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**Title:** Trying on a role: Mentoring, improvisation and social learning in luxury retailing

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## **TRYING ON A ROLE: MENTORING, IMPROVISATION AND SOCIAL LEARNING IN LUXURY RETAILING**

### **Abstract**

Much work has viewed retail as analogous to theater, creating memorable performances that communicate brand meanings. This article asks how the theatrical metaphor applies to a further role of retail environments: enabling customers' social learning. When products are used in a collective consumption context, customers need to learn how to perform in that context. A micro-sociological study of men's luxury tailoring reveals two ways in which this learning can begin in the store. First 'mentoring scripts' help sales associates to coach the customer, using discursive and experiential learning approaches. Second, staff and customers engage in improvisation practices, termed role switching, status asserting, nurturing, and show rescuing. While deeply theatrical, these behaviors are reminiscent not of traditional staged plays but rather of improvisatory and immersive theater, where customers are not an audience but active – albeit novice – performers. The drama of retail contexts is far more participatory than scholarship has yet acknowledged.

**Keywords:** theater, social practices, scripts, collective consumption, micro-sociology

# TRYING ON A ROLE: MENTORING, IMPROVISATION AND SOCIAL LEARNING IN LUXURY RETAILING

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“A well-tied tie is the first serious step in life.” Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*

Retail venues can be considered as a third place that is neither home nor work and yet has home-like qualities (Kent, 2007, Oldenburg, 1999). As pressure mounts due to retailing moving online, retailers are looking to provide a space for leisure, social interaction, and the creation of memories (Williams & Anderson, 2005) in addition to their primary commercial role. Hence, retailers are redefining themselves as experience stagers, looking to the performing arts to create memorable experiences (Stuart & Tax, 2004; Debenedetti, 2021). They look to craft experiences that connect more powerfully with the dreams of consumers (Chandon, Laurent & Valette-Florence, 2016; Dubois & Paternault, 1995).

The metaphor of retail as theater is accordingly much in evidence in both practice and scholarship. Retail experiences are staged (Stuart & Tax, 2004), directed (Dion & Arnould, 2011) and scripted (Darr & Pinch, 2013). Sales associates perform a role (Goulding & Saren, 2016) for the benefit of customers as audience members or, to some extent at least, as protagonists (Kim, Lloyd & Cervellon, 2016). This performance can communicate brand meanings (Peñaloza, 1998), generate strong emotions such as awe (Dion & Arnould, 2011), and engender identity transformations (Megehee & Spake, 2012).

Retail environments also play a part in customer learning (Nicod, Llosa & Bowen, 2020). Some of the learning that customers need involves individual cognitions and skills, such as how to use a technical product; this learning is particularly likely to be switched to a multichannel alternative (Masri et al., 2021). However, some of the required learning is social in nature (Nicod et al., 2020). Notably, if the product or service being bought is to be used in a collective consumption context—a setting where other customers, and optionally other actors,

are present (Bruce et al., 2019)—customers who are novices in that context will need social learning as to how to behave. Those new to classical music, for example, need to learn how to behave in a concert hall, such as when to clap (Kelleher et al., 2019). Similar social learning challenges may exist in other collective consumption contexts, such as team-based leisure activities, education, fine dining, and multi-player gaming (Bruce et al., 2019). Social learning involves more than coaching: it requires learning by doing through participation in social practices (Wenger, 1998). The question arises whether and how retail settings support such social learning – and how this changes the nature of theater within the retailing space.

In this research, we explore this question by studying a collective consumption context where many customers are novices: luxury men’s tailoring. While for regular customers the required social learning may be minimal, many people’s first experience of this sector is buying clothes for unfamiliar settings such as formal elite weddings or visits to venues such as the UK’s Ascot (a high-society racing event), Glyndebourne (a highly exclusive opera venue) or a Buckingham Palace garden party. The learning required extends beyond what to buy to incorporate when and how to wear clothes and how to behave in them. Using a micro-sociological approach, we analyze the social dynamics occurring between sales associates and customers through observation as well as informal interviews to reveal private interiorities.

We find that salespeople use what we term mentoring scripts that have social learning designed in. We also find that the rich participation involved necessitates the use of a range of improvisatory practices—by sales associates and customers alike—that flexibly enable this social learning. Theatrically, this is closer to improvisatory theater and, in the case of some practices, to immersive theater. We discuss the extensions these make to the limited literature on the use of improvisation in sales and service settings, and suggest propositions to explore the transferability of these findings to other collective consumption contexts.

