

CLIENTELING IN FASHION LUXURY RETAIL

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1. INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

Imagine the future of a Minority Report film, where you will enter a retailer, and a hologram will approach you by name, offer products based on your last purchase, and alert your sales advisor to offer you physical assistance, just as Tom Cruise when entered the GAP store during the movie scene, as the perfect example of the maximum of personalization. However, once we have this future, as proposed by science fiction and Sheth (2017), we must count on people and data combined to offer a better in-store experience, especially in luxury fashion retailing. Despite data management's fast evolution, technology will hardly replace human interaction (higher tech, higher touch) (Gummesson, 2017). Thus, associated with the expanding offer of luxury products and services (Guo-feng & Xiao-wen, 2006) and the perspective that "the world of luxury is undergoing profound changes" (Thomsen, Holmqvist, von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, and Belk, 2020, pp. 441), enhances the necessity of brands to fight for the share of the heart of their customers (Sheth, 2017).

Now, let's imagine another situation. Arielle is Brazilian, and a higher-tier customer of a famous fashion luxury brand since the store was opened in her hometown, São Paulo. For the next Paris Fashion Week, she is invited by the brand to join the fashion week, with designers and customers after the party and a guided visit to Louvre. Luxury brands have the power to establish personal and social relationships, sometimes fulfilling psychological needs (Becker, Lee, and Nobre, 2018). As luxury customers are closer than ever to brands, it creates a challenging scope, mainly when associating technology and experience, which can extend beyond personalized mail messages or incredible shopping experiences (Rathi, Garg, Kataria, and Chhikara, 2022). Customers seek bonds with brands, even if engaging with several brands in different levels of relationship simultaneously; if there is a positive balance for each part, the relationship tends to continue (Pettersson, 1995). Also, consumers search for information about others' experiences with other customers (Kim, Han, and Lee, 2001), online reviews, and feedback (Liu, Burns, and Hou, 2013).

Relationship marketing (RM) can help luxury companies manage customer relationships (Guo-feng & Xiao-wen, 2006), as it already works particularly well in luxury (Kim, Kim, and Johnson, 2010), thus being considered in companies' prime strategy for some luxury sectors (Jung, Ineson, and Green, 2013). RM in luxury consists of developing through managing customer information strategy, effortless actions to know consumers better, and tailored customer experience and technology (Guo-feng & Xiao-wen, 2006). On the market side, since 2018, private corporate lectures in luxury management in Brazil have presented clienteling as all client-relationship practices. Already considered an essential driver for investment (Willersdorf et al., 2020), clienteling in the literature appears with different writing and meanings, such as clientelling, clienteling, clientelling 2.0, and digital clienteling. In this research, the term adopted is clienteling. If service personalization depends on customer information, for clienteling customer data plays a vital role in providing a salesperson detailed information (Jain, Rakesh, Nabi, and Chaturvedi, 2018). With a higher dependence on salespeople to operate, clienteling reinforces the one-on-one interaction in retailing (Jain et al., 2018), enabling considerable opportunities to create respectful social relationships with luxury customers (Aliyev, Urkmez, and Wagner, 2019).

RM and clienteling studies identified in the literature are related to luxury in hotels (Kim et al., 2001; Jung et al., 2013), restaurants (Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012; Ryu & Lee, 2017), retail (Guo-feng & Xiao-wen, 2006), and fashion retail (Khoa, 2020). Most of the studies focused on the consequences of RM, with the primary goal of enhancing customer retention (Jung et al., 2013) and extending the length of the relationship (Ryu & Lee, 2017). Quality of relationships is a

variable that depends on customer orientation, expertise, and physical environment (Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012), which can influence repeated purchases (Kim et al., 2001), word-of-mouth (Kim et al., 2001; Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012), customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012). Investments on RM were approached by Ryu and Lee (2017), indicating that luxury calculates different efforts depending on customer return on RM initiatives and must invest in maintaining relationships with valued customers.

