

In-person Communication Styles and Consumer Advocacy

- Centered on the Chinese Luxury Market -

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Abstract

China is one of the largest markets for high-end items. Consumers in China prefer to make purchases in stores after interacting with salespeople. However, the impact of communication style on customer behavior has received little research attention in terms of how salespeople build rapport and promote consumer advocacy. Two research questions were proposed accordingly. Which aspects of luxury salespeople's communication style (e.g., task orientation, interaction orientation, and self-orientation) affect the relationship between consumers and brands in China? Does rapport-building generate Chinese consumer advocacy? A questionnaire survey with 319 consumers who had visited luxury stores was conducted. Data was analyzed using a structural equation model. The findings show that when salespeople adopt an interactive communication style with consumers, it means they succeed in building rapport and influencing consumers' advocacy. Self-oriented salespeople can also positively influence customer advocacy by relational rapport-building with consumers. It was suggested that luxury managers should further improve their salespeople's communication perceptions and skills, use targeted communication strategies for various consumer types, and encourage customers to act as "brand ambassadors". The study findings contributed to the body of the literature in that it investigated how behavior of salespeople in luxury stores affected ordinary consumers and filled knowledge gaps in the research on Chinese luxury retail service.

Key words : communication style, rapport-building, consumer advocacy, luxury brand, Chinese market

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I . Introduction

China accounts for more than a third of the global luxury consumer market (Ip, 2021). Due to COVID-19 travel limitations and increasing Hainan duty-free zone spending caps, it was estimated that up to 98% of China's luxury sales were made via domestic retail in 2021 (Ma, 2022). The essential components of China's new definition of luxury include experience, innovation, personalization, and cultural sensitivity; these components change as society changes and per capita income rises (Daxue Consulting China, 2022). Though many luxury companies provide official online buying options, Chinese consumers still prefer making in-person purchases (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Consumers who prefer offline sales report that they enjoy the ability to touch items and sense atmospheres – the successful Fendi and Mr. Doodle cross-brand mini-cafes, for example, provided visual stimulation to customers as well as taste and smell sensations, helping simulating purchase behavior (Tour De Force Asia, 2020). Personalized one-to-one service markedly improves service efficiency and enhances customer “stickiness”. Up to 75% of luxury consumers say that they keep in daily communication with the salesperson, establishing a “friendly” relationship and creating the conditions for successful transactions (Oliver Wyman, 2021). Salespeople and consumers who are friendly with each other are more likely to have successful transactions. Luxury managers should understand the communication styles of their sales force and determine the key factors that influence consumer behavior.

Luxury consumers have stricter expectations for the services provided in purchasing high-priced goods than standard goods (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). If a consumer receives a service experience that is consistent

with or higher than his or her expectations, it may strengthen their desire to share the experience with others. To better understand this phenomenon, the present study focuses on salespeople's communication and service styles as they affect consumer experiences and behavior. We evaluate the offline luxury store experience by examining the relationship between salesperson communication style and consumer support behavior.

To identify the factors that influence consumers to become advocates for a brand, researchers have explored the relationships that consumers form with salespeople. Customer's commitment to certain service providers drives brand loyalty (Fullerton, 2003). Salesperson-customer communication, as a part of customer commitment, is known to influence purchase intentions but it remains unclear how it may influence brand advocacy. A study on luxury jewelry stores showed that various attributes of service quality positively impact customer satisfaction, which may encourage brand advocacy and repurchase intentions (Daultani et al., 2021). In addition, customer preferences change with geographical location and positive word-of-mouth (Daultani et al., 2021). By 2025, mainland China is anticipated to overtake the United States as the world's largest market for luxury goods (Daxue Consulting China, 2022). Research on Chinese luxury consumers tends to emphasize the factors that affect consumer advocate behavior. Luxury managers should also consider, however, whether targeted communication training for salespeople can encourage customers to exercise brand loyalty and consumer advocacy via effective rapport-building.

