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Elodie de Boissieu, Bertrand Urien

► **To cite this version:**

Elodie de Boissieu, Bertrand Urien. “Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness” in Luxury Stores. *Journal of Business Research*, 2022, 146, pp.409-425. <10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.02.078>. <hal-04632306>

**HAL Id: hal-04632306**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04632306v1>**

Submitted on 22 Jul 2024

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**Title :**

**“Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness” in luxury stores**

**Authors :**

Elodie de Boissieu

Bertrand Urien

## **“Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness” in luxury stores**

### **Abstract**

In this article, we use Impoliteness Theory, defined as an intentional “*face-threatening*” deviant act, to understand consumer misbehavior in the luxury store subculture. Using a qualitative study based on Grounded Theory, we interviewed 14 luxury consumers and 18 salespeople working in luxury stores. We discovered that consumers use impoliteness in a normative exchange setting as a means of formulating their opposition to a brand’s symbolic violence. Our research on deviant consumer behavior in luxury stores brings to light a new concept: “*Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness*”. Furthermore, we unveil four *Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness* practices: “*Being Crude*”, “*Interfering*”, “*Mastering*”, and finally, “*Blaspheming*”. In a normative exchange context, understanding the underlying meanings of *Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness* enables store managers to shape their responses according to the perceived level of such impoliteness practices.

**Keywords:** deviant behavior, impoliteness, luxury, servicescape, symbolic violence.

*They look like dealers from the suburb. You have to adapt fast, there has been a lot of tension between clients and sales staff since the launch of our caps (...) they come in four or five at a time (...), they have no notion of politeness but they definitely want us to be very polite to them.(...) He absolutely wants to be well received, he's very pretentious, very arrogant, he says "Hello I want to see the hats", using a direct and abrupt manner, (...) that's the consumers when they arrive, (...), they try not to respect the rules and to convince us not to follow them, it's a problem, they even approach other consumers to ask them to pay with their own credit card. (Interview, Store advisor Taglio).*

These words, voiced by a salesperson for a famous luxury brand, are symptomatic of deviant consumer behaviors that are being faced more frequently in luxury stores. Specifically, these involve behaviors such as verbal abuse, derogatory remarks, and excessive demands which damage the accepted and usual norms of conduct in specific situations (Fullerton & Punj, 1993, p. 570; Andersson & Pearson, 1999), as previously summarized and conceptualized by researchers as consumer incivility and verbal aggression (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2009). Prior research on deviant consumer behaviors places emphasis on the intensity of the deviant act and the best way to handle it but, curiously, the nature of this deviance and its underlying meanings have rarely been investigated. This study examines deviant consumer behavior dynamics in a luxury retail setting by using the framework of impoliteness.

Derived from linguistics, the traditional definition of impoliteness is as a generic term to qualify the remarks that the speaker makes with the intention of threatening the "*face*" of his or her hearer (Culpeper, 2008; Bousfield, 2008). Here, the notion of "*face*" designates the "*positive social value a person effectively claims for himself*", or his or her "*public identity*" (Goffman, 1967). Impoliteness Theory emphasizes a very specific aspect: the damage caused to the hearer's "*face*". Therefore, this theory, which focuses on the effect produced by the deviant consumer behavior, may help us to better understand the underlying meanings of

deviant behaviors as they occur in a retail setting. More specifically, in a luxury exchange setting, the brand coordinates social interactions and shapes consumer behavior thanks to a normative framework without posing the question of obedience (Dion & Borraz, 2017). However, some customers “*refuse to conform to the normative codes of behavior (-) subvert the rules and assert their position among (-) actors, including other customers and frontline employees*” (Dion & Borraz, 2017).

In using Impoliteness Theory, the aim of our research is to deepen our understanding of the different deviant consumer practices that occur frequently in the normative framework of this particular setting. More specifically, our research questions are: who are the perpetrators of Impoliteness in a normative exchange setting; what are the main types of Impoliteness practices? ; what are their underlying meanings?

Using a Grounded Theory approach conducted on a sample of 32 people (14 consumers and 18 salespeople) in the luxury subculture, our paper makes the following contributions to the existing literature: a) We classify the specific deviant behaviors into a new concept: “*Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness*” (CBI). b) We show that CBI might be interpreted as a response to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) of the luxury brand through the damaging of its servicescape staging. We elucidate for the first time the nature of this response, which varies according to the type of impoliteness practice: “*eradicating the distances*” from the luxury brand; “*forcing the private gates of luxury*”; “*enslaving*” the brand’s representatives, and, finally, “*questioning the very legitimacy of luxury*”. c) Finally, we show that CBI is not exhibited only by “*high symbolic capital*” consumers. Rather, the democratization of luxury brands that has enlarged their customer base, combined with the arrival of new customers with much lower incomes, has resulted in the emergence of a new type of clientele, which hold a “*low symbolic capital*”. These consumer profiles are far from self-exclusion (Dion & Borraz, 2017). Our study suggests,

rather, that impoliteness is manifested in luxury stores by this group in somewhat different ways—by transgressing some of the staged normative rules.

## **1. Theoretical foundations**

Our exploration of the theoretical background of our research aims to highlight the gap that exists in the deviant consumer behavior literature, specifically on the dynamics of consumer–sales person impoliteness, and in particular on the role that servicescape plays in our understanding of the underlying meanings of such practices occurring in a normative exchange context.

### ***1.1 Impoliteness as an intentional “face-threatening” deviant act***

There are a few articles that discuss the use of politeness in Marketing (Goodwin & Smith, 1990; Lerman, 2006; Taheri, 2017; Sundar & Cao, 2018; Andriuzzi & Michel, 2021). Impoliteness can be defined as the negative counterpart of politeness (Brown & Lewinson, 1987). While the wording “Rude/Rudeness” is sometimes used because it has been employed by the general public (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017), in our research we chose to adopt the position of numerous authors who think of impoliteness as a “*blanket term*” (Culpeper (2011a, p.80) for this semantic area. Recently, Dynel (2015) clarified the concept of impoliteness, more precisely defining an impolite practice as: “*When a speaker makes an impolite utterance, he/she not only refuses to preserve the listener’s face but actively seeks to damage/aggravate it*”. In this article, even though an emic definition of Impoliteness exists (Culpeper, 2011, p. 254), we will use the generic and most usual term of Impoliteness (etic) which refers to the remarks the speaker makes intentionally to threaten the face of the hearer (face-threatening-Act or “FTA”) (Culpeper, 2008; Bousfield, 2008).

Moreover, according to Brown and Levinson's work (1987, p 61; 1999), this "*risk of face's loss*" mainly depends on the "*social distance*" between the speaker and the hearer, that is their degree of intimacy (in particular, the frequency of their interactions), the "*relative power*" of the hearer over the speaker (that is, the capacity of the hearer to impose his or her intentions on the speaker), and, finally, the "*ranking of intrusion*" of the deviant act that may threaten the hearer's face. In addition, for Goldsmith (2007, p. 227), "*relative power*" and "*social distance*" are the most reliable predictors of (im)politeness-related behavior, whereas for Song (2017) "*relative power*" has the greatest impact on (im)politeness weight regardless of culture. Moreover, Brown and Levinson's theory has been claimed to be universal (Brown & Levinson, 1999; Dickey, 2016). Indeed, although some researchers have recently challenged the universality of this theory while outlining possible cultural differences that may impact the perception on politeness weight, this theory is considered to be applicable to a large number of different cultures (Dickey, 2016).

Finally, in particular in the context of an interaction between a buyer and a sales person occurring in a retail setting, the "*face-threatening*" deviant act underlined by Impoliteness Theory takes into account two "*faces*": the "*positive face*" that is relative to the need for approval of the sales person and the "*negative face*" which refers to the desire that his or her actions are not being interfered with. In line with this view of polarity of the *threatened-face*, more recent research on Impoliteness has expanded on the characteristics of this deviant behavior practice.

## ***1.2 Impoliteness as a practice***

Culpeper (2016) has proposed a typology of impoliteness acts which has gradually come to dominate academic literature. He distinguishes unofficial types of impoliteness ("*off record*") from official types of impoliteness ("*on record*"), and "*positive*" from "*negative*"

impoliteness. It is also possible to qualify them (Bousfield, 2008; Dynel, 2015) as explicit and implicit impoliteness, whether that be positive or negative. Various examples are offered by Culpeper (2016) to express impoliteness acts. With regard to explicit (*on record*) positive impoliteness strategies, we find *ignoring, snubbing the other* (failing to acknowledge the other's presence), *excluding the other from an activity, being indifferent or unfriendly, using title and last name for a close relation, using obscure language, making the other person uncomfortable by using taboo words, swearing, or using abusive language*, and, finally, *using derogatory terms*. In terms of implicit (*off record*) positive impoliteness strategies, we usually refer to the *refusal of politeness*, for example, when one does not thank someone for a gift. Concerning the negative explicit strategies of impoliteness, research has highlighted specific practices such as *invading others' personal space*—either in reality (moving within the boundaries of usual inter-individual distance) or metaphorically (asking for information that is too intimate for the relationship), *interrupting another's interlocutor* or *breaking up the structure of the conversation*. Regarding negative implicit impoliteness strategies, we usually refer to *sarcasm* or even the *parody of politeness*, when politeness is simply at the surface level and is not sincere.