Among the relevance of the luxury sector to business practice, the studies have attracted more researchers (Aliyev et al., 2019), and even a significant increase after 2010 still has a vast scope to explore (Rathi et al., 2022). Under the clienteling approach, little attention was paid to relationship marketing, especially with the micro perspective (Gurzki & Woisetschläger, 2017). Also, divergences between scholars and practitioners in relationship marketing (Sheth, 2017) create a constant wage of updates and paradigms discussions (Gummesson, 2017), reinforcing that the RM theory and applications still have research gaps. Capturing the opinions of 20 fashion luxury retail specialists in an emerging country, based on online surveys, the research questions that guide this study are as follows:

RQ1: What is the concept of clienteling in fashion luxury retailing?

RQ2: What are the main clienteling strategies applied in fashion luxury retailing?

RQ3: How is clienteling comprehended from strategic, organizational, and customer perspectives?

RQ4: How is the association of clienteling and technology, for now, and for the future?

The main theoretical contributions of this study, applied to fashion luxury retail, are (1) a theoretical definition proposal for clienteling with the association to RM; (2) a list of clienteling strategies; (3) a strategic and organizational view of clienteling; (4) correlations with technology and future perspectives. Practically, the findings of this study are helpful to fashion luxury retailers in terms of understanding clienteling concepts and strategies, their association with data information, and their strategic perspective for the future. Such retailers can use this study's findings to deepen how they can adapt their clienteling strategies and stimulate a customer-centered perspective to develop long-term relationships with higher-tier customers.

The study is organized as follows: First, we review the literature on RM, clienteling, and RM and clienteling in luxury fashion retail. Then, we present our methodology and main results. Finally, this study concludes with research implications and limitations and new research avenues.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.2.1 Relationship marketing (RM): definitions and applications

RM was first presented in the marketing literature by Berry (1983) during service marketing studies. Considering the vast following studies, Gummesson (1994, 1997, 2011) presents that RM comprehends relationships, networks, and interactions between a brand and a customer. It emerged as a reaction to conventional marketing, where interactive and win-win relationships are essential to creating a long-term connection. Nevertheless, neither the perspective that only the company benefits from the relationship (O'Malley & Prothero, 2004) nor the approach of promotions and persuasive sales to create customer dependence (Gummesson, 1997) can be applied nowadays. With a proposal of transcending business relationships and developing a friendship relationship, Sheth (2017) presents the concept of share of heart, which implies bonding emotionally with customers by expanding the functional or economic value. Therefore, investing in RM strategies can generate short-term feelings of gratitude that influence customer commitment and purchase intentions (Palmatier et al., 2009).

RM practices include loyalty programs, bundled offerings, personalized services, and CRM initiatives to change from share of wallet to share of heart (Sheth, 2017). Loyalty and benefits programs have a view of up-selling, cross-selling, and leading customers into an exchange relationship (O'Malley & Prothero, 2004). The increasing emphasis on loyalty programs and CRM associated with RM was highlighted by O'Malley and Prothero (2004) as a more significant mechanism to increase purchase and not necessarily reward customer loyalty. Because CRM is highly dependent on the data client information base and relies on excellence in data gathering (Mitussis, O'Malley, and Patterson, 2006), even though the isolated strategy of CRM is possible due to the link with RM, brands that have disposition can interactively engage and learn from consumer relationships (Mitussis et al., 2006). It is also essential to recognize that customer and salesperson are active in relationship marketing (Gummesson, 1994); as the last paradigm of RM indicates, customer and salesperson interaction must be one-on-one, with a higher level of personalization (Gummesson, 2017).

An evolution of RM is the perspective of joint venture, where brands must develop relationships based on mutual interdependence, mutual commitment, and shared mission (Sheth, 2017), with the support of the paradigm of Service-Dominant Logic (Gummesson, 2017). Jain, Paul, and Shrivastava (2021, p. 14) state that the “fashion industry is a high service dominant industry” where customers play an essential role in the service exchange.

