What luxury consumers want: interrelation between store atmospherics and salespeople behavioural attributes
Abstract

The aim of the present research is to provide a conceptual framework that connects store atmospherics and salespeople’s attributes and behaviours and to assess their relevance in shaping a customer’s overall experience in a luxury store. Our findings prove empirically that salespeople’s attributes and behaviours are more crucial than atmospherics in determining customer satisfaction. The empirical results suggest that Giving advice to customer and Closing the sale are the most influential aspects for the development of an effective customer-centric experience and that empathetic and caring skills are therefore particularly crucial in the selection and training of salespeople. The managerial implications are discussed.
1. Introduction

1.1. The central role of the store for the luxury industry

Even if e-commerce is one of the fastest growing shopping channels for luxury goods (Sanguanpiyapan and Jasper 2010; Bain & Company 2014) and the Internet has “profoundly transformed the industry practices of modern retailing and distribution management” (Liu and Burns 2013; and also Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick 2006; Pentina et al. 2011), the retail channel remains the first driver of growth for the luxury industry, as witnessed by the recent “retailization” phenomenon (Bain & Company 2011). Direct control over the distribution chain enables the successful luxury brands to generate higher profit margins, and the mono-brand store is the format firmly leading the way in this industry (52% of the global market) (Bain & Company 2014). Moreover, the physical point of sale also represents a powerful catalyst for other objectives, synergetic and complementary to profit achievement. The store is the “sacred place” where the oneiric component of the luxury brand materializes in a product presented to the “Chosen ones” (i.e., the “Customers”) through an almost religious ritual (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). The global expansion of the luxury market (Chevalier and Gutsatz 2012; Fondazione Altagamma 2015) and the “luxury democratization” (Gardyn 2002; Truong et al. 2008, 2009) led to a reduction of true craftsmanship in product manufacturing and to a growth of accessories and fragrances in the portfolio of many prestigious brands, aimed at multiplying the opportunities to meet with an increasing customer population. Therefore, the luxury industry is now struggling even more against the eternal paradox between the need to maximize profits and the inescapable necessity to hold high the banner of its exclusivity, not to disappoint its primary target, the so-called “happy few” (Berry 1994; Okonkwo 2007; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Radón 2012). The luxury store represents the stage onto which the brand puts up a show of its own aesthetic definition of “beauty”, as it has been sensed by the genius of its charismatic creative director, thereby establishing its legitimacy in the eyes of its customers (Dion and Arnould 2011; Arnold et al. 2001). Seeking legitimacy is indeed the first objective of any luxury brand, especially in relation to the small circle of connoisseurs, the
hyper-sophisticated, beauty worshipers, and art lovers, the ones that a luxury firm would never dare to betray (Dubois and Duquesne 2003; Kapferer and Bastien 2009). From this perspective, it becomes easy to understand the recurrent and close intersections between luxury and art, especially contemporary, that has concerned the product (the “Lobster dress” by Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dalí, the “Mondrian day dress” by Yves Saint Laurent, the Murakami bags by Louis Vuitton, etc.), various patronage activities (Chanel Mobile Art Pavilion, Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Gucci Dia Art Foundation, etc.), and also the point of sale. The “M(Art)World” store is in fact a pioneering type of luxury flagship, often conceived by the most renowned architects, where the traditional division between commercial activities and art spaces is overcome in the name of a luxury “that contains art within its very identity” (Joy et al. 2014, p. 347) or, at least, that aspires to become art itself (Okonkwo 2007).

The overall shopping experience is certainly related to the “quality” of the physical space, but it also depends on the interaction between retail employees and customers, interaction that is of particular relevance for an industry that offers high involvement products (Martin 1998; Ehbauer and Gresel 2013). Thus, if the luxury store is considered as a sort of “brand cathedral”, its salespersons necessarily become the ambassadors appointed to officiate the rituals and the selling ceremony of the sacralized brand (Cervellon and Coudriet 2013).

This is even more true insofar as the mere concept of in-store purchasing has been increasingly replaced by that of experiential retailing (Lahey 2000; Kim 2001; Shaw and Ivens 2002; Grewal et al. 2009; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009; De Farias et al. 2014; Khan and Rahman 2015).

The luxury store is only partly about transactions. The luxury store has been seen by its selected customers more and more as a place of “experience”, “fun” and “gratification”, a sort of “third space” where not only products but also “good times” are for sale (Allegra Strategies 2005; Anderson et al. 2010; Manlow and Nobbs 2013).