In order to clarify the research gap, we next briefly summarize the literature on retail as theater, beginning with more traditional theater before turning to the notion of sales associates as improvisatory actors. We then consider how social learning is required in some retail contexts, notably including some luxury products where social identity is part of what is bought, and we discuss how that might suggest more novel theatrical approaches.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Retail as theater**

Since Grove & Fisk's (1992) influential early work, literature applying theatrical metaphors to sales and service settings has bloomed. Two broad strands of research predominate. The first hypothesizes implications for retail management by examining an element of theater, such as a theatrical genre (e.g. realism, epic, surrealism, absurd - Harris, Harris & Baron, 2003) or a specific play (e.g. 'The Cripple of Inishmaan' - Stuart & Tax, 2004). The second strand interprets a case of commercial practice through the lens of theatrical performance (e.g. ESPN Zone Chicago - Sherry Jr et al., 2004). Our research follows this second approach.

Predominantly, though not exclusively, both of these research strands compare retail with a conventional staged performance. A good theatrical production combines the design of the stage with the performance (Stuart & Tax, 2004), creating a compelling sense of an imagined world. Correspondingly, the retail environment is designed to define time, place of action, mood, atmosphere, character, and a visual spectacle of an alternative life (Holt, 1993, p.36). The audience may be distinct from the performance but it is not uninvolved: as in theater, actors on the store floor are connected to their audience through an exchange of "invisible threads of energies" (Romanska, 2015, p.203), designed to evoke specific cognitive, affective and behavioral reactions (Baron & Harris, 2001). Customers become intellectually engaged in the performance (Taylor, 2008), and also experience aesthetic pleasure (Townsend & Sood, 2012). The consumer connects with the brand's world, creating memories and imagining alternative

realities (Fisk & Grove, 1996). Consumers can momentarily become protagonists, enacting psychological archetypes from fairy tales (Mossberg, 2008; Kim et al., 2016).

A commonly discussed implication of this theatrical comparison is that providing scripts to aid sales associates might help with performance effectiveness in the same way that a playwright's script (interpreted by dramaturgs and delivered by actors) is the basis of a theatrical production. A variety of types of scripts have been identified among sales associates and other employees, for example functional vs. dramatic scripts (Harris et al., 2003); cognitive scripts (Abelson, 1981); and material, identity and morality scripts (Darr & Pinch, 2013). These scripts are often flexible templates rather than word-for-word equivalents of a play's script: having an overly structured script may render sales associates' delivery less authentic, and providing latitude to the employee can help them tailor the script to the customer (McCarthy, Pitt & Berthon, 2010), albeit with the danger of slips that disappoint (Williams & Anderson, 2005).

## **2.2 Sales associates as improvisational actors**

Some simple improvisation of appropriate words around a pre-defined conversational template, then, is inherent in applying the concept of scripts to a retail context. Some theater, however, takes the concept of improvisation much further. Harris, Harris & Baron (2001), for example, outline possible implications for marketing practice of radical playwright Brecht's participatory techniques. Brecht encouraged audience involvement through such mechanisms as asking them to comment on the performance as it went along, and asking actors to step out of role and join the conversation before stepping back into the script. Contemporary immersive theater can be more radical still, removing the distinction between stage and hall, and enlisting the guests – no longer 'audience' members – into acting roles as well as shaping the drama (Machon, 2013). If the customers are joining in, extensive improvisation from the actors becomes essential in order to respond to what the customers do and say.

Empirical work exploring correlates of such improvisatory and immersive theater in retail

is still at an early stage, much work continuing to emphasize the script – albeit with a mandate for flexibility – and assuming only limited improvisation and customer participation. Customers themselves need to learn appropriate role behaviors so the ‘actor’ (read employee, not customer) can perform to their best (Deighton, 1992; Grove & Fisk, 1992). That may, though, require customers to be coached in scripts themselves, so as to behave correctly in a retail environment (Nicod et al., 2020). Salespeople in turn need to be alert in space and time, and think and act on the spot, switching between scripts as needed (Banin et al., 2016). For example, when failure occurs, employees may be forced to alter the service performance as they attempt to recover goodwill (Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998).

How customers learn about their role *within* the store, then, has received some recent attention (Nicod et al., 2020). What is not yet clear is how the retail environment contributes to learning about how to behave in social contexts *after* leaving the store. This is a particular issue if the product being purchased is then used in a social context that is new to the customer, as occurs with some luxury products (among other categories), as we consider next.