1.2.2 The Clienteling: terms and definitions

The first ones to use the term were Bailey and Bernhardt (1997), who identified *clienttelling* at Bloomingdale's department store during a low-wage industry study in the US. They presented a program created to maintain a list of consumer preferences and habits, interact one-on-one, inform about launches and promotions, and assist with remote purchases. After a decade, Jain et al. (2018) define *clienteling* as a one-to-one marketing approach with personalized communication to enhance positive brand association and customer loyalty. Later, Willersdorf et al. (2020) presented the term *clienteling 2.0* regarding the offer of more personalized sales practices for engaging with high-end customers, which is associated with combining people and data with machine learning to generate relevant information for salespeople. The evolution of technology and data information has transformed physical clienteling into digital clienteling (Jain et al., 2018). Jain et al. (2018) introduced the term *digital clienteling*. However, Jain et al. (2021) define it as the unified resource of information regarding consumer preferences, behavior, and past purchases to provide a better in-store experience with enhanced salesperson interaction.

1.2.3 RM and Clienteling in Luxury and Fashion

Services and experiences are core in luxury offerings (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze, 2020). Besides the fact that each service encounter in luxury also reinforces luxury aspects, the service luxury experience can build an emotional consumer intention, as experiences can be managed with multiple stimuli and enhance luxury perception overall (Wirtz et al., 2020). For adequate brand relationships in luxury, commitment, loyalty, prestige, intimacy, and satisfaction combine the manageable variables (Becker et al., 2018). Consumers who need to learn about luxury services might not enjoy all the stimuli and quality of the experience; a certain level of knowledge, sophistication, and skills are required (Wirtz et al., 2020). Quality is the fundamental component of luxury (Becker et al., 2018), which we extend to the relationship quality built with consumers. The quality of relationships is crucial in luxury and can be influenced by salespeople's abilities to minimize any uncertainty (Kim et al., 2001). Luxury fashion customers who perceive high symbolic, economic, and functional values tend to develop positive relationships with the brands (Jung Choo, Moon, Kim, and Yoon, 2012).

Applied to retail, during an investigation of how Chinese luxury companies comprehend RM concepts, Guo-feng and Xiao-wen (2006) identified that many companies considered it as the unique implementation of a database customer system, even with a noticed lack of training salespeople about the importance of proper consumer data collecting for successful of RM strategy. Part of RM's activities consisted of monitoring changes in consumer needs, dealing with customer complaints, and sending personalized messages based on consumer behavior and preferences (Guo-feng & Xiao-wen, 2006).

In fashion, customer relationship is the factor that most impacts brand loyalty (Khoa, 2020). Depending on the degree of friendship and quality of interactions with salespeople (fun, enjoyable, and exciting), the more loyal the salesperson consumer tends to be, directly influencing brand loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2014). In fashion retail, to maximize RM strategy, salespeople must be assisted with building social relationships with customers (Kim et al., 2010). The investment in technology information, combining customer information and fashion trends, can help brands personalize the service encounter and experience (Khoa, 2020). Information related to customer clothing size, color preferences, likes and dislikes, and purchase history are some of the data that salespeople can use to offer more personalized fashion buying (Jain et al., 2018). This scenario enables brands to create a solid RM strategy with customers as a core asset (Khoa, 2020).

Beyond the one-on-one approach in physical interactions, clienteling practices already mapped include personalized mail communication (Jain et al., 2018), fashions show, private showings, personal shoppers, and white-glove delivery, which compounds the digital luxury ecosystem (Willersdorf et al., 2020).

1.3 METHODOLOGY

1.3.1 Data collection and participant profile

To answer the research questions, the ‘why?’ led us to a qualitative exploratory approach (Barnham, 2015), as the goal is to determine critical issues and describe “things that really happen” (Gilmore & Carson, 1996, p.22) with the technique of questionnaire with open-ended (Baker, 2003) applied through online surveys (Sam & Jankowski, 2006; Regmi et al., 2016). Online surveys allowed convenience and flexible time to the respondents (Van Sem & Jankowski, 2006; Regmi et al., 2016), cost-effective and the application of adaptive questions (Sam & Jankowski, 2006), had lower costs involved and enabled open-ended questions (Regmi et al., 2016).

Inspired by future research questions proposed by Rathi et al. (2022) and the review of literature about clienteling (Bailey & Bernhardt, 1997; Jain et al., 2021) and RM (Khoa, 2020; Kim et al., 2010), an open-ended questionnaire was built to comprehend the understandings and applications regarding clienteling in fashion luxury retail from specialists ‘perspective. After the research participation term letter (see Appendix 1), the questionnaire with 21 open-ended questions (see Appendix 2), within five groups, distributed as (i) personal and professional information (6); (ii) questions related to clienteling definition (2); (iii) clienteling practices (4); (iv) strategic, organizational, and customer perspective (6), and (v) clienteling, technology and future (3).