1.2. Atmospherics and salespeople behavioural attributes
Starting from Kotler’s work (1973), the role of the physical environment in determining a positive customer experience has been widely studied by many scholars who have developed some comprehensive atmospheres classifications (Baker 1986; Bitner 1992; Berman and Evans 1995; Turley and Milliman 2000) and investigated them individually or in their interactions (Mattila and Wirtz 2001; Eroglu et al. 2005a; Spangenberg et al. 2005; Trivedi 2006; Vaccaro 2009). Similarly, especially since the 2000s, other studies have been carried out to understand the impact of salespersons’ attributes and behaviours upon a satisfying overall in-store experience (among others, Walker et al. 1977; Weitz 1981; Menon and Dubé 2000; Sharma and Levy 2003). These factors were then separately studied in the literature and recently have begun to be investigated also in their interrelationships (Sherman et al. 1997; Baker et al. 2002; Hedrick et al. 2006; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Lin and Liang 2011). However, a framework that evaluates the overall shopping experience, gathering together the atmospheres and the salespeople’s attributes and behaviours and validating their distinct relevance, has not yet been developed.

The purpose of our research is to precisely fill this gap in the literature, at least with regard to the buying patterns of a luxury industry whose studies on store atmospheres and salespeople’s behavioural attributes are not numerous.

2. Literature Review/Theoretical Background

2.1. Store atmospheres

The literature on the manipulation of store environments to influence consumer behaviours dates back to the 1950 and 1960 (Martineau 1958; Cox 1964; Smith and Currow 1966; Kotzan and Evanson 1969), even if the term “atmospheres” was coined only later by Philip Kotler (1973); Kotler defined atmospheres as the “effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability” (p. 50). Building on Kotler’s work, Donovan and Rossiter (1982) applied the Mehrabian-Russel model (1974) to retail highlighting the influence of the atmospheres on consumers’ emotions and behaviours. Baker (1986) then developed a more exhaustive model entailing three key elements of the store setting
ambience: “non-visual” (i.e., background conditions in the environment); “design” (i.e., functional and aesthetic elements basically visual); and “social” (elements involving the people who are inside the store). Afterwards, Bitner (1992) imagined three dimensions of the store setting (“ambient conditions”, “space/function” and “signs, symbols & artifacts”) and proved in a very convincing way the impact of atmospherics not only on customers but also on the employees of the store (as previously Baker et al. 1992). Berman and Evans (1995) split up instead the atmospherics into four categories: “exterior of the store”, “general interior”, “layout and design variables”, and “point-of-purchase and decoration variables”. Despite the existence of these first organizational models, Bitner (1992) could not help remarking on “a lack of empirical research […] addressing the role of physical surroundings in consumption settings” (p. 57), an observation that later encouraged Turley and Milliman (2000) to consolidate the learning reached until then and create a more consistent and logical classification of the store atmospherics (ibidem, p. 194). Turley and Milliman’s work represents a turning point in the atmospherics studies as the two scholars took the decisive step to integrate Berman and Evans’s classification with a fifth category consisting of the so-called “human variables” (similar to the “social elements” of Baker 1986), inclusive of all of the aspects related to the influence of other shoppers and of retail employees’ appearance on shopping behaviours. Additionally, for this reason, the Turley and Milliman classification is still considered, after 15 years, to be the most exhaustive and organized work on store atmospherics (tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Atmospherics classifications from the literature

In addition to these systematic studies, many other papers have shown, in parallel, the relevance of the atmospherics as individual variables or classes of variables on customers’ emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses (among others, Bitner 1990; Donovan et al. 1994; Baker et al. 1994; Darden and Babin 1994; Sherman et al. 1997; Richins 1997; Foxall and Greenly 1999 and 2000; Baker et al. 2002; Chebat and Michon 2003; Babin et al. 2004; Demoulin 2011; Andersson et al. 2012; Correia Loureiro and Roschk 2014; Loureiro and Roschk 2014; Ramlee and Said 2014; Spence et al. 2014). Other scholars have focused instead on how store atmospherics are perceived
by customers not as separate identities but in interrelationship (Bitner 1990; Mattila and Wirtz 2001; Morin et al. 2007; De Farias 2014) and on how their simultaneous variations have an impact on perceived merchandising value, patronage intention, service quality and store image (Grewal and Baker 1994; Baker et al. 2002).