The purpose of this study is to understand the effects of salespeople's communication styles and rapport-building behavior on brand advocacy. We also examine the

role of rapport-building as a mediating variable in communication styles and consumer advocacy. We ask two key questions: Which aspects of the luxury salesperson's communication style (task orientation, interactive orientation, and self-orientation) affect the relationship between consumers and brands in China? Does rapport-building generate consumer advocacy for luxury brands?

These findings may provide a new approach for luxury marketers to attract positive word-of-mouth from consumers, encouraging consumers to organically become ambassadors for the brand and thus expanding the luxury market in China.

II. Literature review

1. Communication style

Communication is defined as the process through which a person expresses understanding, interprets, or gains a literal meaning through verbal and interactive techniques (Norton, 1978). The outcomes of personal communication styles and perceptual processes in interpersonal relationships are the subjects of this study. In the retail environment, "communication style" is defined by dual parties, salespeople and customers, involved in a transaction communication based on the forms, rituals, and mannerisms that they utilize (Sheth, 1976). The relevant constructs are task-oriented, interaction-oriented, and self-oriented. These three constructs explain the behavioral tendencies of salespeople involved in the process of emotional exchange with customers and the variance in outcomes among different sellers (Sheth, 1976).

Williams and Spiro(1985) further explained these

three constructive concepts as follows. A task-oriented style is goal-oriented, and a salesperson with a clear task orientation saves time, money, and effort by efficiently serving their clients. For them, the priority is to complete a transaction or customer reception task. The interaction-oriented style, on the other hand, centers on humanization and socializing with others, even to the exclusion of sales goals. The self-oriented style centers on the seller's own interests, and includes conversation but with less empathy than the interaction-oriented style – the primary goal is to simply make sales (Williams & Spiro, 1985). Research on the communication between sales personnel and customers in the retail industry is often extended to research on brand effectiveness (Carnevale et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2022). Therefore, communication was used as an independent variable in the present study.

The quality of customer-related information is very important in terms of retail decisions. Seller-buyer communication has become a unique touch point (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2019), especially for Chinese luxury consumers who prefer certain brands. This is because they make purchase decisions through experiences, such as conversations with salespeople and product demonstrations (Scharwey & Fassnacht, 2017). We take the perspective of Chinese consumers in this study to examine salespeople's communication styles.

2. Rapport-building

In a specific environment, rapport-building has a variety of meanings. The term "rapport-building" refers to communication actions that promote societal concordance (Ädel, 2011). There are two components involved in the development of convergent relationships: Enjoyable

interactions (e.g., a sense of friendliness) and personal connections (e.g., close identification with the other, mutual caring). Heintzman et al. (1993) found that rapport-building among supervisors and employees is characterized by pleasant and interesting exchanges and personal connections such as close identifications with others and mutual caring. Rapport-building was further categorized by Gremler and Gwinner (2008) into five subdimensions: 1) uncommonly attentive behavior (e.g., atypical actions, personal recognition, and intense personal interest), 2) common grounding behavior (e.g., identifying mutual interests, finding other similarities), 3) courteous behavior (e.g., unexpected honesty, civility, and empathy), 4) connecting behavior (e.g., using humor, pleasant conversation), and 5) information-sharing behavior (e.g., giving advice, imparting knowledge, and asking questions to understand others' needs). The first four subdimensions, excluding information-sharing, are relevant to the mutual relationships between salespeople and customers. Salespeople that engage in information-sharing typically offer guidance or collect information by probing the customer's needs. Understanding the customer's unique situation is the priority, not developing an emotional connection (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). Therefore, to better understand the variations in developing rapport, we define two categories for the purposes of this study: Relational rapport-building and informational rapport-building.

3. Consumer advocacy

Consumer advocacy (as in consumers acting as advocates) refers to customers who take the initiative to communicate positively with others about a brand (Chelminski & Coulter, 2011). This aids the company in maintaining a positive public image and avoiding

negative associations with their brand (Kang, 2018). Consumer advocacy varies in different industries. Research contrasting veterinarian care with hair salons, for example, demonstrated significant differences in consumer advocacy (Harrison-Walker, 2001). This article explores consumer (brand) advocacy in the Chinese luxury market.