Initially limited to an analysis of verbal behavior, recent psychosocial works (Brown & Winter, 2019) favor a *multimodal approach* of impoliteness. Our study aims to echo this research by expanding the scope of impolite behavior to nonverbal behavior such as body language or gestural manifestations such as the position of the body, facial and head gestures, manual gestures, the haptics and initiation of impolite behaviors/prerogative. Moreover, through its multimodal approach, Impoliteness is encoded and decoded via multiple channels (for example, gestural and linguistic). This redundancy of communication gives impoliteness the meaning of “*something that can be robustly and efficiently encoded and decoded*” by the hearer (Mason et al., 2015).

Whether Impoliteness is negative or positive, explicit or implicit, or verbal or non verbal, it is worth noting that the situational factors, in particular the servicescape staging, and some specific subcultures, like the luxury subculture, may encourage the formation of impoliteness practices.

### ***1.3 Impoliteness practices and the luxury store's servicescape***

Research in servicescape was first conceptualized by Bitner (1992) as the physical surroundings (“built environment”) that impact the behaviors of customers and employees in service organizations. Three environmental dimensions were proposed : ambient conditions (e.g., temperature, music, scents), spatial layout and functionality (e.g., equipment, furnishing), and signs, symbols, and artifacts (e.g., style of decor). The behavior of other consumers in store has also been added (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). Moreover, servicescape differentiates between substantive and communicative staging (Arnould, Price, & Tierney, 1998; Price & Arnould, 1999). Whereas substantive staging of the servicescape refers to the physical manifestation of the service environment, communicative staging refers to the ways the service environment is presented and interpreted and includes the personnel within a service setting (Dong & Siu, 2013). Although many researchers have investigated the role of the servicescape in the shaping of consumers’ perceptions and behaviors (Sherry et al., 2004; Dion & Arnould, 2011; Ustuner, Tuba, & Thompson, 2012), a few studies have focused on the factors of servicescape (Mari & Poggese, 2013; Merk & Michel, 2019) that may have an impact on the dysfunctional or deviant behavior of consumers. Those behaviors refer to consumer practices which intentionally violate the usual accepted rules of conduct in an exchange setting situation (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Prior research on those “norm-breaking” deviant behaviors (see Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Harris & Reynolds, 2004) emphasized the intensity of the deviant act as well as the ways to handle it. Nevertheless, the

very nature of this deviance and its underlying meanings in a normative consumer context have not yet been investigated.

Particularly in luxury settings, the assemblage of both substantive (ambient and design factors of the contrived environment) and communicative staging (personnel elements of the service environment) of the servicescape (Baker et al., 2002) provide a form of power for the brand. Therefore, exercising such power is a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Dion & Borraz, 2017) with the creation and reproduction of social hierarchies. However, while consumers usually submit themselves to the brand's symbolic violence in order to gain access to the luxury community and promote their social status, others refuse to conform to the normative codes of behavior imposed by the brand (Dion & Borraz, 2017). Those people transgress the rules in order to free themselves from the power of the brand, that is, its symbolic violence. These norm-breaking deviant behaviors may be studied through the lens of impoliteness. By using the concept of "*face's damaging risk*" (Brown & Levinson, 1987), we were able to identify who the perpetrators of Impoliteness are, the main types of impoliteness practice, and their underlying meanings in luxury stores.

## **2. Methods**

### ***2.1. Research design***

For this study, we selected a qualitative approach and used Grounded Theory (GT), which is recommended in the field of marketing to analyze complex (e.g., Flint et al., 2012; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) and new issues (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Indeed, the phenomenon of Impoliteness in a consumer behavior context has rarely been explicitly studied. Additionally, GT is used when a theory is needed to understand how people conceptualize and experience a phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) where existing theories are

not available or are insufficiently detailed (Creswell et al., 2007). Using this GT approach, we have uncovered new, emergent themes pertinent to interactions during luxury store visits.

Employing theoretical sampling, we first interviewed customers who frequented luxury stores both frequently and less frequently to gather their point of view regarding their in-store shopping experience and any issues they may have come across during those experiences. While analyzing and coding the data obtained from our interviews, Impoliteness emerged progressively as a key construct. While coding, we identified the need to interview sales staff who were in direct contact with customers in order to obtain their thoughts about the behavior of consumers in their stores, as well as to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of Impoliteness from those on the receiving end. During these interviews, we recognized the importance of other actors, such as sales executives (trainer managers, floor managers, store managers and directors) who retained direct contact with customers but who were also in a hierarchical position in relation to the sales staff we interviewed. We decided to interview them as well.

## ***2.2 Data and data collection***

First, we interviewed 14 frequent and less frequent consumers of luxury products and users of luxury flagship stores. Their membership of the luxury community was confirmed depending on the frequency of their visits (from once a week to once a year), and the name of the brand stores they visited (flagship stores of brands in high-end fashion and accessories and/or jewelry goods fields) (Table 1). Most of the interviews were conducted in French and these consumers were fluent French speakers. Where responses were given in English, they were translated into French. We included socio-demographic diversity regarding the status, origin, and age range of our sample. However, as females represent the majority of luxury consumers in stores, they are overrepresented in the sample. With regard to consumers in the

lowest economic class, as it was very difficult to obtain interviews, we relied mainly on the observations of the sales representatives. We did have the opportunity to interview some sales staff recruited by luxury houses in various Parisian suburbs, such as Montfermeil and Clichy-sous-Bois, thanks to an inclusive training programme (Source: <https://www.lesechos.fr/pme-regions/ile-de-france/lvmh-lance-sa-campagne-de-recrutement-en-seine-saint-denis-1172788>). Indeed, according to the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), we found that these particular salespeople were often asked by other sales staff to deal with consumers in the low-economic category in store. Lasting from between 35 and 90 minutes, the consumer interviews followed a comprehensive interviewing framework (Kaufmann, 2011) in order to allow respondents to feel free to express themselves about their experience of their visits to stores without any of the social filters often observed in such contexts. By triangulating the data across respondents and searching for limiting exceptions, the diversity of our respondents enabled us to ensure the validity and scope of the emerging interpretations (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Semantic saturation was obtained after 11 interviews. Further interviews were conducted without identifying any additional codes.

**Table 1:** Sample description of interviewed consumers

Name	Status	Luxury brands	Frequency of luxury stores visits	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Duration
Camilla	Consultant	Tiffany's, Louis Vuitton, Van Cleef and Arpels	1 per week	Brazil	44 yo	F	90 mn
Claudia	Commercial Director	Chloé, Marni, Narcisso Rodriguez	1 per year	Colombia	42 yo	F	75 mn
Clara	Consultant	Burberry, Prada	2 per month	Italy	52 yo	F	35 mn
Constance	CEO	Chloé, Boucheron, Van Cleef and Arpels	4 per year	France	46 yo	F	55 mn
Daniela	Consultant	Louis Vuitton, Hermès	2 per month	Italy	54 yo	F	45 mn
David	Lawyer	Louboutin, Baume et Mercier, Hugo Boss, Hermès, Dior	2 per month	France	42 yo	M	34 mn
Elisabeth	High official	Dior, Gucci	2 per month	USA	50 yo	F	45 mn
Floriane	Marketing director	Hermès, Shang Xia, Berluti	2 per month	France	26 yo	F	60 mn
Isabelle	Fiscalist	Chanel, Hermès, Alaia, Dior	1 per week	France	45 yo	F	60 mn
Jamie	Trader	Roger Vivier, Louboutin, Hermès, Céline	1 per week	China	27 yo	F	35 mn
Maïte	Doctor	Hermès, Buccelati, St Dupont	1 per month	France	66 yo	F	40 mn
Marie Louise	CEO	Louis Vuitton, Dior, Givenchy, Fendi	1 per week	Libon	52 yo	F	45 mn
Sophie	CEO	Boucheron, Hermès	1 per month	France	44 yo	F	35 mn
Thibault	Student	Louis Vuitton, Hermès	2 per month	France	23 yo	M	55 mn

After coding our consumers' interviews, we interviewed nine luxury sales people who were in direct contact with luxury consumers in luxury stores as well as nine sales executives. In both cases, we reached semantic saturation after seven interviews. Two additional interviews were conducted without detecting additional codes. Interviews lasted from between 35 minutes and 100 minutes.