2.2. Salespeople’s attributes and behaviours

The role of the retail salespersons has been quite neglected by scholars, especially if compared to the numerous studies dedicated to store atmospherics (Hartline and Jones 1996; Darian et al. 2005; Hedrick et al. 2006; Gremler and Gwinner 2008). In addition, the focus has typically been more on service quality and sales performance rather than on sales associates’ attributes and behaviours (Kim and Kim 2012). Therefore, in the past, only relatively few studies have fully recognized the importance of a solid relationship between salespersons and customers (Walker et al. 1977; Weitz 1981; Weitzel et al. 1986; Menon and Dubé 2000; Sharma and Levy 2003; Bäckström and Johansson 2006) and the impact this may have on the commitment and loyalty towards the brand (Macintosh and Lockshin 1997; Campbell et al. 2006; Gremler and Gwinner 2008), on customer satisfaction (Goodwin 1996; Menon and Dubé 2000), on patronage intentions (Darian et al. 2001), and on word-of-mouth communication (LaBahn 1996; Gremler and Gwinner 2000 and 2008; DeWitt and Brady 2003).

More recently, however, the role of salespeople attributes and behaviours has been increasingly seen as critical (Kim and Kim 2010), and many scholars have begun to highlight its key contribution in shaping the customer overall in-store experience, sometimes judging it as even more crucial than that of the atmospherics (see, e.g., Hedrick et al. 2006; Fowler et al. 2007).

3. Research objectives

The literature presents many studies that investigated the impact of the atmospherics on the retail experience. Several other papers have highlighted the importance of salespeople’s attributes and behaviours in determining customer satisfaction. These factors were mainly studied separately and only occasionally together (Sherman et al. 1997; Baker et al. 2002; Hedrick et al. 2006; Puccinelli
et al. 2009; Lin and Liang 2011). Our intent is to empirically analyse the influence and importance of these aspects and of all of their variables on the in-store experience within a unique conceptual framework, something that is still missing, at least to our knowledge, in the literature.

More precisely, the questions that we will try to address are the following:

1. Which factor, between atmospherics and salespeople’s attributes and behaviours, is more relevant in determining the overall experience in a luxury store?
2. Within these factors, which variables are the main drivers of customer satisfaction?
3. How can the overall in-store experience be improved in the light of our study findings?

5. Conceptual model and hypotheses

5.1. Conceptual model

In an attempt to organize systematically the broad and complex field of studies concerning the atmospherics and the salespeople’s behavioural variables, we have summarized them in the 10 steps of an ideal customer’s journey, identified on the basis of the relevant literature, from the moment that the client walks into the store until he/she leaves. The steps/variables are as follows: 1. Appearance – 2. Store appeal – 3. Sensory stimuli – 4. Initial greetings – 5. Beginning of the experience – 6. Approach to customer and determining his/her needs – 7. Presenting and proposing products to customer – 8. Giving advice to customer – 9. Closing the sale – 10. Final greetings and end of the shopping experience (Tab. 2) (Tab. 3).

Tab. 2. Store atmospherics relevant literature

Tab. 3. Salespeople’s attributes and behaviours relevant literature

5.2. Hypotheses

A part of the literature has proven the importance of the different atmospherics in shaping the in-store customer experience, whereas other studies have focused instead on the relevance of salespersons’ behavioural attributes. Recently, some scholars have suggested that these aspects should be investigated together (Sherman et al. 1997; Baker et al. 2002; Hedrick et al. 2006; et al. 2009; Lin and Liang 2011).
Hedrick et al. 2006 and Fowler et al. 2007 showed through a factorial experimental design and on a qualitative basis, respectively, that salespeople’s attributes and behaviours are the most important retail environmental factor. Our intention is precisely to examine together these two factors and empirically validate the findings of the above scholars.

Thus, we draw the following hypothesis:

**H1** *Salespeople attributes and behaviours are more relevant than the atmospherics in determining customer satisfaction in a luxury store.*

Additionally, the literature is rather extensive on the role that each variable of the atmospherics and the salespeople’s attributes and behaviours has in influencing the different moments of the in-store experience (tab. 2) (tab. 3). Now, we want to investigate the relevance of every single variable/step in defining the overall customer experience.

Thus,

**H1a** *All of the 10 variables/steps in which we split the customer’s journey in a luxury store influence the overall evaluation of the shopping experience.*

**H1b** *All of the 10 variables/steps in which we split the customer’s journey within a luxury store have equal influence on customer overall experience.*

6. **Research methodology**

The study included both an exploratory and a closing phase. In the exploratory phase, we conduct a background study primarily focused on the development of an observation grid. In the closing phase, we use the structured observation grid to collect data.