4. Impact of communication style on rapport-building outcomes

Communication style plays a practical role in the relationship between salespeople and customers, such as the effective or ineffective transmission of information and feelings. This not only affects individuals themselves but also affects the relationships between individuals (de Vries et al., 2013). Salespeople who regard sales behavior as a task will communicate with customers actively; their purpose is to ensure positive mutual contact based on consumers' own interests and confidence levels (Kim et al., 2011; Lau & Huang, 1999). Task-oriented salespeople communicate with consumers for the purposes of creating sales (Kusumasondjaja, 2018). Information exchange is one of the most important elements of a buying-selling partnership. Task-oriented salespeople may maintain relationships with consumers through information exchange and rapport-building; when successful, this allows the brand to gain competitive advantages. We hypothesize:

H1. Task orientation has a positive effect on relational rapport-building.

H2. Task orientation has a positive effect on informational rapport-building.

Empathy is an employee skill that markedly affects

the customer experience (Janelle, 2021). Empathy, as one of the characteristics of the interactive orientation, can allow salespeople to improve the customer experience, strengthen consumer identification, and uphold long-lasting, valuable customer relationships (Tung et al., 2014; Williams & Spiro, 1985). Salespeople with the interactive orientation communication style identify with and deeply understand their customers; this understanding usually comes from mutual information-sharing between buyers and sellers. When the relationship reaches a certain stage, the exchange of information further encourages the other person to strengthen the relationship (Mangus et al., 2020). We hypothesize:

H3. Interactive orientation has a positive effect on relational rapport-building.

H4. Interactive orientation has a positive effect on informational rapport-building.

Self-oriented salespeople are more concerned with their own needs than those of others (Williams & Spiro, 1985). In the field of luxury retail, salespeople tend to have high social status (referent power) (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013). As a result, they may project indifference or arrogance, causing negative emotions among consumers (Liu et al., 2021). Negative emotions affect sales interactions and information-sharing in different ways (Johnson et al., 2021). When there is less interaction and less information shared among parties, it becomes much more difficult to form relationships. We hypothesize:

H5. Self-orientation has a negative effect on relational rapport-building.

H6. Self-orientation has a negative effect on informational rapport-building.

5. Effects of rapport-building on consumer advocacy

Successful word-of-mouth can result from positive service interactions between salespeople and consumers (Grenler et al., 2001). Particularly in the luxury retail market, rapport between customers and salespeople can improve the experiential quality with premium consumer brands and increase brand loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2014). Pleasant emotions experienced while shopping result in positive perceptions of the brand (Tsai, 2005). Consumers that have had good experiences are more likely than others to tell other consumers about their favorite brands (Kang, 2018). If mutual identity and shared values are formed, a relationship can emerge between the seller and buyer, boosting customer loyalty and brand advocacy while persuading consumers to pay more for a given product or service (Fullerton, 2003). Additionally, continuing relationships can raise customer satisfaction and increase their awareness of brand advocacy (Song et al., 2020). We hypothesize:

H7. Relational rapport-building has a positive effect on consumer advocacy.

H8. Informational rapport-building has a positive effect on consumer advocacy.