### **2.3 Luxury retailing and social learning**

Luxury stores aim to entertain (Schmitt, 1999) and impress (Dion & Arnould, 2011) customers. Management of affect creates desire for a dream-like (Dubois & Paternault, 1995) setting that provides ‘extra pleasure, flattering all the senses at once’ (Kapferer, 1997, p.253). Sales associates play a crucial role in communicating brand values, notably including status values (Wieseke, Mauer & Alavi, 2013). Their behaviors personify these values, including a representation of luxury, directly influencing brand attitudes (Dion & Borraz, 2017).

This personification is important because what is being bought can in large part be an aspirational social identity (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008). Luxury stores aim to project and allow the customer to access such an identity (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008), thereby transforming the consumer’s own identity (Megehee & Spake, 2012) and aligning the brand’s personality with that desired state (Okonkwo, 2007). In order to embody the brand, retail staff play a role as



part of the elite identity that they are selling—though outside their jobs they are very rarely part of that elite themselves (Dion & Borraz, 2017).

The comparison of this role-playing with theater is clear. This acting creates a paradox for retailers. Sales associates can often thereby come across as inhospitable and arrogant, leaving some customers feeling intimidated and even rejected, and reinforcing feelings of exclusion and lack of legitimacy (Ward & Dahl, 2014; Wang, Chow & Luk, 2013). However, although consciously annoyed by such behavior, customers' admiration for the brand and their desire for its social status might outweigh that annoyance (Wang et al., 2013) and reinforce the brand image instead of harming it. While snobbish service may deter customers from entering a store, those who feel that their social identity is challenged may be motivated to prove that they have the wealth and status to purchase the goods and deserve to be there (Chiou & Hsiao, 2017).

It is clear, then, that some luxury products are bought to gain access to new social identities. However, it is also known that social identities are reinforced through participation in social practices (Wenger, 1998). When products are used in collective consumption contexts where other consumers are present, a novice consumer will need to learn how to participate in the social practices mandated in that context. For example, while luxury clothing may help a customer to feel comfortable in an elite concert hall or opera house, the customer will also need to learn a range of related behaviors once they arrive there: where to go, what clothing to wear at what points, when to talk and when not to, and so on (Kelleher et al. 2019). That is, the customer needs to acquire social learning, which after Wenger (1998), Bruce et al. (2019) and Kelleher et al. (2019) we define as learning about how to participate in social practices. The question arises whether and how this social learning can begin within a retail store. As social learning generally occurs *through* experiential participation (Wenger, 1998) – just as scholars learn to publish by participating in publishing teams with more experienced scholars – one might expect the store to be hosting participatory practices perhaps closer to immersive theater

than a conventional staged event.

In the empirical work that follows, we therefore examine practices in the collective consumption context of men's luxury tailoring, with a particular interest in how social learning occurs. We will then reflect on what theatrical metaphors are appropriate for such a context, and how these findings might transfer to other contexts.

### **3. METHODS**

Our research question is whether and how retail settings support social learning in collective consumption contexts, and how this changes the nature of theater within the retail context. We adopt a mixed method involving a combination of ethnographic immersion and micro-sociological analysis of specific customer-employee interactions. Data include detailed observational notes and both formal and short informal interviews.

This mixed-method approach has benefits as compared with the common interview method alone. Dey (1999) cautions that “we often cannot explain why we act as we do; people act out motives and interests that they may or may not be able to articulate” (p191). Nicolini (2009) concurs that people are rarely good reporters of their own activity. Observing this activity in real time and with a minimum of researcher intervention is therefore invaluable, particularly when the research question requires an exploration of practices in a field setting (Nicolini, 2009). Sales interactions in particular have a “choreographed” aspect (Whalen, Whalen & Henderson, 2002) that suits close observation to detect the physical and verbal actions and reactions comprising the practice. Furthermore, observing sales encounters as social dramas can help to understand how the brand's story is presented, heard, felt and thought of (Fischer & Sherry, 2017). Equally, however, the meanings attached to those activities by the actors involved form part of the practice (Kelleher et al., 2019). Observation is therefore complemented by informal and formal interviews. Our method thereby follows the approach of micro-sociology, the study of people and what they do, say and think in face-to-face

interactions (Llewellyn, 2021), with analysis focusing on particular ‘scenes’ of interaction. This micro-sociology is also informed by ethnographic immersion in the field, sensitizing the field researcher (the first author) to it.