Using Google Forms, specialists needed to access a web link via WhatsApp, LinkedIn, or e-mail. From a list of 20 international fashion luxury brands that operate in Brazil, we could contact 35 specialists, with a final sample recruited of 20 specialists in luxury fashion retail in Brazil, including six executives who work for Farfetch and Gringa, who are supporters of this research. Data collection occurred in October 2023. The participants were informed about

confidentiality, anonymity, and research goals. Also, they were classified with pseudonyms and coded.

The 20 participants are six men and fourteen women, with occupations comprehending roles as coordinators, consultants, managers, directors, and CEOs, from a range of international and national fashion luxury retail expertise. Eight participants have more than 15 years of experience in luxury retailing, with only one participant with 1 to 2 years of experience, who is the marketing director of an international fashion luxury retail company in Brazil. Details of informants are in Table 1.

Informant pseudonym	Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Experience in luxury retailing (years)
Bella	BF	45	Female	Consultant	more than 15 years
Lindsey	LS	44	Female	Communication Manager	5 to 10 years
Raul	RP	41	Male	CEO	more than 15 years
Beth	BH	53	Female	CEO	10 to 15 years
Amelia	AG	46	Female	Global Director	2 to 5 years
Mia	MG	27	Female	Marketing manager	5 to 10 years
				Senior Manager	
				Retail	
Chloe	CL	37	Female	Operations	10 to 15 years
Ava	AM	62	Female	CEO	more than 15 years
				Communication and Marketing	
Lea	LA	42	Female	Manager	5 to 10 years
Clara	CA	39	Female	PR and Events Director	more than 15 years
Nathan	NE	44	Male	Product Manager	more than 15 years
Enzo	ER	37	Male	CRM Coordinator	5 to 10 years
Jade	JR	44	Female	Senior Manager	more than 15 years
Ines	ID	41	Female	Marketing Director	1 to 2 years
Mathias	MC	51	Male	Brands Director	more than 15 years
Marie	MK	43	Female	Personal Shopper	10 to 15 years
Julia	JT	32	Female	Head of Marketing and Growth	2 to 5 years
Jonas	JI	42	Male	COO	2 to 5 years
Cora	CF	48	Female	Head of PR	more than 15 years
Luca	LB	39	Male	Regional Sales Manager	10 to 15 years

Table 1 – Specialists in fashion luxury retail participant’s profile

2.3.2 Analysis method: content analysis

We manually analyzed the data content analysis (Gilmore & Carson, 1996; Krippendorf, 2004) with both deductive and inductive approaches (Krippendorf, 2004) since we are replicating reality and extending the theoretical framework based on the RM perspective. With an interpretative emphasis (Gilmore & Carson, 1996), data was organized by units of analyses (words and sentences), associating them to each participant's code. Then, the information was organized around the RQ topic, mainly spread through the questionnaire, which required an ongoing analysis (Gilmore & Carson, 1996). Following this, we could compare the most frequent terms and descriptions mentioned by the participants and develop content analysis. RQ1 required us to set specific coding categories, such as (1) relationship perspective, (2) personalization, (3) customer history, and (4) salesperson fashion knowledge. The data analysis was conducted by a researcher with over 15 years of experience in professional and academic

luxury fashion management, providing a deeper understanding of RQs (Gilmore & Carson, 1996).

1.4 FINDINGS

Parting from the real world of everyday findings associated with the data organization into categories of analysis combined with the literature review allowed us to answer the four research questions and achieve the objective of this study.

1.4.1 Clienteling in Fashion Luxury Retailing

In response to RQ1, research data suggest that clienteling still has different but complementary perspectives from market specialists. During informal talks with the participants, there was a general lack of theoretical understanding of clienteling; however, generally, it can be considered “*the main differentiator between luxury retail and others*” (AM, Female, CEO). As participant BH (Female, CEO) mentioned, “*Each luxury sector has its peculiarities with clienteling, regardless of whether it is fashion or not.*” To clarify this, we first asked them to define clienteling.