The conceptual model of the present research and research hypothesis were illustrated in <Figure 1>

III. Methodology

1. Measurement

To conduct an empirical test of the proposed

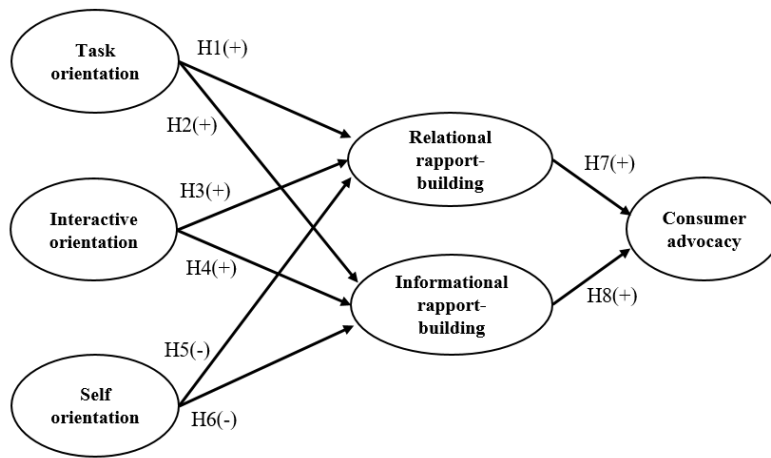


Figure 1. Conceptual model of present research.

theoretical constructs, multiple items were referenced from existing literature and measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Communication style was measured with eight items under three dimensions adapted from Williams and Spiro(1985), whose research is mainly aimed at the communication between salespeople and customers in the retail industry and is widely used in brand-related research (Carnevale et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2022). Rapport-building was measured with six items under two dimensions adapted from Gremler and Gwinner (2008), whose work on rapport-building is often used in luxury retail studies (Kim & Baker, 2022). Consumer advocacy was measured with three items adapted from Chelminski and Coulter (2011), who provided insights on brand management and services.

Ten graduate students majoring in retailing and 16 graduate students with various majors, both male and female, were the participants in our pre-test. We tested the validity and reliability of the questionnaire and adjusted the translation and ideation of the questions as necessary.

2. Data collection

The questionnaire was distributed via an online survey company called Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn) in China from February 8-11, 2022. Wenjunxing is a widely used questionnaire tool in China (Zhang et al., 2020) which uses random sampling for data collection. The target population was those expressing preference for luxury brands in ‘The white paper on luxury brand report in 2021 from Gorgeous Think Tank and Weibo’. Survey participants were initially required to answer the following questions:

“Have you ever been to any of the following luxury brand stores?”

There were 319 valid questionnaires gathered ($n = 319$) after eliminating 590 people who replied “No” to the first question. The sample is 49.53% ($n = 158$) female and 50.47% ($n = 161$) male (Table 1). The majority of consumers who opt to browse luxury items offline are middle-aged, according to the descriptive statistical findings (Table 1). The age of consumers with experience in luxury stores is primarily spread between 30 and 40 years old, accounting for 49.84%. It is possible that

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($n = 319$).

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	161	50.47
Female	158	49.53
Age		
Under 24 years	15	4.7
25-29 years	99	31.03
30-40 years	159	49.84
40 years and above	46	14.42
Income		
¥0-¥3000	0	0
¥3001-¥5000	7	2.19
¥5001-¥8000	70	21.94
¥8001-¥12000	88	27.59
¥12000 and above	154	48.28
Education		
Secondary/high school	45	14.11
Bachelor's degree	240	75.24
Undergraduate student	3	0.94
Master's degree	25	7.84
Graduate student	2	0.63
Doctor's degree	2	0.63
Ph.D. student	2	0.63
Occupation		
Employees	227	71.16
Staff and workers of government agencies/institutions	37	11.6
Freelance	36	11.29
Student	4	1.25
Other	15	4.7

those with bachelor's degrees shopping for luxury products in stores may seem more widespread because bachelor's degree holders make up the majority of the survey respondents (75.24%), followed by secondary or high school and Master's degree holders. In terms of monthly spending, consumers with an average monthly income of more than 5,000CNY make up the majority of those who browse luxury goods in offline stores, accounting for 97.81% of all consumers. Nearly half

reported an average monthly income of more than 12,000CNY, indicating that the majority of those who shop luxury brands have relatively high incomes. Further, 127 of the 154 respondents reported both browsing and purchasing goods in luxury stores. This demonstrates that our sample is a primary group of consumers at luxury establishments rather than simply browsers.