**Table 2:** Sample description of interviewed luxury salespeople

Name	Current position	Sectors of activity	Expertise level	Nationality	Spoken languages	Age, Gender	Duration
Abdessamad	Sales advisor	High end fashion and accessories	5-10 years	Moroccan	French, English, Arabic	30, M	45 mn
Antoine	Client advisor	High end fashion and jewelry	2-5 years	French	Fr, English, Chinese	25, M	66 mn
Barbara	Sales advisor	High end fashion and shoes	2-5 years	Italian	Fr, English, Italian	29, F	40 mn
Gabriel	Client advisor	High end fashion and leather goods	2-5 years	French	Fr, English	23, M	42 mn
Maria	Sales advisor	High end fashion	10-20 years	Russian	Fr, English, Russian	35, F	59 mn
Nolwenn	Store advisor	High end fashion	2-5 years	French	Fr, English	25, F	42 mn
Taglio	Store advisor	High end fashion and accessories	5-10 years	Brazilian	Fr, English, Chinese, Portuguese	31, M	73 mn
Victoire	Sales advisor	High end fashion and jewelry	2-5 years	French	Fr, English	25, F	35 mn
Wenqing	Sales advisor	High end fashion	10-20 years	Chinese	Fr, English, Chinese	40, F	42 mn

Tables 2 and 3 show the composition of our samples by current expertise level in the

company, years of professional experience in luxury sales, nationality, spoken language, age, and gender. We selected them because they were all currently working in Parisian luxury flagship stores that have been frequented by the consumers previously interviewed and belonging to worldwide luxury brands such as: Christian Dior, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Berluti, Hermès, etc. The interviews were conducted by the same researcher for the purposes of consistency. Most of the interviews were conducted in French (the rest were in English). When non-French-native sales representatives spoke in French during interviews, their level of fluency was sufficient to allow a nuanced expression in their responses and to relate their in-store experience of comments or gestures from impolite consumers. The level of seniority and experience in luxury sales enabled us to ensure that the interviewee was the key person to interview on the topic of consumer impoliteness. This served as a guarantee of the interviewee's knowledgeability and involvement with the phenomena explored in our research. We focused on sales expertise and interviewed sales trainers, store directors, store managers, sales managers, etc. currently working in heritage and global luxury brands' flagship stores. Also, we interviewed sales experts from different representative countries or who spoke different languages (Chinese, English, French, Italian, Arabic, Russian) to ensure that they corresponded to representative consumers of luxury shopping in their stores. The interviews conducted with both salespeople and sales executives were not directive and the interviewer's discussion themes were wide-ranging, which allowed informants to talk spontaneously about their in-store experiences and about the behaviors of consumers and other salespeople in the store. The topic of impoliteness was not explicitly mentioned at the beginning of the discussion to avoid any prompting of the respondents.

**Table 3:** Sample description of luxury sales executives

Name	Current position	Type of brand's store	Expertise level	Nationality	Spoken languages	Age, Gender	Duration
Alexandre	Store manager	Global luxury brand	> 20 years	French	French, English	45, M	50 mn
Anne	Store trainer	Global luxury brand	> 20 years	French	French, English	45, F	54 mn
Carole	Training manager	Global luxury brand	> 20 years	Italian	Fr, English, Italian	43, F	40 mn
Franck	Store manager	Global luxury brand	> 20 years	French	Fr, English	48, M	100 mn
Géraldine	Special order and training manager	Heritage brand	> 20 years	French	Fr, English	45, F	45 mn
Lila	Store manager	Global luxury brand	5-10 years	Chinese	Fr, English, Chinese	30, F	69 mn
Matthias	Store manager	Heritage brand	10-20 years	German	Fr, English, German	40, M	43 mn
Sophie	Store director	Global luxury brand	> 20 years	French	Fr, English	48, F	84 mn
Ting	Client service manager	Global luxury brand	10-20 years	Chinese	Fr, English, Chinese	35, F	75 mn

### 2.3. Analysis

We conducted our analysis in an iterative way. Using open coding, we first determined key statements made by our respondents and assigned them *in vivo* codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Statements pertinent to respondents' conceptualizing and defining of impoliteness behaviors were assigned specific codes according to their content. These codes were then gathered into first-order categories. Moreover, we classified the first-order categories with common meanings into higher-order categories. Then, we used an axial coding process to interconnect these higher-order categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, through selective coding, we identified the central phenomenon that emerged (Impoliteness). An example of categorization of the data is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Example of categorization of the data

<b>Interviewee (example)</b>	<b>First-Order Category</b>	<b>Second-Order Category</b>	<b>Aggregate Dimensions</b>
Carole	Criticizing the store's environment because its temperature is not appropriate (for a luxury brand) from her (consumer) point of view	Refusing to endorse the brand's embodiment (physical environment of the store)	Blaspheming
Abdessamad	Touching luxury products without permission and moving the product display around to how they (clients) like it	Refusing to endorse the brand's embodiment (product displays)	
Isabelle, Alexandre, Taglio	Damaging and attacking, verbally or physically, the products and their quality	Voicing their disgust toward the brand (damaging the product offering staging)	
Camila	Criticizing other groups of consumers who take over the store while transforming it into a "cyber-café"	Overtaking the territory of luxury (transforming the store)	Being crude
Carole	Pointing out consumers who arrive in groups, sitting without permission, snapping fingers in order to turn the luxury store into a café		
Thibault	Crossing the physical barriers staged by the brand to access the luxury products	Overtaking the territory of luxury (product staging)	
Taglio	Interrupting conversations and moving into the personal spaces of other consumers	Disrespecting other consumers' space	

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), we examined four criteria to demonstrate the trustworthiness of our research project: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is enhanced by a prolonged engagement with the setting: informants were interviewed in different places (in the store, in an office or outside, in public or private places) over an extended period of eighteen months. Moreover, we interviewed different types of respondents (sales representatives, store and training managers as well as consumers) from different cultures and different brand and luxury stores to obtain a triangulation of the data. Finally, by going constantly back and forth, categories and concepts were regularly compared and checked against the empirical material to make findings and conclusions credible. Peer debriefing between the two co-authors was also implemented to gain feedback and facilitate the qualification of our research findings (Decrop & Masset, 2018). As for transferability, the theory generation process has been thoroughly described and for each of these components, specific retranscribed quotes have been proposed (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). A French researcher in the linguistics field served as an external auditor in

assessing the dependability and the confirmability of the findings. Finally, addressing all of these external criteria allowed us to conclude that our findings are trustworthy.

### **3. Findings**

Two main themes emerged from our research on impoliteness in luxury stores, which have structured our findings. First, we identify the main perpetrators of impoliteness and how such impoliteness is generally performed in such a normative exchange setting. Second, we categorize and expand on the different types of impoliteness practices, specifically in the context of the luxury store servicescape. Indeed, whether the substantive staging of servicescape (spaces, sales protocol, products, other in-store visitors, etc.), the communicative staging (sales advisors, sales managers, etc.), or both, are damaged and according to the modalities of performance (verbal or gestural, implicit or explicit manners), we are able to identify that these impoliteness practices do not impart the same message to the luxury brand.

#### ***3.1 Consumers as perpetrators of Impoliteness in luxury stores***

Whether the respondents (salespeople or consumers) highlighted a specific attitude, look, gesture, a particular tone of voice, or the words used, our findings show that the perpetrators of impoliteness in luxury stores are mainly luxury consumers rather than salespeople.

*We can feel it, just from looking at the attitude of the consumer, snobbish people, who don't even look into our eyes when they talk to us, they are more focused on their phone than on us, have no consideration for the person who faces them. It's not easy to manage that, it's a sentiment we often experience. (Saleswoman, Victoire).*

In line with previous research (Reynolds & Harris, 2006) and for the majority of the situations described in our study, our findings show that the perpetrators of impoliteness in luxury stores involve mainly luxury consumers. Moreover, such impoliteness is often

described by salespeople as behavior which is observed immediately, as soon as the consumers enter the store. For example, saleswoman Victoire describes the effect of this impolite behavior as feeling instantly humiliated due to the nature of the look given to her by the consumer : a belittling attitude, “face” attention paid to the phone rather than to her, a lack of eye contact while speaking, an absence of consideration when face to face. In this luxury store context, where brands create experiences in order to induce emotions in users—for example, through a display of artworks (Joy et al., 2014)—Victoire describes this consumer’s behavior through her emotional lens. By doing so, she interprets the consumer’s behavior as a refusal of the brand’s experiential side, which leads her to perceive an impoliteness practice.

*They talk very loudly to each other on purpose with an accent from the ghetto (Salesman, Antoine);*

*They are immediately aggressive, while talking loudly, using rude words from the beginning (Store Manager, Alexandre).*

In other situations, salespeople define impoliteness from consumers as stemming from the nature of the voice they employ as soon as they enter the store. The aggressivity of their tone, the rudeness of the words used, their overly informal accent, and the loudness of their conversation not only disturb the peaceful environment of the store and its employees, but also annoy other consumers present.