The structured observation grid entails the possibility of making an assessment of each specific examined variable *(1. Appearance – 2. Store appeal – 3. Sensory stimuli – 4. Initial greetings – 5. Beginning of the experience – 6. Approach to customer and determining his/her needs – 7. Presenting and proposing products to customer – 8. Giving advice to customer – 9. Closing the sale – 10. Final greetings and end of the shopping experience)* on the basis of a four-point Likert scale (*0=very poor, 1=low; 2=good; 3=excellent*). At the end of the grid, we also added the
posibility of expressing an overall evaluation of the experience made in each luxury store ( - * 

Rate of the overall experience).

6.1. Sampling

The grids were distributed to 21 students of a post-degree master’s program in luxury goods management and used by them to conduct some mystery shopping visits as a part of their exam in a retail course. All of them are junior executives working for important luxury firms, their average age is 32 years, and most of them have a previous academic background in Economics, Communication and Business Administration. All of them are luxury goods buyers. They are a suitable panel because they are, at the same time, consumers, students and young executives and thus endowed with the expertise and the necessary skills to manage a complex task such as the mystery shopping activity. They were instructed to go shopping for jewels and accessories (mainly shoes and bags) in prestigious luxury retail stores (flagship stores and multi-brands point of sales) belonging to 24 luxury brands1. The students have already been used in other research on luxury consumers (Dubois et al. 2005; Godey et al. 2013) and their positions as young executives can help us draw useful managerial implications. The stores were selected by locations in the Triangle d’Or in Paris, in the Quadrilatero in Milan and in top luxury destinations of other visited cities (tab. 4).

Tab. 4. Selected stores and brands

Overall, 107 visits were made and as many questionnaires were filled out. The students were asked to complete the grid right after their visit, based on their impressions of the store (Barret 1997). This procedure for data collection has been successfully used by other scholars (Mulhern and Padgett 1995; Machleit et al. 2000). The length of each visit varied from 10 to 65 minutes (with an average of 30 minutes), depending on the size of the store and on the ability of the salesperson to satisfy the requests and answer the questions.

7. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

1 Armani, Bulgari, Burberry, Bottega Veneta, Cartier, Chanel, Cucinelli, Dior, Ermenegildo Zegna, Fendi, Ferragamo, Gucci, Hermès, Loro Piana, Louis Vuitton, Moschino, Pomellato, Prada, Saint Laurent, Shang Xia, Tiffany, Tod’s, Valentino, Versace.
The data collected were subjected to data reduction through an explanatory factor analysis (EFA) with SPSS. A principal components analysis (PCA) was used for the extraction of the factors starting from the original measured variables. The initial unrotated solution was received and subjected to Varimax rotation for further refinements. The rotated solution explains 71.025% of the variance associated with the problem and was composed of two factors. Eventually, a reliability assessment was conducted using Cronbach’s coefficient α to ensure that the items for each factor were internally related. The final values show a satisfactory reliability because they are very near 0.7, a common limit for exploratory research (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994) (Tab. 5) (Tab. 6).

**Tab. 5. Total Variance Explained**

**Tab. 6. Tabulated factor output**

The exploratory factor analysis condensed 10 statements into two distinct groups of statements. We can observe the presence of a first construct measured by the *Appearance, Store appeal and Sensory stimuli* variables and a second one measured by the remaining variables (i.e., *Initial Greetings, Beginning of experience, Approach to customer and determining his/her needs, Presenting and proposing products to customer, Giving advice to customer, Closing the sale, Final greetings and end of the shopping experience*).

The first three variables mentioned represent those elements that the literature has defined as “atmospherics” (hereafter, we will call them “hard” factors), whereas all of the others concern the human aspect of the client-salesperson relationship (“soft” factors).

We used the analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique to assess which of the two factors is the main determinant of customer final evaluation. The ANOVA shows the significance of the proposed model, given the presence of a F with a p-value < 0.05. (F 23,31 and p-value 0,000).

Additionally, we resorted to the regression analysis to determine the different relevance of the soft and hard factors for the overall evaluation of the shopping experience. The results indicate a greater relevance of the soft factors compared to the hard factors (Tab. 7).

