–15k
Agnès	62	F	Auctioneer	Paris	5k–10k
Françoise	62	F	Retired	Boulogne	10k–15k
Pierre	67	M	CEO	Paris	10k–15k
Matthieu	32	M	Managing	Paris	5k–10k
Madeleine	65	F	Retired	Paris	5k–10k
Olivier	46	M	CEO	Paris	5k–10k
Elizabeth	28	F	Fashion Designer	Paris	5k–10k
Pascal	29	M	Sales Manager	Paris	5k–10k
Laura	43	F	Lawyer	Paris	5k–10k

**Table 3**

List of general managers and experts interviewed.

Anne-Claire	27	Customer Relationship Manager	Leather goods
Christine	45	Retail Manager	Leather goods
Gabrielle	41	Marketing Director	Watches/Jewelry
Marie	62	Communication Director	Jewelry
Marc	58	Consultant	Luxury sector
Eric	62	Consultant	Luxury sector
Julia	45	Retail Manager	Jewelry
Alain	48	Operations Manager	Jewellery/Watches
Cédric	36	Operations/Retail Store Manager	Watches
Bénédicte	42	Retail Manager	Leather goods
Louis	43	Regional Director	Jewelry
Angelo	48	Regional Marketing Manager	High end fashion

Engaging in commercial friendships  
with clients: luxury becomes a world of  
gifts and secrets



## Methodological approach

Ethnographic observations of  
habituated luxury customers in  
French and US luxury stores

- 21 days of participant  
observation
- 29 customer interviews
- 12 interviews with luxury  
managers

Increased dependency:  
salespeople become  
subordinated to luxury  
clients

### Managing the intimacy trap

1. Becoming indispensable
2. Foregrounding the salesperson's role