*From the moment they enter the store (...) the way they are dressed, if they are dressed like people from the suburbs (...), I know some salespeople even filter them at first glance. (Training manager, Carole);*

*Those wealthy people, we recognize them immediately (...) they enter without saying hello (...) they enter our store and immediately say to us: “I want the most expensive stuff in the store” (Saleswoman, Maria).*

Salespeople immediately assess the potential economic capital of their customers and decide whether to pay attention to them or not. When consumers do not dress in the way they expect them to do or when they exhibit an unpleasant and closed attitude originating in their lack of understanding of luxury codes, salespeople perceive them as holding low economic

capital level. The fact they are unaware of luxury norms (dress code, for example) enables salespeople to quickly perceive and evaluate their potential level of expenditure. Furthermore, when salespeople assess both the economic power of the country of origin of consumers and the way in which they dress, they can immediately measure their level of economic capital.

### ***3.2 Types of Impoliteness practices in luxury exchange settings***

Our research investigates how different clients' impolitenesses operate inside a normative exchange setting such as a luxury store. Through our analysis of the physical environment (substantive staging) and the ways it is presented and interpreted (communicative staging) (Arnould et al., 1998), we reveal and describe below four types of impoliteness practices ("Being Crude", "Interfering", "Mastering", "Blaspheming") which vary according to their meanings, addressees, modalities, and the profiles of consumers. Table 5 (see appendix) features the various characteristics of impoliteness practices occurring in luxury stores.

#### ***"Being crude" or eradicating the distances from the brand***

Our findings reveal a kind of impoliteness practice that has occurred more recently in luxury stores. Coming mainly from occasional and low economic capital consumers, who are rarely alone when entering the store, this practice is described as an explicit eradication of the symbolic distances that the luxury brand artificially creates to preserve its autonomy from certain clients. Indeed, those consumers are not made particularly welcome in the luxury community, which makes them feel socially inferior (Dion & Borraz, 2007). In response, supported by the systematic presence of one or many other members of their own community, our findings show that these clients use the luxury environment to fulfil their need for social status elevation by creating their own rules in the luxury store.

### ***Overtaking the territory of luxury***

*They talk very loud, they're people who come by in bunches and only one person buys. The others take advantage while one individual is buying (...) They take beverages, champagne, they make themselves comfortable in the space. The other day, a woman (from the group) was looking for something while all the others opened their laptops, working and searching everywhere in the store for plug sockets. When you are a real client, it's degrading to see that. A luxury brand, with someone opening up their laptop in a luxury store, it shouldn't happen, it's not a cyber café here! I don't want to go to that place anymore. (Consumer Camilla).*

Regular consumers like Camilla describe such “degrading“ behaviors occurring in luxury stores. These practices come from groups of people who are not “*real clients*”. They overtake the space with no respect for the luxury brand and its physical environment. They transform the place into a “*cyber café*” while doing away with the ceremonial sales ritual. By refusing to follow the existing in-store rules and imposing their own norms, these clients’ practices turn the brand into something ordinary which is no longer desirable, exclusive, or endorsed by the “real” (regular) and traditional community of luxury. By damaging the luxury space, these practices lead to a desacralization of the space which is no longer set apart from ordinary activity (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989)

*I was with a friend, dressed like a soccer player (...) nobody looked at me, they (salespeople) were talking to each other (-). After a moment, I took the product that was in the display, went straight to the cashier that was located close to the front door, even if there were four other cashiers, two close to the front door and two far from it. And then, the security guard at the door (who saw I was taking the product by myself) came straight up to me and said: “Where do you think you’re going there?” (Consumer, Thibault).*

Like other non-familiar-to-the brand consumers, Thibault describes his behavior during his first visit to a luxury store. At that time, he did not know how to approach the products, what the appropriate dress code might be, or have the self confidence needed to express himself or to observe the luxury codes. Because these elements constitute important symbols of membership of a given class during informal interactions (Goffman, 1951), Thibault was unsuccessful in making eye contact with the luxury brand’s ambassadors. Nevertheless, Thibault refused to be ignored or to wait any longer to be served and made the decision to act without the approval of the brand. In front of his friend, Thibault explicitly forces access, crossing the symbolic borders to remove the luxury “sacred” affordances

(Dion & Arnould, 2011) on his own and without assistance from the brand's representatives, refusing to follow the brand's protocols and etiquette, as well as to conform to its normative codes (Dion & Borraz, 2017). In response, the staff immediately confront him, like a thief, without letting him explain the situation.

### ***Disrespecting other consumers' space***

*I see my colleagues, they expect the consumer to know how to behave, that means never touching the products (...) We don't like it when they touch the products, we don't like them interrupting conversations while we are in the middle of explaining something to another client, we also don't like these clients getting close to another client, and taking products to try them on by themselves, for example... politeness for us is firstly being able to be patient when you have to wait in line (...) They don't want to pay using the methods we have, but we have to go strictly by the rules and they try not to respect this and to convince us not to apply them. It's a real problem. They even get close to other consumers in store and ask them to pay for them (instead of them) with their credit card! (...) (Store advisor, Taglio).*

As well as being an explicit taking over of the space, some in-store behaviors are considered to be forms of impoliteness once distance codes are broken, as mentioned by Taglio. Whether the breaching of symbolic distances concerns consumer-to-product ("*touching the products*", "*try them on by themselves*") or consumer-to-consumer ("*interrupting clients' conversations*", "*close to another client*", "*get close to other consumers in store*"), these practices lead to impoliteness. This kind of behavior, which is often exhibited by non-regular clientele, can even end in situations where other luxury consumers are asked to break the store's regulations for them (Culpepper, 2016).

The taking over of the physical space, the breaching of in-store rules to access to products as well as disrupting other in-store visitors' experience, lead to an eradication of the symbolic distances artificially created by the luxury brand. Nevertheless, these practices of "*Being Crude*" are not perceived by their observers as the most aggressive of potential actions, as Carole notes:

*They immediately overtake the place, they don't talk to us, especially if you are a woman, they snap their fingers and yell as if they are in a café, they want to show off to the others... but they are not the worst ones. (Carole, Training manager).*

Indeed, while the substantive staging of the luxury servicescape is damaged, the “*personnel service setting*” (communicative staging) is not directly attacked (Dong & Siu, 2013). These negative impoliteness practices come from people who (just) “*want to show off to the others*” so even if the brand does not consider them as part of its community, they are capable of creating their own tribe (“*a café*”) where they might obtain, for a moment, an elevated social status.

### ***“Interfering“ or forcing privacy of luxury***

There are other impoliteness practices which appear to be more aggressive from the recipients’ side than the above-mentioned. Indeed, these behaviors are performed both verbally and in implicit and explicit ways, damaging the communicative staging of the luxury servicescape rather than the substantive ones. Embarrassing the salespeople or criticizing the existing luxury community, they mainly involve holders of low-economic capital and regular consumers who possess a certain degree of intimacy with the brand.

#### ***Embarrassing salespeople by making personal comments***

*Hey, don’t you have anybody other than a Chinese [person] to serve a French person?* (consumer’s comment related by Store director, Sophie).

*At your store (wry smiling), you only have Chinese [staff], don’t you?* (consumer comment related by Store Manager, Franck).

Store trainer Anne, quoting a consumer: *I don’t wait behind Chinese people!* Anne adds (using a disgusted tone): *the brand doesn’t belong to them (...)*!

*Luxury has democratized itself, consumers now enter my store and demand: “serve me at once”, they make you feel inferior by using a harsh tone, by showing impatience right away. Our local clientele feel threatened by their presence and ask us loudly: “how come these [people] are not at Galleries Lafayette?” (...)* actually for this type of client, we don’t want to deal with them at all. (Training manager, Carole).

Sales representatives Sophie, Franck, Anne, and Carole shed light on some acts of exclusion made by domestic (French) consumers and directed toward other consumers who do not fit with their perceptions of the luxury community. From the queue outside, where traditional consumers do not want to be physically close to these people, to the inside of the store, where they refuse “*to be treated like Chinese consumers*” or helped by Chinese

representatives, they openly (voicing loudly while in the line with other clients) or implicitly (wry smiling) criticize the luxury store's community (both consumers and salespeople) to show the brand that they do not endorse their choices regarding their criteria for community membership. These impoliteness practices are also a way for their perpetrators to show off their superiority toward the brand (“*the brand doesn't belong to them* (these domestic clients)”, “*wry smiling*”, which shows their complicity with the brand’s representative, “*how come these people* (new comer clients) *are not at the Galeries Lafayette?*”) while shouting at the ears of brand’s messengers their critics. Due to their strategic ownership of the company like position, they even address sarcastic and racist comments (Culpeper, 2016) to other non domestic consumers and salespeople without running the risk of self-exclusion. Moreover, these embarrassing behaviors do not seem to be corrected by their direct recipients (the salespeople), as if salespeople were also complicit in this non endorsement of the other consumers.