IV. Results

1. Assessment of measurement model

We tested for construct reliability and convergent validity using partial least squares-structural equation model (PLS_SEM) methods. As shown in <Table 2>, the Cronbach's α and construct reliability (CR) are both over 0.7. Additionally, outer loading relevance values all exceed 0.7 and all average variance extractions

(AVE) are higher than 0.5. Thus, our results have good reliability and convergent validity.

2. Structural model

PLS_SEM is an effective means of testing an effective structural equation model, as it can effectively reveal the correlation between variables as well as efficiently predicting variables (Hair et al., 2020). <Figure 2> shows the predictive power values of the

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity.

Constructs	Outer loadings	CR	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
Task orientation		0.869	0.703	0.769
I think that SA wanted to do the job well.	0.848			
I think that SA genuinely enjoyed helping me.	0.905			
Interactive orientation		0.845	0.725	0.645
I think it was easy to talk with SA.	0.811			
I think that SA likes to help customers.	0.768			
I think that SA was friendly.	0.830			
Self orientation		0.838	0.788	0.637
I think that SA seemed more interested in himself than in me.	0.715			
I think that SA was more interested in what he had to say than in what I had to say.	0.707			
I think that SA talked about his own personal difficulties.	0.949			
Relational rapport-building		0.812	0.657	0.591
I think that SA understands my pain and will comfort me.	0.815			
SA remembers my name and my life story when serving me.	0.712			
When the SA is serving me, it's about me not the sale.	0.776			
Informational rapport-building		0.833	0.700	0.624
I think that SA described and introduced the product in detail and gave me advice on how to buy it.	0.793			
I think that SA knows a lot about the product or service and has professional knowledge.	0.752			
I think that SA is trying to understand my needs and really listens to my answers.	0.823			
Consumer advocacy		0.855	0.747	0.663
I will share my experience with this luxury brand and assist other people towards a similar experience.	0.776			
It makes me feel good to tell others about this luxury brand service.	0.846			
I suggest this luxury brand to others.	0.820			

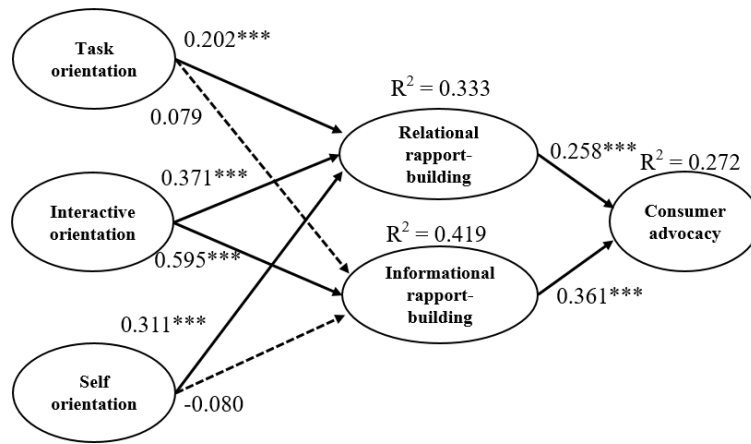


Figure 2. The results of the main effects.

Table 3. Hypotheses testing results.

Hypothesis	Coefficients	<i>t</i> Statistics	<i>p</i> values	Result
H1: TO → RR	0.202**	3.362	.001	Supported
H2: TO → IR	0.079	0.964	.335	Not supported
H3: IO → RR	0.371***	6.319	.000	Supported
H4: IO → IR	0.595***	6.617	.000	Supported
H5: SO → RR	0.311***	5.950	.000	Not supported
H6: SO → IR	-0.080	1.754	.080	Not supported
H7: RR → CA	0.258***	5.396	.000	Supported
H8: IR → CA	0.361***	4.907	.000	Supported

Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

TO, Task Orientation; IO, interactive orientation; SO, self-orientation; RR, relational orientation; IR, informational orientation; CA, consumer advocacy

R2 model. Each architecture's R2 value is higher than the minimum criterion of 0.25. Additionally, the Q values are between 0.177 and 0.249. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values range from 1.004 to 1.446, which is under the cut-off value of 5, confirming the absence of multicollinearity.