### **3.1 Selection of the research site**

The high price points, sense of exclusivity and close customer relationships of luxury brands require discretion that makes full access to sites challenging. After considerable effort, ‘unusual research access’ (Yin, 1994) was granted to a luxury tailor and outfitter, with the pseudonym AZ Taylor, providing an opportunity “to explore a significant phenomenon under rare circumstances” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

AZ Taylor’s luxury status is built on its longstanding reputation of craftsmanship and serving the sartorial needs (both formal and general) of aristocratic and prominent societal figures. It is recognized as an important cultural object (see Holt, 2002), possessing significant symbolic and functional value (see Belk, 1988), making it a storied, authentic institution. Observations provided insight into how sales interactions enabled customers’ social learning of the brand’s English sartorial culture.

AZ Taylor has three product ranges: bespoke, made-to-measure, and ready-to-wear (RTW). The research focused on the RTW range. RTW is not the same as ‘off the peg’: the garments are pre-made but unfinished, so the service offering includes advice on sizing, customized alterations (‘tailoring’) and fitting, as well as suitability, styling, and sartorial etiquette. Although RTW is a basic tier within the category, it is considered luxury due to its provenance, craftsmanship, service and price. Interactions are personalized and instructive, requiring a considerable investment of time from both the sales associate and the customer.

### **3.2 Data collection**

Data collection occurred over an eight-month period, and more intensively via ethnographic immersion over four months. The store’s working day lasted from 9am–7pm. Immersion sessions were either full days or blocks of time in the morning (arriving between 9am and 11am

and leaving between 2-4pm) or afternoon (arriving between 12- 3pm until 7pm), making it possible to observe periods of varying consumer activity, and ensuring that daily norms could be fully identified. 110 such observational sessions were carried out.

### ***3.2.1 Observation***

Observation of customer interactions permitted detailed study of relationship dynamics, attitudes and behaviors. The researcher was positioned on the perimeter of the shop floor, to avoid intruding on the intimate space of real time fittings and interactions. In addition to observation of customer interactions, a range of backstage events were observed, including morning briefings, staff training, product training, visual merchandising, and product launches.

Observations were recorded in extensive contemporaneous field notes. These attended to routines, dialogue, behaviors, timings, settings, moods, interactions, movement in space, and inferred meanings (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Following Eriksson & Kovalainen's (2008, p.88) suggestion, both what happened and what did not happen (built on prior observations of the 'norm') were documented.

### ***3.2.2 Interviews***

Twenty formal interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed. Sampling covered all members of front-of-stage staff (sales associates, store managers and 'cutters') as well as backstage staff (stockroom manager, visual merchandiser and support staff) who worked to present the physical aspects (staging) of the brand on the shop floor. Interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes and occurred during lunch or tea breaks in the staff room or on the shop floor. The interviews were semi-structured. Protocol questions were open-ended, centered on the employee's experiences, behaviors and beliefs. Prompts explored motivations for working at AZ Taylor, the relationship with the brand, how the employee sought to engage customers, how they aimed to shape the interaction, their personal selling technique, and how they conceived the customer experience.

In addition, innumerable informal, unstructured interviews were carried out, generally on the shop floor or in the staff room. These helped to understand participants' meanings attached to the roles, scripts and practices that emerged later during analysis. Many of these informal interviews immediately followed sales interactions, though others occurred at other moments. These gained insight into individual thought processes (Hammersley, 1990) and feelings (Otnes, McGrath & Lowrey, 1995). Extensive contemporaneous notes were made.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Interview transcripts, interview notes and field notes were analyzed in NVivo. Data collection and analysis were iterative and inductive, moving between the data and the evolving analysis, with idea generation for further data collection. This continued until no new themes, categories, or relationships emerged and theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Open, axial and selective coding were used, with a particular interest in the process of social learning and the relevance of theatrical imagery. Open coding involved iteratively combing through the data several times. This process was guided by the data, remaining "open to all possible theoretical directions" (Charmaz, 2006, p.46), "to see the direction in which to take the study" (Glaser, 1978, p. 56). Recurring themes were grouped into categories. First-order codes included front-stage and back-stage happenings, scripts, theater forms, actors and roles. Labelling stayed close to the data, using language used by employees (Van Maanen, 1979). Data was grouped into blocks of categorized raw data.