### ***Making inappropriate comments***

*You have men and women who talk about their mistresses, their personal problems. And you think to yourself: is this the right place (the fitting room), the right moment to talk about that, am I the right person to hear that? We have to manage to absorb such things, to see the client with two different women within the same week, and moreover to be asked in whispers not to say anything. It contradicts the message we give to our sales teams. We are obliged to respect the client, but in the meanwhile, what he's doing, is it right ? Is it polite to bring (into the store) his wife and then his mistress ? (Store manager, Alexandre).*

Aside from sarcasm, some other impoliteness practices put salespeople in real difficulty because they touch on their clients’ private situation. Even if they are performed in an intimate setting (the fitting room) likely to foster friendship (Fournier et al., 1998) and whatever the proximity of the perpetrators to the luxury store, Alexandre interprets these practices as a violation of the brand’s symbolic space (not “*the right place*”, “*the right moment*”, “*the person to hear that*”). Our findings also show that those particular practices which damage the communicative staging of luxury stores are explicit and mainly verbal (“*to be asked in whispers*”). Nevertheless, as with the racist comments, salespeople do not react to these uncomfortable remarks even though, as outlined by Alexandre, he does not approve of

this type of behavior. Indeed, a luxury and prestigious brand is supposed to show the way ahead (“*it’s a contradiction*”), that is, to provide a *class model* to its clients (Dion & Borraz, 2017).

In summary, by damaging the luxury brand’s community as well as its representatives, “*Interfering practices*“ use provocative and intimate verbal and explicit/implicit ways to refute the autonomy of the luxury brand. Because of the regular and familiar-to-the brand status of these perpetrators, the brand chooses not to react to this privacy issue even though they acknowledge the low-level economic capital these consumers hold.

Thanks to our analysis of the context, we discovered that negative impoliteness practices occurring in stores are performed via damage to the substantive staging in an explicit and gestural way (“*Being Crude*”) whereas others directly damage the communicative staging of servicescape (“*Interfering*”).

#### ***“Mastering“ or enslaving brand’s representatives.***

Verbally and gesturally performed, these “*master*”-like practices refer both to the consumers’ negative (damaging the brand’s rules) and positive (eliminating the need for brand approval) impoliteness toward the brand (Culpeper, 2016). Moreover, our findings highlight that their perpetrators not only refuse the luxury brand’s need for approval deriving from its representatives but invert it.

#### ***Refusing to show politeness to dominant luxury salespeople***

*She (consumer) doesn’t speak well, she doesn’t say hello and she demands “Orange juice!”, no please, a very harsh tone. (I asked her) if she wishes to see this product. (...) She doesn’t listen to you at all. (Client Service Manager, Ting).*

Due to their familiarity with the brand and luxury codes, the perpetrators of such impoliteness practices are perfectly aware of the service they can expect from salespeople as

observed and described by Ting. Openly manifested through verbal demands (“*orange juice!*”) without any expression of politeness, manners, or making eye contact with their addressee, their behavior erases the salespersons’ presence, quite deliberately. Moreover, by refusing appeals for a greeting or refusing to listen to salespeople (Culpeper, 2016) while claiming orders, their practices remove the dominant position of the salesperson. In luxury stores, salespeople’s attitudes and behaviors are specifically shaped, in part, by prior beliefs linked with the products they are selling (Wright, 2005). Therefore, sales representatives of luxury and prestigious products internalize and idealize the aesthetics and values of the luxury brand and do not perceive themselves as subordinated service workers, but as being in a more dominant position in the presence of the upper-class consumers with whom they associate (Dion & Borraz, 2017). As a consequence, this refusal to take part in politeness practices demonstrates its perpetrators’ refusal to be the luxury brand’s *class-subjects*.

### ***Inverting the dominant position of luxury***

*Some consumers entered the store, they were (already) pissed off, there is no “hello”, no “thank you”, we can feel that they have a kind of racist attitude, maybe it’s not pure racism rather a social racism. “Me, I’m a client, I have money, you, you are a salesman, I’m somebody, you, you are nothing, you are here to obey what I say because I am the one who’s got the money, therefore I don’t need to make an effort. On the contrary, you, you have to make some (effort) because I’m the one paying.” (Store Manager, Mathias).*

From the moment they enter his store, Mathias “*feels*” he is immediately subjected to the aggressive mood of some of his visitors. The explicit lack of politeness (“*no ‘hello’*”, “*no ‘thank you’*”) gives Mathias the impression that he will be blamed for things he is not responsible for, and he prepares himself to become his client’s personal punch ball, whatever his hierarchical position in the luxury store. Moreover, the client’s practice evolves into an act of social imperialism (“*social racism*“, “*me, I am the client*”, “*you are nothing*”) where the client not only refuses to respond to salespeople’s politeness but treats them like slaves because he is “*the one paying*”. As a consequence, this impoliteness practice removes the brand's capacity for acknowledging consumers’ roles and status (Goffman, 1967) and inverts it thanks to the high economic capital its perpetrators possess (Bourdieu, 1984).

### ***“Blaspheming” practices, or questioning the brand’s legitimacy***

Finally, our findings shed light on some positive impoliteness practices which are largely explicitly performed through damage to the the servicescape stage. These behaviors are ways of demonstrating that the brand does not possess the codes which correspond to their perpetrators’ own luxury criteria.

#### ***Refusing to endorse the brand’s embodiment***

*(...) the client was very edgy, she tried on some clothing in the fitting room, then she literally threw it in the salesman’s face, she said it was not acceptable (for a luxury brand) that it was so hot in here. She behaved like a she-cat. There was zero tolerance: “I was at Dior before, and it was perfect, how come it’s like this in here?”. She couldn’t tolerate it, she was disgusted because she felt that our environment needed to be perfect. (Training Manager, Carole).*

In this first “*Blaspheming*” act described by Carole, the client compares the brand’s physical environment to that of a competitor, ranking it in an inferior position. By this behavior, the impolite client takes over the luxury brand’s role to educate regular clients to the luxury codes (Dion & Borraz, 2017). Indeed, by “*swearing*” (Culpeper, 2016) and throwing clothes at the salesman’s in the context of a silent fitting room, the client is vociferous in demonstrating to the brand’s representatives, and implicitly to the brand’s community, that she does not endorse its high-end positioning (“*not acceptable*”, “*zero tolerance*” for a luxury brand).

*I have some “very tactile, like-to-touch” clients. They will take you by the hand, they will destroy the merchandising within thirty seconds; if the display has just been installed, we have to call the merchandising department to put it back. They won’t hesitate to take the bags and wander around inside the store with them. We tell them not to touch but they don’t care. (Sales advisor, Abdessamad).*

More intense than the previous examples, these impoliteness practices, exhibited mainly by familiar-to-the-brand consumers with a high perceived economic capital, can also be manifested explicitly through damage to the store interior and its product displays. In such stores, merchandising and in-store displays deploy museological techniques, used by luxury brands to construct their charismatic luxury authority (Dion & Arnould, 2011). The products

are organized to visually express the brand's story and should not be moved by anyone but the brand's merchandisers. The impoliteness behaviors described by Abdessamad are exhibited by consumers who consider themselves at home in the store. By "taking the hand" of the staff member, they overthrow the latter's authority while showing the brand representative their own and (what they believe to be) the right way of handling the luxury environment: showing little respect for the merchandising display, touching and trying on fragile and expensive luxury products (without permission, without paying attention to the brand's setting, or the sales person's warnings). By doing so, they "exclude" the brand (Culpeper, 2016) from its luxury charismatic authority (Dion & Arnould, 2011).

### ***Voicing their disgust for the brand***

*(...) they even denigrate or question the quality of the products. I have already had a conversation with clients who have scratched the product in front of me in order to tell me that the veal leather was not sufficiently resistant. Of course, I told her that veal leather is the most delicate of any leathers, but she went on scratching it with her nails in front of me. I begged her: "Please stop it!" (...)* (Store advisor, Taglio).

*(...) She spits out all her poison, all the disgust she has for the 'maison', the products that are rubbish, (...) she doesn't listen, she sticks to her position, and the tone rises and it explodes!* (Store manager, Alexandre).

*The other day, I went to the C. store at Place Vendôme, I said I had a diamond that wasn't tight enough, and the saleswoman responded: "It happens"; and then I said: "No, it can't 'happen, brands that declare themselves to be luxury but don't have the corresponding quality and the after-sales service that goes with it, I say no!". My friend had the same situation happen to her, she went [to the store] and she was told: "That never happens!" They gave us no explanation, nothing at all, the after-sales service took a very long time. Moreover, we had to pay for it and we were the ones with the complaint ! The outcome: I will never buy anything at C's again! We must complain about this after-sales [service] that was rubbish, and the quality of product that was rubbish !* (Consumer, Isabelle).

In these situations, the consumers went even further in harming the brand's servicescape. In pointing out the flaws, the poor quality ("denigrate", "poison", "rubbish") of the product offering in the servicescape, the consumers quoted by Taglio (store advisor) and Alexandre (store manager) used a louder tone as well as abusive language (Culpeper, 2016)

to express their disgust towards the brand. As well as verbally, some of them would even attempt to physically damage the “*objects of adoration*” represented by luxury products (“*scratching it with her nails*”) while ignoring the salespeople’s exhortations (“*I begged her*” to stop it). Luxury high-end products are considered as exceptional and charismatic personifications of the brand designed by the brand’s artistic director (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Dion & Borraz, 2015). As a consequence, these consumers’ criticisms damage in a direct and virulent manner the external embodiment of the luxury brand as well as questioning the legitimacy of its luxury characteristics (i.e., the dimension of authenticity of the luxury brand (Beverland, 2006)). Moreover, according to regular consumer Isabelle’s point of view, a luxury brand should not have any issues with product quality (“*no, it can’t happen*”), otherwise it no longer belongs to the realm of luxury.