We next ran SmartPLS 3.3.7 software's bootstrapping procedure with 1,000 bootstrap samples using 95% bias-corrected and accelerated bootstraps to examine the model. <Table 3> shows the results. The communication style task orientation (H1: $\beta = 0.202$, $p < .001$), interactive

orientation (H3: $\beta = .371$, $p < .001$), and self-orientation (H5: $\beta = 0.311$, $p < .001$) all have positive effects on relational rapport-building. The interactive orientation (H4: $\beta = 0.595$, $p < .001$) has a positive effect on informational rapport-building. Relational rapport-building (H7: $\beta = 0.258$, $p < .001$) and informational rapport-building (H8: $\beta = 0.361$, $p < .001$) both have positive effects on consumer advocacy. However, both the task orientation (H2: $\beta = 0.079$, $p = .335$) and self-orientation (H6: $\beta = -0.080$, $p = .080$) were rejected for informational rapport-building.

Table 4. Mediation results.

Hypothesis	Coefficients	<i>t</i> Statistics	<i>p</i> values	Result
TO → RR → CA	0.052**	2.726	.007	Supported
IO → RR → CA	0.096***	3.778	.000	Supported
SO → RR → CA	0.080***	3.873	.000	Supported
IO → IR → CA	0.215***	5.709	.000	Supported

Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

3. Testing of mediation hypothesis

We also investigated the potential mediating relationship of rapport-building in communication style and consumer advocacy. Task-oriented and self-oriented communication styles appear to have no influence on informational rapport-building, so we examined the relationship between the remaining variables.

<Table 4> shows the results of the mediation effects of rapport-building. When rapport-building is an intermediary between orientation variables and consumer advocacy, task ($\beta = 0.052$, $p < .01$), interaction ($\beta = 0.096$, $p < .001$), and self ($\beta = 0.080$, $p < .001$) orientations have positive impacts on consumer advocacy. When informational rapport-building is the mediated variable, the interactive orientation ($\beta = 0.215$, $p < .001$) has a positive effect on consumer advocacy.

sampling method was used to investigate the relationship between luxury salespersons and consumers in China. We analyzed the relationships between the variables as shown above.

We find that communication styles can positively impact relational rapport-building. The interactive (mutual) orientation has a greater impact than the task orientation or self-orientation. The luxury industry provides customers with personalized, one-to-one services which encourage consumers' to interact with salespeople and brands (Yao et al., 2022). Per the definition of relational rapport-building, consumers seek to increase their connectedness through sharing similar interests and special concerns with salespeople (Williams & Spiro, 1985). The increased willingness of consumers to interact means that salespeople can swiftly establish friendly relations with them.

Surprisingly, self-orientation does not support rapport-building with consumers through information-sharing, but can facilitate contact with consumers through relevance. This result does not support H5 and H6. In the luxury retail context, salespeople tend to have strong professional knowledge and high social status (referent power) (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013). Consumers with lower social status are more inclined to actively interact with sellers in the process of acquiring goods and services (Menon & Bansal, 2007). Customers who do not frequently purchase luxury products may have a relative lack of professional understanding regarding

V. Discussion

In this work, we examined three communication style dimensions and two rapport-building dimensions as factors affecting consumer advocacy. We also explored whether rapport-building acts as a mediator in the relationship between communication style and consumer advocacy. Considering that consumers who buy luxury goods are not necessarily financially wealthy, a random

such goods, making them more likely to defer to salespeople and more inclined to seek their advice as purchasing guides – even if they perceive said salespeople as arrogant or cold. Overall, luxury consumers pursue a connection with a brand, and the social status they may acquire by obtaining that brand’s products, rather than the person selling them (Liu et al., 2021).