The combination of the coding categories (see Table 2) of relationship perspective, personalization, customer historical, and salesperson fashion knowledge allows us to define that clienteling involves a set of relationship marketing strategies, commercial and non-commercial, based on customer history with the company (salesperson), created to attend to higher-tier customer preferences in a personalized and exclusive way. Compared to the previous definitions, our proposal is complementary to Jain et al. (2018), which includes the long-term relationship approach to clienteling and amplifies the applications from communication strategies to a set of marketing strategies that combined can create clienteling strategies. Also, as Bailey and Bernhardt (1997) and Jain et al. (2021) stated, customer data is essential to this activity. According to participant MC (Male, Brand Director), it is a “*new relationship model that is not a simple WhatsApp message.*” Table 3 presents previous and new definitions to clarify our contribution to the literature.

Coding category	Participants quotes
(1) Relationship perspective	Relationship marketing strategy (JI). Customer relationship management (RP,BH). Set of communication strategies and actions aimed at a list of customers (LB). Long-term customer-relationship (AG,JT). Strengthen customer relationships (MG,NE). Create a relationship with the customer (CL,ID). Build customer loyalty (JR,MC).
(2) Personalization	Exclusivity (NE,JT). Individuality (CA). Concierge (JI). Personalized and exclusive relationships with customers (AG,LA,BF,JI). Richer customer experience, with greater empathy, attention to detail, impeccable and humanized service (JR,NE,AM). Offer the complete brand experience that goes beyond the physical product (JR,CL,MK,MG).

(3) Customer historical	Listening and understanding of customer needs (ID). Attentive to the customer's wishes (BF,MK). In-depth customer knowledge (CA, JR). The use of data and information about customers to understand their preferences, needs, and purchasing history (AG,CF,LB,LA). RFV and LTV matrix (RP). VIP status (LS,CL,CF).
(4) Salesperson fashion knowledge	Specialized and in-depth product knowledge, empathy, and a strong desire to meet customer needs (JR, JT). Inform customers about the history of the brand, the culture surrounding the products, and how they are made, this delights the customer (LB). In-depth knowledge of customer fashion styles and preferences (AG, ID). Offer extreme personalization and bespoke service (NE,CF,JI,AG). Fashion luxury training (MK, LB, JR).

Table 2 – Coding category and participants quotes

Term	Definition	Source
Clientelling	A program created to maintain a list of consumer preferences and habits and interact one-on-one; inform about launches and promotions and assist with remote purchases.	Bailey and Bernhardt (1997)
Clienteling	One-to-one marketing approach with personalized communication to enhance positive brand association and customer loyalty.	Jain et al. (2018)
Clienteling 2.0	The offer of more personalized sales practices for engaging with high-end customers, which is associated with the combination of people and data with the use of machine learning to generate relevant information to salespeople	Willersdorf et al. (2020)
Digital Clienteling	Unified resource of information regarding consumer preferences, behavior, and past purchase, to provide better in-store experience with enhanced salesperson interaction.	Jain et al. (2021)
Clienteling	Involves a set of relationship marketing strategies, commercial and non-commercial, based on customer history with the company (salesperson), created to attend to higher-tier customer preferences in a personalized and exclusive way.	Research data

Table 3 – Terms and definitions of clienteling

Apart from this general understanding from the participants, the following question was to comprehend if any specific concept of clienteling is specific to fashion luxury retail. The importance of salesperson fashion knowledge was pointed out by Kim and Kim (2014), Kim et al. (2010), and Khoa (2020) and reinforced by most research respondents. Also, respondents reinforced how fashion luxury training for salespeople is essential to an effective clienteling strategy, as participant LB (Male, Regional Sales Manager) mentioned, "*employees with luxury education may be better seen and respected by their customers,*" as "*salespeople and consultants play a fundamental role in creating emotional connections with customers*" (AG, Female, Global Director).