Next, axial coding cross-coded the first-order codes "looking for answers to questions such as why or how come, where, when, how, and with what results" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.127). The first-order codes were reduced by grouping them into more abstract second-order themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.102); then, credible relationships between the themes were identified. Second-order themes included becoming of the brand, buying into the brand, transformation, etiquette, and a well-populated theme of educating the customer.

The final stage of selective coding integrated previous rounds into a more abstract conceptualization of the data. The foundation of a coherent emergent theory began to form that elicited understandings of social actors (and by this point it was clear that these included the customers themselves) and shop floor performances. Examples of the relationships identified are brand embodiment, pre-show preparations, delivering the play, scripts, and improvisatory practices.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

We begin by setting the scene, describing the sales associate's primary role as 'gentleman mentor'. We then describe the salesperson's scripts, revealing how they incorporate social learning. Extending the theatrical metaphor, we also identify four improvisation practices that complement these more process-oriented 'material scripts' (Darr & Pinch, 2013), which we term role switching, nurturing, status asserting, and show rescuing; we discuss these in turn.

##### **4.1 Setting the scene**

Role theory (Solomon et al., 1985) suggests that in any social interaction we expect and adopt roles, usually based on pre-conceptions or experience (whether direct or indirect). Sales associates were very conscious of the artificial setting and the need for them to act a role within it. Salesperson A03<sup>1</sup> reminisced that walking into the store was like "walking into a GQ ad. So slick and stylish, down to the shoes. If your shoes weren't polished, why aren't they polished?" When a sales associate enters the stage-like public area of the store – the 'shop floor', as they call it – "I am more or less a completely different person to what I am now." This requires backstage preparation: putting on a costume from the store's products – an enacted aesthetic extension of the brand (Fuentes & Hagberg, 2013) – but also preparing mentally:

'So I'm super relaxed, I try not to think about anything too much... and I more or less just zone out, have a bit of me time ...I want to go out and have an aura of calm so that other people don't feel

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<sup>1</sup> To provide anonymity, participants were assigned codes: letters (A, B, etc.) for their role - sales associates were designated with an A - and a number (e.g. A14) to separate those within a role.

stressed' [A14 Interview]

The primary role being prepared for is that of an English gentleman, and specifically a gentleman mentor. 'English gentleman' is typical English indirect coding for class, 'gentleman' originally having referred specifically to the aristocracy, and those others on the boundary of the upper class who do not need to work to support themselves. Deciphering the English gentleman's sartorial etiquette is a minefield of traditions that date back centuries. Customers are asked to play the role of gentleman novice. Without prior socialization into this role, novices are at risk of embarrassment and feeling like outsiders: spectators to a performance and not part of it (Kelleher et al., 2019). The salesperson's act is widely accepted:

'I don't know what impression customers get of me. They say things like: 'You must know what it's like skiing in Aspen?' I have no idea; I can't afford it. They don't realize that we are just normal people and not part of that world.' [A14]

Once on stage, the sales associate is guided by a set of scripts, as we consider next.

#### **4.2 Mentoring scripts as vehicles for social learning**

Customers in the store are led through a structured performance with what we term 'mentoring scripts' that present as observable practice. A script is a repeated pattern of interaction (Darr & Pinch, 2013). The scripts we observed had an ordering that matches a conventional sales process, from selecting a product to buying it and leaving with it. See Table 1. However, the scripts focus rather on the customer's learning journey, from how to choose clothes to how to dress in them, how to judge fit, and when and how to wear them. The climax of this journey is not a sale but rather a sartorial transformation; see the third column of Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The aspirational setting defines the sales staff as central members in the desired social group ('Observing' and 'Introducing' scripts). The next scripts, 'signposting' and 'assisting', educate the novice through what we term *unpacking*: making explicit the tacit knowledge of experts. Scene 1 illustrates the presence of unpacking within the salesperson's script.

## SCENE 1

*[A couple taking their time, pensively browsing the morning suits]*

**A14:** *[Leans into the customers]* Hello there, would you like any help?

**A14:** A more personal fit will be better. You can have an initial chat with the made-to-measure team. However, our ready-to-wear is good and will do the job. If you have time I would get one, but it is up to you.

**Customer:** If it is a suit, then I could wear it again?

**A14:** Yes, you can break it out, more often than a morning suit. Morning suit – unless you are going to Ascot it is difficult to wear it again.

**A14:** Will everyone wear morning wear?

**Customer:** Just me.

**A14:** It may look a little strange—you will stand out. It is your wedding; you can be as traditional as you want. What time is your wedding?