Both relational rapport-building and informational rapport-building appear to positively affect consumer advocacy. Emotion is inextricably linked to purchasing behavior (Kemp et al., 2018). When customers’ emotions are connected to a brand, they become more likely to advocate for that brand compared to experiences where they are simply satisfied with a purchase (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Kang, 2018; Shimul & Phau, 2018). Informational rapport-building involves building connections as salespeople share information and accept feedback from consumers (Grenler & Gwinner, 2008). It is considered a voluntary behavior that adds value to the brand (Delpechitre et al., 2018). Luxury salespeople participate in this type of rapport-building by providing consumers with real-time product information, store discounts, gift cards, and other benefits. This may build sufficient trust to encourage the consumer to provide voluntary feedback or advertise brand-related events and discounts to others.

All three communication orientations appear to positively influence consumer advocacy through relational rapport-building. The interactive orientation has the greatest impact on consumer advocacy ($\beta = 0.096, p < .001$) and further, only the interactive orientation through informational rapport-building ($\beta = 0.215, p < .001$) exerts a positive effect on consumer advocacy. Salespeople who are interaction-oriented are more sympathetic, service-focused, and friendship-focused than they are sales-focused (Williams & Spiro, 1985). A salesperson who establishes a “helpful” relationship with “complete

attention to the customer’s needs” leaves a favorable psychological impression on the customer and is more likely to maintain a long-term relationship with them (Chitwood, 2005). Fostering a close relationship with customers over time increases positive associations with the brand, encourages brand-related information-sharing, and increases the brand’s worth (Coelho et al., 2019). Customers who have positive, friendly experiences with salespeople are more likely to have a stronger connection to the brand, which makes them more likely to take the initiative to promote it.

VI. Conclusion

1. Theoretical implications

We make several contributions to the literature with this work by illuminating aspects of consumer behavior in China’s luxury retail market. First, we specify rapport-building in the luxury retail sector. Surprisingly, most seller-buyer rapport-building studies focus on general retail, such as the pure service industry or automobile markets (Fatima et al., 2019; Jin & Zeng, 2021). The luxury market shows characteristics distinct from the ordinary retail market in regards to not only seller-buyer relationships but also consumers themselves. We analyzed how the communication style of salespeople affects consumer emotion to find that sellers do not need to build positive emotions to build rapport, or even to encourage consumer advocacy. Consumers who have distinct requirements for a brand may not voluntarily advocate for it, even if they like it very much (Shimul & Phau, 2018). We found that the establishment of harmonious relationships can generate luxury brand advocacy even if the customer is not particularly loyal.

2. Managerial implications

Our results may have implications for luxury retailers. First, as communication style is highly correlated with personality (Rewindinar et al., 2020), managers can conduct personality analyses and use the results to train their sales force for the ideal customer-facing communication style. In addition to analyzing consumers' personal characteristics to fit suitable salespeople, luxury retailers in China may hire salespeople based on certain communication styles. Task-oriented and interaction-oriented communication styles positively affect relational rapport-building and consumer advocacy. Retailers can use personality tests (e.g., MBTI) to assess the suitability of their employees. Salespeople also need to consider whether their actions create proactive information-sharing opportunities for consumers. The choice of appropriate sales personnel for communication with consumers with different personalities may be conducive to friendly relations and thus to brand advocacy.

However, task-oriented salespeople do not create harmonious relationships with consumers through information-sharing. This phenomenon may be attributable to the scarcity of luxury products. Product scarcity affects how consumers process information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchasing decisions (Hamilton et al., 2019). For example, certain luxury styles are available only in very limited quantities. If consumers desire such rare luxury goods, they need to have effective communication with sales staff. The salesperson does not need to interact with the customer beyond offering the specific desired goods in order to have a successful transaction in this case. Scarcity also may arouse consumers' awareness of a certain brand and widen the difference between what consumers like most and what

they dislike most (Zhu & Ratner, 2015). This may also be one of the factors that prevents self-oriented salespeople from building rapport through information-sharing.