**Tab. 7. Regression analysis**
These findings support H1 because salespeople’s attributes and behaviours (soft) turned out to be more relevant than the atmospherics (hard) in determining customer satisfaction in a luxury store. Finally, we tested the potential correlation between the 10 variables and the overall evaluation of the consumer experience. The Pearson’s correlation coefficient shows how all of the investigated variables, with the exception of the store appeal, are positively correlated with the overall evaluation of the shopping experience and how the phases of giving advice to customer and closing the sale are the most critical for the formulation of the final assessment (Tab. 8).

Tab. 8. Pearson’s correlation coefficient

Because the store appeal variable seems not to be significantly correlated ($r=0.075$ $p=0.457$), a subsequent Chi-square test was conducted revealing that there is no link between the evaluation expressed in terms of store appeal and the final judgment of the customer on the overall experience ($\chi^2=81.885$, $p=0.894$).

These findings indicate that H1a is partially supported and H1b is not validated.

8. Conclusions

The role of the physical point of sale for the luxury industry is still predominant (Dion & Arnould 2011), although retail strategy choices are often implemented based on intuition and not on extensive and continuing research (Dubois & Duquesne 1993; Vigneron & Johnson 1999 and 2004). Our paper is intended to contribute to a better systematization of two factors that are critical for the overall in-store experience: the atmospherics and the salespeople’s behaviours and attributes. Our results empirically demonstrate that the sales staff behavioural attributes are more important than the atmospherics in determining a positive shopping experience. This result reinforces what has already been established both on a preliminary basis, through a factorial experimental design (Hedrick et al. 2006), and qualitatively (Fowler et al. 2007) and confirms the opinion of those researchers who consider the overall satisfaction as a primary function of perceived service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Ajao et al. 2012). The human factor thus
emerges as the main driver of customer satisfaction and the real competitive edge (Babin et al. 1997; Goff et al. 1997; Lin and Liang 2011), especially for those stores that offer high involvement goods (Darian et al. 2005).

Our results also indicate that all the different variables/steps of the ideal customer journey are positively correlated with overall evaluation of the shopping experience in a luxury store, with the exception of the “store appeal”. The fact that this “store appeal” variable (encompassing, as indicated in Tab. 2, “location”, “attractive store windows”, “store design and concept” and “exposure of the good”) is not directly correlated with customer satisfaction is an interesting and partially surprising finding that can lead to some important managerial implications (see Section 8.1.). Actually, the literature gives great importance to the design elements and the location of a luxury store, in particular of the flagship, considered the direct manifestations of the brand identity (Riewoldt 2002; Kent and Brown 2009; Manlow and Nobbs 2013), the means to recreate an allure of uniqueness and exclusivity (Okonkwo 2007; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Moore et al. 2010; Nobbs et al. 2012) and ploys to lure the customer in (Carusone and Moscove 1985; Shapiro 1992; Horvitz 1998; Verplanken and Herabadi 2001; Muruganantham and Kaliyamoorthy 2005). By contrast, the relationship between the aesthetics of the luxury shop and the consumer experience in the store (Manlow and Nobbs 2013) has been less explored, at least empirically. The objective of the present research was also to make a first step in the direction of bridging this gap in the literature.

In addition, we know that making suggestions to clients positively stimulates their emotions (Menon and Dubé 2000) and that the employees’ attitude of giving advice to their customers helps the firm to build a long-term rapport with them (Gremler and Gwinner 2008). Our findings add to these results the empirical evidence that giving advice to customers is the most influential variable in determining customer satisfaction.

Similarly, the ability to “close the sale” is considered by the literature to be one of the most valued skills that a salesperson can own (Marshall et al. 2003) because of its connection with sales
performance (Jaramillo and Marshall 2004; Johlke 2006). This translates into a salesperson’s ability to reiterate the benefits of the product, reassure the customer of his/her potential choice and help him/her decide (Anderson and Dubinsky 2004; Johnston and Marshall 2006). If the literature has argued that this step is crucial in terms of profitability, we proved empirically that it is also true with regard to customer satisfaction.