1.4.2 Main clienteling strategies applied in fashion luxury retailing

Based on the comprehension of clienteling, *RQ2* was answered, with the participant's confirmation that the strategies already mapped in literature, such as personalized mail communication (Jain et al., 2018), fashions show, private showings, personal shoppers, and white-glove delivery, (Willersdorf et al., 2020), are applied in fashion luxury retail. However, the research data suggest that other "*non-commercial experiences*" (MG, Female, Marketing Manager) are crucial to luxury fashion retail. Apart from a participant's quote that "*we adapt to something that makes sense for the client's lifestyle*" (CL, Female, Senior Manager Retail Operations), we asked them if they missed practices from this previous list and a vast number of clienteling strategies were mentioned by the participants and are presented in Table 4.

Clienteling strategies	Source
Personalized mail communication	Jain et al. (2018)
Fashions shows, private showings, personal shoppers, and white-glove delivery.	Willersdorf et al. (2020)
Commercial experiences: Invitations to parties or dinners attended by the creative director/founder (BF,JT). Lunches or dinners between brand customers (LB). Early access to the collection and exclusive products (JT,JI,AM). Loyalty programs (JI,JT,RP). Exclusive discounts, different payment methods, free shipping, exclusive service channels (JI). Special shipping and collection methods, exchange of benefits with other brands/services that are of interest to the customer, referral programs (JT). Gifts on special dates in the customer's life (not just those on the retail calendar – i.e.: birth of a child, wedding birthday) (ID,CL).	Research data
Non-commercial experiences: gastronomic experiences, visits to closed galleries, invitations to art and entertainment events (LA,LS,MG,NE). Personalized treats (AM). Reservations at trendy restaurants, spas, and hotels (CL).	

Table 4 – Clienteling strategies in fashion luxury retail

Complementary to this list, we also asked the participants if they could detail some of these strategies, and the results allow us to suggest that there are two types of strategies, such as commercial and non-commercial experiences. Commercial experience strategies are directly related to future purchase intention, such as early access to the product, with the anticipation of

a collection launch in 15 days; personalized treats for post-sales follow-up, such as sending personalized thanks and maintenance service for purchased products (AM, Female, CEO) and until managing customer shopping transactions (JR, Female, Senior Manager). The fashion shows were more detailed and related to the higher-tier customer service structure during fashion week, including fashion shows, tours, meetings, and parties with artists (LA, JR, MC, BF). The non-commercial experiences strategies are related to brand loyalty, such as the long-awaited show with Beyoncé in New York in a premium seat (LS, Female, Communication Manager), a guided tour of a Gallery in Milan (AG, Female, Global Director), an invitation to Cannes with all experiences included, from the reception upon arrival at the airport to the gala ball (CL, Female, Senior Manager Retail Operations).

Most respondents also associated the non-commercial strategies only with higher-tier customers, which must vary according to each segment profile. They indicated that clienteling strategies differ due to relationship time, customer social status, and shopping profile. For example, *“a lower profile, discreet client may prefer a more intimate event without media coverage, not accessible to anyone”* (ID, Female, Marketing Director) also for longtime customers, who can receive the early collection at home or store visit by appointment along with a personal shopper to present it privately.

1.4.3 Clienteling comprehended from strategic, organizational, and customer perspective

For RQ3, our goal was to expand investigation about clienteling, comprehend how customers perceive the strategic and organizational side, and present this contribution to a need for more literature. Considering customers, the specialists mostly agree that understanding clienteling terms should be more straightforward, even if they are aware of the benefits and exclusivities connected somehow with their purchase behavior. *“They should not know the term “clienteling” but rather realize the benefits related to it”* (NE, Male, Product Manager) as they *“recognize the differentiated treatment and greatly appreciate”* (AM, Female, CEO).

On the strategic side, most participants agree that clienteling should be viewed as a strategic asset, corroborating with Jung et al. (2013), with the customer at the center of all decisions, and some highlighted that this strategic interest and discussion is recent for some companies. Some practical applications when clienteling is strategic to the company are that *“with each launch, we think about how to create unique experiences and improve the connection with our customer base through clienteling”* and *“In some cases, it even influences the selection of products for brands in Brazil because it can direct purchases, considering the specific profile of some customers and the most exclusive approach with them, to convert a sale”* (BF, Female, Consultant). One participant brought to light that when it is not strategic, the *“excuse” is that there is no time, no staff availability to take care of just that”* (AM, Female, CEO).