We have shown that positive impoliteness practices operate in luxury stores via damage to both the substantive (product display, products) and communicative staging of the servicescape. Deriving mainly from regular consumers who have high perceived economic capital according to the salespeople interviewed, these explicit, verbal, and gestural impolite behaviors are ways to demonstrate their refusal of the brand’s domination and to invert it.

#### **4. Discussion, implications, and conclusion**

Prior research on “norm-breaking” deviant behaviors in a consumer behavior context have emphasized the intensity of the deviant act as well as ways of handling it, but the very nature of these deviant practices and their underlying meanings in a normative consumer context have not previously been investigated. The contribution of this paper has been to understand customer impoliteness from a marketing perspective and, more specifically, in a normative context such as the luxury store subculture.

Our findings show that consumers are the perpetrators of impoliteness practices in a normative exchange setting. Moreover, we identified four different types of impoliteness practices: “*Being Crude*”, “*Interfering*”, “*Mastering*”, and “*Blaspheming*.” These practices vary according to their meanings, their addressees, their modalities, and consumers’ characteristics (level of perceived economic capital and frequency of store visits). Our study expands our understanding of the underlying meanings of such impoliteness practices by revealing a new concept (“Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness”) while explaining how it is evaluated from the consumer’s perspective. According to the level of the perceived risk of damage to the brand’s face (communicative and/or substantive staging), *Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness* will vary. We conclude with a suggestion for coping strategies for *Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness* for managers operating in luxury stores.

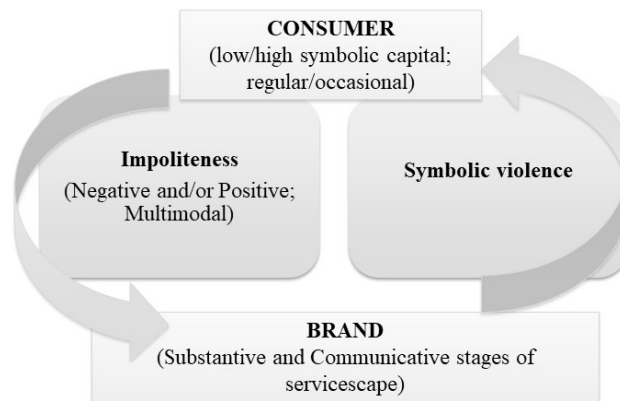
#### ***4.1 “Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness” as a response to symbolic violence***

Impoliteness has been ignored in research on deviant consumer behavior. Our research demonstrates that it should now be included. We have shown, first, the originality of the concept of impoliteness, i.e., the effect produced by deviant behaviors and, more specifically, the damage to the recipient’s face. Moreover, while luxury consumers usually submit to the normative codes of behavior imposed by luxury brands (Dion & Borraz, 2017) in order to gain access to the luxury community, some of them refuse to pledge allegiance by damaging the substantive and/or communicative staging of the servicescape of luxury stores. By applying Impoliteness Theory to a luxury field, we have shown that the content of consumer impoliteness in luxury stores can be considered as *Impoliteness toward the Brand* (“*Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness*” or CBI). Indeed, because consumers may perceive products and brands as having human features (Puzakova et al., 2009), consumer impoliteness, which consists initially of threatening an individual’s face, i.e. their public

identity (Goffman, 1967), also threatens the public identity of the brand, i.e. the brand's image. Therefore, by damaging the substantive and communicative staging of a servicescape (Bitner, 1992), we show that luxury consumers aim to harm the luxury brand's image. As previously shown by Dion and Boraz (2017), in the context of the luxury subculture, this *CBI* might be interpreted as a response to the symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) of the luxury brand via the damaging of its servicescape staging (Figure 1). Echoing this research, our study delves further into the nature of the response to brands' symbolic violence according to the type of impoliteness practices used: "*Being Crude*" for "*Eradicating the distances*" of the luxury store; "*Interfering*" for "*Forcing the private gates of luxury*"; "*Enslaving*" brand's representatives for "*Mastering*", and, finally, "*Blaspheming*" for "*Questioning on the luxury brand legitimacy*". All these responses provide multiple ways for consumers to voice their opposition to a luxury brand's symbolic violence.

Moreover, CBI can be addressed to the positive face of the brand via both its substantive and communicative servicescape staging (*throwing clothing at salespeople's face, damaging the products*) or to the negative face of the brand via its substantive staging (*taking control of the space, annoying other consumers, interrupting others' conversations*) or communicative staging (*employing over-familiar subjects of conversation, refusing to be assisted by certain kinds of salespeople*).

**Figure 1** : Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness in luxury stores



#### ***4.2 Assessment of the level of “Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness”***

Following Brown and Levinson’s work (1987), our findings show that CBI or the risk of the brand’s loss of face depends on: a) the level of interaction between the brand and the client (i.e., client’s frequency of visits to luxury stores); and b) the “*relative power*” of the brand over the consumer (that is, the brand’s capacity to impose itself on the speaker or the client).

More precisely, if the consumer regularly frequents the brand’s luxury shop, the social distance will be short (low) and vice versa. As for power relationship, Dion and Borraz (2017) outlined that the substantive and communicative staging of servicescape shape a socio-material assemblage that gives the brand significant power in the status game. This power refers to the capacity of the brand to impose, for example, the unwritten rules of the store on its consumers. Those rules refer to the “*behavioral class model*” promoted by the brand (Dion & Borraz, 2017) that constrains consumers’ behavior in order to prevent them from acting in ways that are not aligned with the established etiquette. Nevertheless, the higher the symbolic capital of the consumer, the less relative power the brand has over the consumer, and vice versa.

Following Brown and Levinson (ibid), a consumer wishing to buy a luxury brand's product in a store may perceive a high risk of damaging the brand's face (or CBI) when their purchasing frequency is low and/or the difference in symbolic power is high. Therefore, the consumer will adjust their behavior accordingly. As Feng et al. (2011) outlined, the consumer might be less impolite where there is a high perceived risk of damaging the brand's face, whereas they will be more impolite where there is a low perceived risk of damaging the brand's face.

Our results, which focus on the economic side of consumers' symbolic capital, reveal that "low symbolic capital" consumers may be less impolite than those with "high symbolic capital". Moreover, among the "low symbolic capital" consumers, those who do not regularly frequent luxury stores formulate the lowest level of impolite response to the brand ("*Being Crude*"). Also, for the "low capital" consumers, CBI is mainly formulated on the negative side, meaning that there is no questioning of the luxury status of the brand (positive CBI). Rather, they damage the territory of the brand and, more specifically, the substantive staging ("*Being Crude*" behavior) and the communicative staging ("*Interfering*" behaviors). These results reveal a graduation of CBI, from the lowest level (substantive staging) to higher level of CBI (communicative staging) where the purchasing frequency is regular and the social distance from the brand is therefore short. From the "high symbolic capital" consumers' side, the perceived risk of damaging the salespeople's face is lower, particularly for regular consumers. Indeed, the social distance and the relative symbolic capital gap between those consumers and the luxury salespeople is low. Therefore, we notice that a higher level of impoliteness behavior is performed: the very legitimacy of the luxury brand (Beverland, 2006) is attacked explicitly in both verbal and gestural manners.

Furthermore, positive and negative CBI practices are formulated differently. Our results clearly show the need for a multimodal approach (verbal and non verbal) to

impoliteness (Brown & Winter, 2019). In the case of positive CBI, consumers may predominantly use non-verbal (*scratching the products*) and verbal impoliteness (*shouting, spitting, crying*) to reject the brand's domination and refuse to endorse its prestigious status, whereas for negative CBI, they favor gestural impoliteness (*avoidance of eye contact, reducing appropriate distances, etc.*) to reveal their opposition to the brand norms in luxury stores. Indeed, in line with prior research on “redundancy of communication” outlined by Mason et al. (2015), our findings reveal that “low symbolic capital” consumers use mainly substantive *or* communicative staging of the servicescape to formulate their opposition to the brand, whereas “high symbolic capital” consumers would use both. In this case, according to this multimodal approach of CBI, the means of formulating impoliteness are particularly intense.

Finally, our findings show that CBI is not specifically the preserve of “*high symbolic capital*” customers and that there is not a systematic “*self-exclusion*” of other—low capital—consumers “*who feel socially non legitimate*”. Indeed, the democratization of luxury brands, which has enlarged their customer base, combined with the arrival of new customers with much lower incomes has resulted in the emergence of a new type of clientele, who hold “*low symbolic capital*”. The latter are far from self-exclusion and also exhibit some forms of impoliteness in luxury stores—although in somewhat different ways—by transgressing some of the staged normative rules.