8.1. Managerial implications

The relevance of the atmospherics is well established in the literature and basically confirmed by our findings, which, however, suggest that the environmental cues are unlikely to provide sufficient differentiation from competition. This is particularly true for the “store appeal” variable, which does not seem to have a direct impact on customer overall satisfaction. We can reasonably speculate that in a high-end industry such as luxury, the excellence of the location and of the design elements is taken somehow for granted, so that these aspects would only be noticed “in negative”, i.e., if they were perceived to be below the expectations of the prestigious goods clients. However, this result leads us to make two considerations worthy of further investigation. The first is that, also based on the previous literature, we could assume that the “store appeal” variable is certainly suitable to convey the core values of a brand as well as to influence consumer’s initial behaviour, that is, his/her decision to enter the store, but may be less suitable than the overall shopping experience. The second is that these aesthetic elements, to be more relevant, should be nonetheless enriched with additional, more emotional and experiential dimensions, all the more so if, according to our findings, another important class of store atmospherics, the “sensory stimuli”, much more related to a perceptual experience, are instead positively correlated with customer satisfaction. Thus, considering that the outlook for the future of luxury retail is that of reducing the pace of new openings and focusing instead on perimeter expansion/renovation, particularly in mature markets (BGC 2015), the challenge for retail managers will become that of creating a superior customer experience, through the humanization, the socialization, the characterization and even the "theatralization" of their retail spaces (Hollenbeck et al. 2008).
Our study also suggests that the retail battle, in a now “democratized” luxury market, will be played more and more in the arena of the relational aspects of the shopping, something that has been long neglected by luxury firms (Ehbauer and Gresel 2013). Some scholars have insisted on this point for some time now (Babin et al. 1997; Goff et al. 1997; Darian et al. 2005; Hedrick et al. 2006; Fowler et al. 2007; Lin and Liang 2011). The crucial role of salespeople’s attributes and behaviours in luxury retail calls for a sensible and thorough training that takes great care, in particular, of two key steps of the customer in-store journey. The fact that Giving advice to customer and Closing the sale were found to be critical for any luxury firm that aspires to offer its clients a flawless shopping experience suggests that retail managers should pay particular attention to the emotional/psychological aspects of their salespeople training. By this, we do not question the “cognitive” skills that every sales assistant who works in a luxury store is expected to have. Our findings emphasise, however, the relevance of other qualities of the salesperson, such as sensitiveness and reassurance towards the customer (see also Kapferer and Bastien 2009), which must be nurtured through specific training. Some scholars have already stressed the importance of investing in the empathetic and caring skills of a firm’s sales staff (Sharma and Stafford 2000), but in regard to luxury brands, there is a tendency to assign to the didactic skills of the sales assistant (i.e., the capacity to explain in detail the product features) the greatest merit in connection with the customer satisfaction achievement. Many store managers of prestige goods still have a “product-centric” vision of the shopping experience, whereas according to what emerges from our research, customer satisfaction seems to be driven more by the emotional aspects of the salesperson-customer relationship. Once more, the client, and not the product, should be in the spotlight. In this sense, the investments that luxury operators should undertake concern, in the first place, the recruitment and then the training of valuable salespeople who are particularly able to empathize with their customers and to offer to each of them a unique and tailor-made buying experience. The “experience”, especially for luxury customers, is even more important than the product itself (Ehbauer and Gresel 2013).
8.2. Limitations and suggestions for further research

If enhancing consumer physical experience in-store is becoming mandatory over the coming years, the role that digital technology will be playing in this process has to still be investigated. Connecting consumers through state-of-the-art applications, improving their wayfinding performance, facilitating their purchases and transactions outside/inside the store thanks to the innovative beacon technology, and many other opportunities will certainly have an impact on the customer journey that is bound to become fully omni-channel (Abnett 2015). New technologies are definitely spreading in our lives, and they are also catching on in retail environments, for example, with the advent of the web-atmospherics on the physical stores (Dailey 2004; Eroglu et al. 2000; 2001; 2003; Poncin and Mimoun 2014). This new digital world is yet to be monitored, and the concerning body of literature is still very deficient. Similarly, most of the stores are not yet digitally well-equipped or ready to make the best use of these new technologies. The main risk we envision for luxury brands in approaching this opportunity is to consider it more as a goal in itself - if not something “nice to have” - than as a valuable tool. Digital technology applied to retail is not a fad but rather a further chance to deepen the understanding of customer needs and to enhance the development of an authentic and individual shopping experience (Pantano and Naccarato 2010). The growing relevance of these themes will probably encourage many scholars to thoroughly investigate the impact of the digital layer on retail environments, especially in relation to the atmospherics and to the dynamics between the salesperson and customer. This is becoming even more critical because it seems that the conjoint consumer interaction with the in-store technology and with the salespeople has a significant impact on the overall service quality perception (Pantano and Viassone 2015). Always with the objective to boost the in-store customer experience, we hope that the increasingly investigated area of the experiential retailing (Lahey 2000; Kim 2001; Shaw & Ivens 2002; Grewal et al. 2009; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009; De Farias et al. 2014; Khan and Rahman 2015) will soon also be focused on the luxury sector, where studies are still very limited.
The present research does not take into account two important aspects of the “human” atmospherics: the influence of demographics (Churchill 1975; Churchill et al. 1985; Goolsby et al. 1992; Levy and Sharma 1994; Kang and Hillery 1998; Jones et al. 1998; Ewing et al. 2001; Sharma et al. 2007) and of other customers on the appraisal of the shopping experience (see, e.g., Eroglu and Machleit 1990; Grove and Fisk 1997; Harris et al. 1997; Brady and Cronin 2001; Argo et al. 2005; Söderlund 2010). Although we were aware of the great relevance of these two variables, we decided to exclude them from our research because they would have overtly stretched our scope of work. Finally, we believe that it would be interesting to cross our research findings on the individual stores with other data pertaining to the stores themselves, such as their size, their geographical location, their format, their economic performance (average receipt or income), and above all, the money they invest in personnel training. In this way, we would perhaps be able to further investigate the topics covered in the present study.
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### Tables & Figures