Still, from the strategic perspective, we asked about budget planning for these activities. We were presented with a medium- and long-term ROI perspective that requires higher value expenses for customers and salespeople. The participants reinforced the importance of salespeople training, as also stated by Guo-feng and Xiao-wen (2006). Also, if money is involved, results tracking is fundamental, as mentioned: *“Ideally there should be methods for “tracking” activities and results. Clienteling without clear targeting does not happen. There should be annual, monthly, and weekly metrics”* (LB, Male, Regional Sales Manager). As suggested, budget planning should be calculated considering how much revenue can be made with each customer. This finding allows us to connect accountability concepts to clienteling. For most participants, the involvement of higher management is strongly related to the success of clienteling and defining the strategy, resources, and priorities. These findings corroborate with Guo-feng, and Xiao-wen (2006), in the RM perspective, that it is crucial to have the involvement of company leadership to the success of it.

Finally, we asked the participants which area was responsible for clienteling from the organizational perspective. Areas such as Marketing, Operations and retail, and Customer Service were mentioned with a highlight to the CRM team as responsible for it. One participant described working in a Clienteling area that is dependent on and connected to all the areas above but with a focus on RM strategy and reported directly to the CEO. Other participants also suggest that all regions should manage these activities, as *"we look for contributions from the most diverse areas to get where we want"* (JT, Female, Head of Marketing and Growth).

2.3.4 Association of clienteling and technology: for now, and for the future

Finally, in RQ4, we aimed to verify the data management emphasis discussed in the literature (Willersdorf et al., 2020), clienteling managerial strategies, and introduce future perspectives. Considered a necessary investment to be forecast, the correlation with technology was presented by specialists such as (i) allowing the addition of more customer data types to analyze and develop better CRM insights, (ii) supporting salespeople with tools and devices to provide updated customer information; (iii) provide better tracking on customer behavior to adapt rapport; (iv) provide financial analysis and accountability insights. Despite these correlations and benefits, some specialists reinforced the importance of human-to-human connections, concentrated in interactions that technology still cannot provide, corroborating with Gummesson (2017).

For the future, specialists heavily associate technology with a significant emphasis on expanded experiences with the use of AI and AR tools to create an even more tailored approach, as also proposed by Sheth (2017). Also, most participants reinforced the strategic importance that clienteling should receive in the following years, especially to attract more customers to the brands and expand connection emotions, thus offering all the personalization, exclusivity, experience, and one-to-one approach that the clienteling strategy allows. It will become increasingly essential that it will make a difference. Some participant's quotes below illustrate the view of the future:

"Faced with increasingly faster market dynamics and a less loyal consumer, brands will need to work on emotional connection through clienteling." (LA, Female, Communication and Marketing Manager)

"More technological, more personalized, more diverse and indispensable for the competitive environment." (ER, Male, CRM Coordinator)

"To keep up with these changes, investing in more training in this area is imperative to create clienteling departments specifically adapted for luxury retail. This training can help teams better understand customer needs, develop empathetic communication skills, and ensure each interaction is marked by exceptional service." (JR, Female, Senior Manager)

"Brands that do not start implementing these practices will face serious difficulties as they will lose customer attention and interest in such a competitive market." (ID, Female, Marketing Director)

"Therefore, our challenge in this luxury market is: how to surprise this customer who 'has everything'? How to make him fall in love and get involved with the brand? How to be part of this client's life? What we try to do is provide experiences that money cannot buy." (CL, Female, Senior Manager Retail Operations)

2.5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study accessed an area of application of clienteling. This term still needs to be recognized by text-correcting tools, mainly when applied to the fashion luxury retail context. The data provided allowed us to answer all research questions. We were able to (1) propose a definition

of clienteling in fashion luxury retail associated with RM theorization, (2) identify and describe the actual practices involved with detailed examples, (3) understand these activities' strategic, organizational, and customer relationships, (4) present a view of the future for clienteling and technology. Our propositions are the first step in theorizing the clienteling practices in academia.