Finally, social exchange theory suggests that the relationship between two parties is established and maintained via the exchange of mutual benefits over time (Itani et al., 2020). When a salesperson offers information about a product or a competitor to a consumer, the goal is to create a sense of empathic identification. Customers will share helpful information with the salesperson out of reciprocity if they feel "concerned". Luxury retailers can foster trust in their customers by training their salespeople on information beyond the brand that may be valuable, including real-time information about shopping malls and competing retailers.

3. Limitations and future research directions

This study was not without limitations. First, the scale we used is not fully suited to a non-Western audience and there may have been issues with the translations. Though we made adjustments based on the pre-test results, persons from various cultural backgrounds might respond to the scale's questions differently. Future research on the unique services offered in the Chinese market will need to be developed. Chinese culture may affect consumer advocacy through various communication techniques. Second, our data are not sufficiently targeted. To determine changes in consumer behavior brought on by regional differences, future studies should also take the region into account while determining control variables. The various regions in China show significant distinctions. Additionally, we neglected certain aspects that influence consumer behavior including store environment elements, product features, and salespeople's facial expressions, all of which are known to affect

customer purchasing decisions. The number of control variables and mediators could be expanded to account for these factors. The main research topic of this work is also biased toward common consumers like employees and college students, who view luxury items as expensive. Future research can further take into account the decision-making processes and viewpoints of more affluent consumers. Finally, we focused mostly on encounters with luxury retailers in actual stores, so other retail experiences such as pop-up stores could also be given more consideration.

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대인 커뮤니케이션 스타일과 소비자 옹호 - 중국 럭셔리 시장 사례를 중심으로 -

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요 약

중국은 전 세계에서 가장 큰 럭셔리 시장 중 하나이다. 또한, 소비자들은 판매원과의 상호작용을 통한 매장 구매 방식을 선호하는 독특한 판매 문화를 구축하고 있다. 하지만 영업 사원의 의사소통 방식이 소비자 행동에 어떠한 영향을 미치는지 살펴볼 필요성이 있다. 즉, 직원과 소비자와의 관계 구축 방식이나 소비 촉진 전략에 대한 측면이 연구가 거의 진행되지 않았다. 따라서, 본 연구의 목적은 다음과 같다. 먼저 중국 시장에서 럭셔리 브랜드 직원의 의사소통 방식(과업 지향성, 상호작용 지향성, 자기 지향성) 중 어떠한 요소가 소비자 관계 구축과 브랜드 이미지에 영향을 줄 것인가, 라포 형성이 중국 소비자의 옹호를 향상시킬 수 있는 가이다. 럭셔리 매장을 방문한 소비자 319명을 대상으로 설문조사를 실시한 후 구조방정식 모형을 이용하였다. 분석 결과, 직원들이 상호작용 지향성 의사소통 방식을 했을 때, 소비자와의 관계적 라포를 형성할 수 있는 것으로 나타났다. 또한, 자기 지향적인 의사소통 방식은 소비자와의 관계적 라포 형성을 구축함으로써 소비자 옹호에 정적인 영향을 미치는 것으로 나타났다. 이는 럭셔리 직원의 커뮤니케이션 능력을 더욱 향상시켜야 한다는 사실과, 다양한 소비자 유형에 맞는 타겟 커뮤니케이션 전략의 필요성을 의미한다. 즉 럭셔리 직원은 소비자와 커뮤니케이션을 통해 라포를 형성한다면 고객이 주도적으로 적극적인 브랜드 홍보역할을 할 수 있다. 본 연구는 중국 럭셔리 점포 영업사원의 커뮤니케이션 방식에 대한 기초 연구로 이론적 측면과 함께 오프라인 서비스에 대한 실무적 시사점도 제안하였다는 점에서 의의가 있다.

주제어 : 커뮤니케이션 스타일, 라포 형성, 소비자 옹호, 럭셔리 브랜드, 중국 시장