**Tab. 1. Atmospherics classifications from the literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOLAR(S)</th>
<th>CLASSIFICATIONS</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kotler (1973)</td>
<td>Store atmosphere induces emotional responses which affect purchasing decisions. The store environment is divided into: 1) visual dimensions such as colour, brightness, size and shapes; 2) auditory dimensions such as volume and pitch; 3) olfactory dimensions such as scent and freshness; 4) tactile dimensions such as softness, smoothness and temperature</td>
<td>Still generic definition of &quot;atmospherics&quot;, key variables like crowding or salespersons influence missing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker (1986)</td>
<td>Three key elements of the store settings: 1) &quot;Non visual&quot; (i.e. background conditions in the environment, including elements such as temperature, lighting, music and scent) 2) &quot;Design&quot; (i.e. functional and aesthetic elements that are more &quot;visual&quot; in nature than are ambient factors) 3) &quot;Social&quot; (elements involving the people who are within a store’s environment)</td>
<td>Introduction of the &quot;social&quot; elements of the shopping, i.e. the influence of the other customers and of the salespersons. To note that salespersons appearance and behaviours are included in the same cluster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brincker (1992)</td>
<td>The physical surroundings of a store do have an impact on customers and employees and it can be identified in three specific dimensions: 1) Ambient Conditions (i.e. temperature, air quality, noise, music, odor, etc.) 2) Space/Function (i.e. layout, equipment, furnishings, etc.) 3) Signs, Symbols &amp; Artifacts (i.e. signage, personal artifacts, style of decor, etc.)</td>
<td>Interestingly enough in this study the physical surroundings is considered to have a significant impact not only on the customers but also on the employees of the store. In this model, however, the &quot;social&quot; variables of the shopping are totally missing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berman and Evans (1995)</td>
<td>Four are the variables of physical the store settings: 1) External 2) Internal 3) Landscaping 4) Interior Design and Layout</td>
<td>This classification was meant to integrate and complete Brincker's one but once again the &quot;social&quot; or &quot;human&quot; aspects of the shopping experience were totally disregarded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turley and Milliman (2000)</td>
<td>Five classes of atmospheric variables: 1) External 2) General Interior 3) Layout and Design 4) Point-of-purchase and decoration 5) Human</td>
<td>Integration and revision of Berman and Evans's classification with the key introduction of the human variables (i.e. the influence of other customers and of the salespersons on shopping behaviours). However, similarly to Baker, the aesthetical and relational characteristics of the salespeople (for instance &quot;uniforms&quot; and &quot;friendliness&quot;) end up being quite indistinct and generic.</td>
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<td><strong>Tab. 2. Store atmospherics relevant literature</strong></td>
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<td><strong>SALESPEOPLE</strong></td>
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<td><strong>1. APPEARANCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure of the goods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Color</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive, emotional and behavioural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer behaviours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved feelings of wellbeing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stronger affinity with the emotional</td>
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<td><strong>2. SENSORY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Decision to enter the store</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumer attitudes and</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. OTHER</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency/inconsistency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Product's attitudes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Product evaluation</td>
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<td>Time spent in the</td>
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<td>Amount of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steps</td>
<td>Variables</td>
<td>Effect on</td>
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<td><strong>4. Initial greetings</strong></td>
<td>Available</td>
<td>Positive emotional contagion</td>
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<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Perception of value</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Direct eye contact</td>
<td>Perceived waiting time duration</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Service evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer behavioural/buying intentions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patience and word-of-mouth</td>
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<td><strong>5. Beginning of the experience</strong></td>
<td>Freedom to move around</td>
<td>Perception of waiting time duration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom to look around but under scrutiny</td>
<td>Impulsive buying</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open approach w/o judgement</td>
<td>Customer positive experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Approach to customer and determining needs</strong></td>
<td>Customer feeling comfortable</td>
<td>Customer feeling comfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service quality perception</td>
<td>Perceived credibility/reliability of the salesperson</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service evaluation</td>
<td>Consumer's consumption behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
<td>Purchasing rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patience intentions</td>
<td>Patience intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creates interest</td>
<td>Increased customer attention, interest and arousal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses positive language and is evocative of the brand</td>
<td>Perceived credibility/reliability of the salesperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is not intrusive</td>
<td>Consumer's consumption behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shows creativity in proposing products/cross selling</td>
<td>Sociability with the customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helps the customer get acquainted with the store</td>
<td>Rapport building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makes the customer feel at the center of the attention</td>
<td>Beliefs about the product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrates knowledge of the product and assortment</td>
<td>Patience intentions/store loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Giving advice to customer</strong></td>
<td>Investigates the desires and reactions of the customer</td>
<td>Customer feeling comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If the client is accompanied also takes into account the other person</td>
<td>Perceived credibility/reliability of the salesperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makes sure to have properly interpreted the request (calls for feedback)</td>
<td>Customer feeling reassured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Goes beyond the demands made by the customer (proactive)</td>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responds positively to both objections and doubts</td>
<td>Rapport building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patience intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reminds the customer the positive points of purchase</td>
<td>Decision-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reassures the client underlying the result</td>
<td>Purchasing rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. Final greetings and end of the shopping experience</strong></td>
<td>Shows optimism at all stages of the in-store experience</td>
<td>Eliciting positive emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishes relationship by: a) presenting weekly arrivals, events</td>
<td>Enhancing customer persuasion</td>
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## Tab. 4. Selected stores and brands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRAND</th>
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<tr>
<td>ARMANI ATENE</td>
<td>Sorbonne</td>
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<td>Vogansikou</td>
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<td>La Rinascence</td>
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<td>rue du Rhone</td>
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### Tab. 5. Total Variance Explained