The lack of understanding of clienteling and a definition proposal is also supported by Mitussis et al. (2006), who associate the lack of theoretical evolution to superficial management knowledge about RM definition combined with a limited view of databases. Also, a gap in the literature is the adequate classification of RM in luxury management. Let us consider the classification proposed by Gurzki and Woisetschläger (2017) and Rathi et al. (2022) who included luxury brand management research under the RM umbrella to create luxury value. Finally, associated with the proposal by Jain et al. (2021) and the future perspective presented in this research, we can establish a strong connection and even dependence between technology and clienteling.

2.5.1 Practical implications

Our study focused on Brazilian fashion luxury market specialists who all work(ed) for international operations; thus, we understand this applies to developing countries. Remembering Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechhoff, and Kardes (2009, p. 13), “managers should recognize the window of opportunity after an RM investment, during which they can “collect” on feelings of gratitude.” Associating this importance of RM to research findings, luxury management must understand clienteling as a strategic asset based on customer data information that can impact customer relationships and shopping behavior. Also, it highlighted the importance of planning a structure to attend to this demand, with connections primarily to Marketing and Sales. After this understanding, a list of practices can be applied in several businesses, not exclusively in fashion luxury retailing. Regardless of the segment, these practices usually involve higher expenses that must be planned, controlled, and analyzed. From a financial perspective, the forecast of investments in clienteling should be carefully considered.

2.5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations when researching the luxury market can be vastly described. However, academia's problematic access to executives, salespeople, and customers can be considered the most significant limitation of scientific research. The brand's guardians very well hide the secret of luxury management, as we can classify this audience. Nevertheless, even with a decline of 15 specialists who did not return the messages, we were able to collect our data. We were also just able to participate because of the online survey technique.

Future research can expand this sample, apply personal in-depth interviews, and investigate it in other luxury segments that might present differentiation in clienteling practices and strategic perspectives. Apart from the other perspectives, studies can be conducted with luxury customers and salespeople to understand their clienteling comprehension and enrich the literature about it even more. Method, reliability, and data validity could be analyzed with the support of qualitative data software, enhancing data analysis and expanding findings. Also, adopting two (or more) independent coders to conduct the same analysis path can enhance the reliability of the findings (Perreault & Leigh, 1989).

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APPENDIX 1 – Research participation term

Hello,

You are invited to participate in our research, part of a doctoral thesis project at FEA-USP.

The objective is to understand your perceptions associated with practical knowledge about clienteling in luxury fashion retail.

It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any time. We need to know your opinions.

Your survey responses will be strictly confidential and data from this survey will only be reported in aggregate form. Your information will be encrypted and will remain confidential.

If you have questions at any time about the research or procedures, you can contact (researcher name) by phone at (researcher mobile) or by email at (researcher mail).

Thank you in advance for your willingness to contribute to research on luxury practices in Brazil.

Please start your search now by clicking the Continue button below.

APPENDIX 2 - Research questionnaire

Question group	Question
Personal and professional information	Name, age, e-mail, telephone, time of experience in luxury, and professional role
Definition	For you, what is clienteling in luxury retail? If we consider luxury fashion retail, would you come up with a new definition of clienteling? Is there anything so specific about luxury fashion retail that it deserves more attention?
Strategies	Some studies have already mapped some strategy in luxury fashion clienteling. As you have experience in the area, can you confirm which options (personalized mail, fashion shows, pre-launching, personal shoppers) you have seen in practice? Among the activities already studied, did you miss any strategy(ies) that you consider to be clienteling? Could you detail some clienteling strategy(ies) that you selected/described? Are there differences in clienteling practices according to the customer profile?

Strategic, organizational, and customer perspective	From an organizational perspective, where is clienteling? Which area takes care of or should take care of these activities?
	From a strategic perspective, is clienteling a topic of discussion in companies at a strategic level? Is it considered as part of the strategy?
	Does the luxury fashion consumer know what clienteling is?
	How do you understand the relationship between investments and returns on clienteling actions?
	Is there already a budget forecast exclusively for clienteling initiatives?
Technology and future	In your opinion, is there a relationship between senior management involvement and clienteling success?
	How do you see the future of clienteling in luxury fashion retail?
	What is your opinion on customer data and clienteling?
	How do you see the advancement of technology can benefit clienteling?

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