#### ***4.3 Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness coping strategies***

Our study on strategies for handling consumer impoliteness in the subculture of luxury stores reveals the existence of a new typology with regard to the existing literature (Bousfield, 2008a; Reynold & Harris, 2006). As a result, the handling of *Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness* can be curated by the brand depending on the type and level of CBI.

Particularly in a consumption context, we have shown that positive and negative impoliteness by consumers can be addressed to the brand through the in-store servicescape staging. It is interesting to note that the management of such consumer impoliteness is specific to the capacity of consumers to make the brand loses its “*face*”. The consumer can cause various degrees of damage to the brand’s face and the brand’s response strategy will vary accordingly. Moreover, a luxury store manager may have a wide choice of potential strategies to cope with CBI. Graded according to the level of perceived damage to the brand, we propose eight different strategies that could be implemented by salespeople: *Submitting to aggressor*, *Applying minimum standard procedure*, *Overplaying politeness*, *Educating*, *Staying still*, *Calling for dominant intervention*, *Snubbing*, *Excluding*. Details of these strategies are featured in the appendix (Table 6.)

Finally, the observation of in-store impolite behavior by consumers provides a new means of listening to, watching, and understanding verbal and non verbal reactions toward a change in brand image strategy. For example, when a luxury brand chooses to expand its product territory to lower-end products (perfumes, accessories) or replace its artistic director (as Louis Vuitton did with the former street artist Virgil Abloh, or as Chanel did with Virginie Viard when the very charismatic Karl Lagerfeld passed away), the brand endangers its public identity (or “*brand’s face*”) (Goffman, 1967). Therefore, the analysis of impoliteness behaviors occurring in-store can be a useful means of understanding how the brand’s consumer community reacts to this change.

#### ***4.4. Limitations and future research***

Our research is based on the seminal framework of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) which was, according to its founders, supposed to be universal, and is still considered to be applicable to a large number of different cultures (Dickey, 2016). Nevertheless, the specific empirical field in which it was conducted, namely consumer behavior in Western

European luxury stores, indicates possible transferability and opens avenues for future research. Indeed, it would be useful to expand our study to brands or stores from cultures and countries outside Western Europe as well as other types of stores. Also, from a cultural point of view, it might be interesting to conduct a comparative analysis of consumer impoliteness behaviors in countries where certain aspects of face are particularly salient, impacting the perception of the relative power of the brand. For example, in Chinese culture, the recognition by others of a person's social standing and position is often associated with relational obligations (*Renqing*) as well as with status power (*Mianzi*) (Barnes et al., 2010). Therefore, understanding how consumers in a wide variety of countries perceive the damaging of a luxury brand's face would be relevant in the formation of the concept of Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness, especially in the luxury market, where Chinese consumers occupy a dominant position. Also, our research used only the perceived economic capital held by consumers to assess the symbolic capital of the perpetrators of impoliteness practices. It would be interesting to deepen our understanding of the *Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness* concept by varying the social and cultural components of the symbolic capital held by consumers in our empirical field of investigation.

Moreover, previous research shows that the “*risk of loss of face*” is also impacted by the degree or the ranking of the deviant act of intrusion that may threaten the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Furthermore, the ranking of the deviant purchasing act of intrusion that may threaten the need for prestige recognition (*positive face*) or the territory preservation (*negative face*) of the brand may depend on the position of the brand on “*the utilitarian-luxury continuum*” according to Berthon et al. (2009). This means that the highest “*ranking of intrusion*” refers to a high-end luxury brand whereas the lowest ranking would correspond to a utilitarian brand. Therefore, future research could study impoliteness dynamics in other environments where the normative behavior framework (“*ranking of*

*intrusion*”) is more (yachts, luxury hotels, or restaurants) or less (department stores or shopping malls) foregrounded. Also, impoliteness dynamics could be explored in stores belonging to brands with higher or lower luxury positioning. In the same vein, our research could be extended by studying impoliteness in contexts where the relative power of the brand and its proximity to consumers is of a higher or lower degree.

Finally, this study relies on what our respondents told us during their interviews. It would be useful, however, to also observe how the same respondents behaved in luxury stores, and it would be interesting to complete this study using ethnographic methods, for example, with a field observation in the luxury stores, particularly for a more in-depth investigation of multimodal impoliteness. Furthermore, it would be very helpful to analyze impoliteness behaviors using comments gathered from social media platforms such as brand and store-specific Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, or Weibo accounts in order to better analyze the types of responses made by the brands’ representatives. Finally, because our study was conducted before the pandemic, it would probably enrich our understanding of impoliteness behaviors if we were able to interview the same consumers and sales experts using a longitudinal method. This would enable us to better understand the two different manifestations of impoliteness (discursive and gestural) in a context where inter-individual distances are more constrained than before the health crisis.

# Appendix

## Table 5: Impoliteness practices in luxury stores

Impoliteness Practices in luxury shops	Meaning of impoliteness	Impoliteness's addressees	Impoliteness modalities	Type of consumers				
<b>“Being Crude“</b>	Collectively eradicate the distance from the brand and create their own rules	<i>They talk very loud, they're people who come by bunches and only one person would buy. The others take advantage while only one is buying (...) They take beverages, champagne, they make themselves comfortable in the space. The other day, a woman (from the group) was looking for something while all the others opened their laptops, working and searching everywhere in the store for plugs. When you are a real client, it's degrading to see that. A luxury brand, with someone who opens up their laptop in a luxury store, it can't be, it's not a cyber café here! I don't want to go to that place anymore. (Consumer Camilla).</i>	Substantive staging (the interior of the store, the furniture, the consumers present, the internal rules, the products)	<i>I see my colleagues, they expect the consumer to know how to behave, that means never touching the products, (...) We don't like when he touches the products, we don't like that he comes to interrupt conversations while we are already explaining something to another client, and that he takes products to try them on by himself for example... politeness for us is firstly being able to be patient when you had the luck not to wait in line (...) They don't want to pay with the methods we ask, but we have to respect the rules in a strict way and they try not to respect them and to convince us not to apply them. It's a real problem. They would even get close to consumers in store and ask them to pay for them (instead of them) with their credit card! (...) (Store advisor Taglio).</i>	Mainly gestural, explicit, low, negative impoliteness	<i>They immediatly overtake the place, they don't talk to us, especially if you are a woman, they snap their fingers and yale at us like in a café, they want to show to the others (...) but they are not the worst ones. (Carole, Training manager).</i>	Occasional and low economic capital perceived	<i>“Dressed like a soccer player“ (Thibault); “...they come from the suburbs“ (Carole); “They come by bunches...“ (Camilla)</i>
<b>“Interfering“</b>	Force privacy of luxury without consequences	<i>You have men and women who talk about their mistresses</i>	Communicative staging (criticizing the brand's choice in front of salespeople)	<i>Luxury has democratized itself, consumers now enter my store and order: “serve me at once”, they make you feel inferior, by using a harsh tone, by showing impatience right away (...) me, I say to myself: how come this people are not at Galeries Lafayette?(...) actually for this type of client, we don't want to deal with them at all. (Training manager Carole).</i>	Verbal, explicit/implicit, negative, meddium impoliteness	<i>They come to us and say loud: “At your</i>	Regular, familiar to the brand and low economic capital perceived	<i>“When I go there, I never do the line “ (Consumer Isabelle), “how come those people (consumers) are not at Galeries Lafayette? (rather than in my store)” (Training manager Carole).</i>
<b>“Mastering“</b>	Refuse the dominant position of the brand, enslave the brand's representatives to invert domination	<i>Some consumers entered the store, they were (already) pi</i>	Communicative staging (ordering about of salespeople)	<i>I say I want to try everything (in the store), other stuff, the biggest possible rings, I want to be a princess... My friends, they are stunned. I went there twice with my friends, they were totally hallured to see me ordering like a princess, but I love it so much. Of course, I did not buy anything, but the place was a mess when we left“ (Consumer Constance); “I woke up in the morning (...). I went directly avenue Montaigne (...) when I saw the first saleswoman, I didn't like her face so I said “no I want somebody else to serve me. Why? I didn't like her!“ (Consumer Marie-Louise)</i>	Mainly verbal, explicit/implicit, positive/negative, meddium impoliteness	<i>She (a consumer) doesn't speak well, she doesn't say hello and she asks, “Orange juice !”, no please, a very strict tone. (I asked her) if she wishes to see this product. (...) She doesn't listen to you at all. (Client service manager Ting).</i>	Occasional and not familiar to the brand and high economic capital perceived	<i>“They enter our store and immediatly say to us: “I want the most expensive stuff in the store“ (sales advisor Maria); “What is the job that makes this guy capable to burn 5000 euros for a belt that is not even more qualitative than an other one“ (manager Franck); “They are 30 to 40 years old, dressed up like americans and want to be treated like the Prince of Bel Air“</i>
<b>“Blaspheming“</b>	Question on the very legitimacy of the luxury brand	<i>The other day, I went to the C. store at Place Vendôme, I</i>	Substantive and communicative staging (damaging the brand's products ignoring salespeople's warnings)	<i>(...) they even denigrate, they question the quality of the products. I already had a conversation with clients who scratched the product in front of me in order to tell me that the veal leather was not resistant enough. Of course, I told her that veal leather is the most delicate of existing leathers, but she went on scratching it with her nails in front of me. I begged her: “Please stop it!“ (...) (Store advisor Taglio).</i>	Mainly verbal/gestural, explicit, positive, High impoliteness	<i>They won't hesitate to take you by the h</i>	Regular and high economic capital perceived	<i>“Those clients (...) they follow the trends,... want to look like us, opened mindset like countries“ (sales advisor Abdessamad); “We have some regular clients which are really famous, we always ask them if they want some privacy (...) but most of the time, they like to remain in the center of the store because they need to do their show (...) it also entertains the other clients!“ (sales manager Franck); “This Chinese client, he is a very important person in his country, (...) when he enters, I brief everyone to welcome him with a “good morning, M. Ting“ (Sales advisor Wenqing)</i>