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Initial Eigenvalue</th>
<th>Unrotated Factor Loadings</th>
<th>Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings</th>
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<td>Total % of variance</td>
<td>% of variance</td>
<td>cumulative</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>55.67</td>
<td>55.67</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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### Tab. 6. Tabulated factor output

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<th>Factor</th>
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<th>Cronbach’s ( \alpha )</th>
<th>Variables included</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>hard (atmospherics)</td>
<td>0.681</td>
<td>Appearance, Store appeal, Sensory stimuli</td>
<td>0.728</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>soft (relational)</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>Initial greeting, Beginning of experience, Approach to customer and determining needs, Presenting and proposing products to customer, Giving advice to customer, Closing the sale, Final greeting and end of shopping experience</td>
<td>0.854</td>
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### Tab. 7 Regression analysis

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<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized coefficients</th>
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<th>Sig.</th>
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<td>1 (Constant)</td>
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<td>0.097</td>
<td>13.245</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soft (relational)</td>
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<td>0.097</td>
<td>6.211</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard (atmospherics)</td>
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<td>0.097</td>
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**Tab. 8 Pearson's correlation coefficient**

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<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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<td>Store appeal</td>
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<td>Sensory stimuli</td>
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<td>Initial greetings</td>
<td>0.388**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beginning of experience</td>
<td>0.238**</td>
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<td>Approach to customer and</td>
<td>0.456**</td>
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<td>Presenting and proposing</td>
<td>0.489**</td>
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<td>Giving advice to customer</td>
<td>0.553**</td>
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<td>Closing the sale</td>
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<td>Final greetings and end of</td>
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<td><strong>OVERALL RATING OF THE EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
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</table>
Keywords

*Store atmospherics; Salesperson-customer relationship; Luxury shopping experience; Customer satisfaction; Overall in-store experience*