**Table 6: Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness coping strategies in luxury stores**

Impoliteness practice	Relative Power of the Brand on the consumer	Social Distance from the Brand	Level of Consumer Impoliteness Behavior	Polarity of Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness	Type of Brand Impoliteness coping strategies	Characteristics of Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness coping strategies	Example of quotes
Blaspheming	Low	Low	High	Positive	Submitting	Even though the <i>Blaspheming</i> practice attacks the very legitimacy of the brand, while being humiliating for the salesteam, the brand has to submit to aggression from over-wealthy and familiar-to-the brand perpetrators' and remain calm. In this situation, the salespeople might be obliged to give way and physically accept the impolite demands. In order to restore the balance, they could invite the clients to visit the brand's factories or to encounter its best craftsmen at work.	<i>I already had a salesman who was a bit exasperated because a consumer ordered him: "polish my shoes" without anything else, without saying "please", without anything once he was settled in. In this case, we have a salesman who is very mad and feels humiliated. He does it anyway, we need to try to understand (the client). (Store manager Matthias)</i>
Mastering	Low	High	Meddium	Positive	Overplaying politeness	Teaching salespeople how to adopt the <i>Overplaying</i> strategy is another potential solution, highlighting the positive face of the luxury brand when it is damaged by over-wealthy and occasional consumers. In order to respond to the Mastering and slave approach, salespeople could act like old-fashion servants, exaggerating the volume of their voices in their interaction, employing a sophisticated vocabulary (which testifies to the high manufacturing expertise of the brand), accentuating the sales ritual (increase the number of steps, the duration of the ceremony) and the corresponding manners (large and exaggerated gestures while presenting a product).	<i>For this type of client, they are entrepreneurs, very wealthy, (...) they take the products by themselves and don't wait for us to bring them to them (...) when they have a high education, they expect a very French customer experience, with a salesman who speaks English very well, who embodies France, the luxury domain. In the sales ceremonial ritual, they love their (salespeople's) way of talking in English with a French accent, their manner of elevating the tone to show they (consumers) are so important, very rich. We even have salesmen who kneel before the consumer to present him the jewel, he takes the client's hand, he kisses it, he stays very close on the same level of the client, he presents the products by staying on his knee (...) other people look on, amazed! (Store manager Lila)</i>
				Negative	Applying minimum standard procedure	When impolite and occasional consumers, who often hold high symbolic capital, treat salespeople as if they were stupid, as servants at their entire disposal, there is no possible misinterpretation. Nevertheless, salespeople could accept this kind of humiliation while focusing on the efficiency of the sales transaction. They would remain at the consumer's service, remaining physically at their side during their visit.	<i>There are also clients who have another conception of the sales advisor. They say it's a job for stupid people, whereas they are themselves super important. We have to be on the side, (...) they were in their bubble and didn't want me to interfere, ...we shouldn't interact with them. We are just here as a support. We stay on the side and talk only if they need us, we try to satisfy only their needs, we have to stay away. We have to show him we are here on the side, talk when he yells and calls for us, we are considered as someone who brings things. Even though our objective is to sell something that will suit him (it doesn't give a positive image of the brand otherwise) but in this case, we can't interfere that much. (Sales advisor Barbara)</i>
Interfering	High	Low	Meddium	Negative	Educating	When impolite comments are engaged in by regular and low symbolic capital consumers through <i>Interfering</i> practices, they implicitly damage the negative face of the brand. Therefore, the salesperson might take on the role of a teacher, having evaluated their commercial potential. By offering guidance in stores located in less touristic zones, they may show the consumer the right way to behave in order to be integrated into the luxury consumer community.	<i>We are here to give a positive message but when I hear on the floor: "there are only Chinese people here", I take the consumer by the hand and take him around the store pointing out each salesperson to him: you see her, she's from the Philippines, this other salesperson is Korean, etc. I try to bring some education here, I stay at his aggressive level, (...) people feel a little bit stupid if they learn something, it's part of my mission to bring back the Church at the center of village life. (Store director Sophie)</i>
					Staying still	When occasional and less wealthy consumers explicitly cross the store's or brand's boundaries by, for example, asking to check a brand's product certificate, while endangering the brand's authenticity, salespeople might stand firm in refusing their demands. Thanks to the official rules of the brand, salespeople know perfectly well that they have the right not to bend to consumers' negative impolite requests.	<i>(...) At C.'s, each store ('maison') is free to stamp or not products' certificates. The consumer insults me but I stayed with an olympian calm, he kept insulting me, I didn't move at all, these are the rules of the 'house.' (Store advisor Nolwenn)</i>

Impoliteness practice	Relative Power of the Brand on the consumer	Social Distance from the Brand	Level of Consumer Impoliteness Behavior	Polarity of Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness	Type of Brand Impoliteness coping strategies	Characteristics of Consumer-to-Brand Impoliteness coping strategies	Example of quotes
Being Crude	High	High	Low	Negative	Calling for Dominant Intervention	Whenever the brand is negatively damaged because low symbolic capital consumers cross the line ( <i>Being Crude</i> or <i>Erasing the Distance</i> practices), the staff may call the manager, the store director, or even someone from headquarters. The intervention of a dominant third party allows the situation to be dealt with and may calm the client down by letting them deal with a brand representative who possesses a superior position in the company. By taking back control in favor of the luxury brand, the situation goes back to normal.	<i>Sometimes, we have clients who ask for or do something that is not possible. After that, the weight of the hierarchy in such out of control situations that occur when a client shouts, or expresses himself with rudeness, is virulent. Sometimes calling a manager, sometimes even the director of the store can make him calm down. I think the hierarchical weight makes that the highest ranked person of the store, when she says no, there is no more issue for him, he has no other solutions but to approve and accept the final solution. (...) it's never appreciated to see a consumer who is angry, it doesn't give a good image, nor good advertisement for the brand. But sometimes unfortunately, we can't do more than that. (Sales advisor Victoire)</i>
					Snubbing	Some consumers with low symbolic capital may perform negative impoliteness. Because they use body language that is not appropriate to luxury stores (gesturing with the thumb, no direct eye contact with salespeople, refusal to participate in the luxury shopping experience, disrespecting the presentation of products and the ceremonial ritual of a sale), salespeople might consider that they will be unable to create a relationship with them in order to transform them into loyal and respectful consumers of the brand. Therefore, they filter them out at first sight and abandon them in the short term because they feel it is useless to spend time on them.	<i>They hardly talk to you, we have to stay at his level, it's useless to discuss with him, very often we don't relate with him, he talks (about the product) behind his phone (...) he agrees or doesn't, we use sign language with him, he says yes or no with the thumb, they know what they want thanks to their social media network, they come with a picture (of the product), they are not receptive to any attention (...) these ones, they do not come for the experience (...) we don't have much choice, I know that some salespeople filter the clients when they come in. (Client advisor Gabriel)</i>
					Excluding	The brand's decision to give access to any and all consumers via the democratization of its offer can lead to frequent negative impolite behavior in stores and disturbs the traditional community of luxury while not being endorsed by salespeople. These "Crude" individuals are assessed as soon as they enter the store because they do not exhibit the appropriate politeness habits toward the sales force and the store environment. In this case, salespeople may physically (call security guards) or metaphorically (isolate them in specific dedicated rooms) throw them out of the luxury store and their community.	<i>(...) This type of client, it's our nightmare (...) a type of consumer we really disliked, with a behavior like commuters' one, we have to adapt ourselves immediatly, there are a lot of chillings between consumers and salespeople (...) I had to be very strict, to show no sign of weakness, they come with all the clan, (...) they touch everything and take the control of the store, security guards, well they are in panic. They (consumers) don't have any politeness, it's a very specific consumer's behavior, we have to pay attention to the situation because it can degenerate very fast (...) we need support... It often occurs to me to help the other salespeople and tell this type of people to stay calm, (...) I often refuse to sell products to this kind of clients because of this kind of behavior occurring in my store. (...) when it occurs to me, I go straight to the back office in order to prevent others from showing that we have got champagne. (Store advisor, Taglio)</i>

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