**Customer:** 2:30.

**A14:** Wedding in the morning, early afternoon, the time is suitable.

**A14:** A three-piece suit with a contrast waistcoat... if you put a contrast waistcoat on with your regular suit you can look special. With embroidery, the shape, there is lots you can do to make it look special.

**Customer:** Right, that makes a lot of sense. What is the price difference?

**A14:** There are three tiers. Ready-to-wear is everything you see here. Alterations, depending on what you have done, £30, £20, can bring it up to £1200, within that price bracket. Made-to-measure entry level is £1500, then goes up with the cloth that you use; a waistcoat is another £300 - £500. Bespoke takes a little longer and is more special. Starts at £5000.

**Customer:** Made-to-measure is fine. I guess we will browse around. It is good to know. This is all a little too much.

**A14:** If you get others to wear a morning suit also, like the father of the bride, then it will be ok.

**Customer:** What about a dinner suit?

**A14:** Any event before 6pm—garden parties, picnics—you wear a morning suit. 6 onwards you wear evening wear, black tie. This is a 200-year-old tradition, but it is up to you.

**A14:** *[to fiancée]* Do you have an outfit sorted?

**Fiancée:** Yes.

**A14:** It would be nice to have something complementary - tie, pocket square...

**Customer:** When would you wear a bow tie?



**A14:** You would wear it with dinner wear like this. [*Pointing to a mannequin dressed in a dinner jacket and black tie*]

**Customer:** What is it when you have the black fabric hanging?

**A14:** Oh that is just a bow tie undone. [*He takes them to the mannequin realizes the bow tie is ready-made*]

**A14:** Ohhh. [*He goes to the next mannequin and turns it around and undoes the bow tie*]

**Customer:** Oh, that's what it is.

**A14:** That is more for the end of the night. It also shows that you know how to tie a bow tie.

**A14:** If you want I can grab a guy from made-to-measure. Have a look round.

**Customer:** OK, thank you.

[*They quietly browse the dinner suits*]

As Solomon et al. (1985) suggest, “behaviors which may come automatically to a veteran ... demand great cognitive activity from a novice” (p102). This cognitive effort is apparent in the customer's comment that “This is all a little too much”. Much information is conveyed in a short period. Most of that information is not about the product, but rather about social norms. The customer generally stays in his role as a novice, with a few moments in a more empowered customer role, such as when asserting that ‘Made-to-measure is fine’.

In later scripts within the script set of Table 1, the social learning becomes more experiential. ‘Trying on’ is an opportunity to try on not just the clothes but also the role of gentleman: how to dress, how to move, and how to talk about clothes. This continues in the ‘celebrating’ script. Scene 2 illustrates this *experiential learning*. Here, a young man buying a suit for his graduation is shown how to tie a bow tie properly. The symbolic importance of this scene to the father is evident in his requesting a photo.

## SCENE 2

[*A father and son are being served. To mark the son's university graduation—a notable rite of passage— they are buying a suit from the prestigious ‘tailoring quarter’, adding to the momentous occasion. A09 stands in front of the customer tying his tie. He fixes it at the back, folding the shirt*]

*collar over the tie. He does this delicately and precisely with finesse. The father is standing to A09's side attentively observing. A09 ties it slowly, aware that the father is taking note of what he is doing.]*

**A09:** The pocket square is a nice touch, but is not necessary.

**FATHER:** Can we try it?

**A09:** Yes.

*[A09 chooses a couple of pocket squares from the display that he thinks will complement the suit. He pins the pocket, folds the pocket square, and places it in the pocket.]*

**A09:** That is one option.

*[He gets another pocket square and folds it on the arm of the chair.]*

**A09:** This is plain white.

*[He switches the pocket squares over.]*

**A09:** This is another option.

**FATHER:** Can we take a photo with you, A09?

**A09:** Oh, yes, please do.

*[A09 and the customer stand together at the side of the chair and have their photo taken.]*

**FATHER:** Cufflinks?

**A09:** *[Regretfully]* I don't have cufflinks unfortunately. Is it for his graduation?

**FATHER:** Yes.

**A09:** *[Smiling]* Oh, congratulations!

**FATHER:** *[With obvious pride]* Thank you, thank you.

*[A09 proceeds to tie the tie, so all the son has to do is put it round his neck on the day.]*

**A09:** I will fold the pocket square and put it back in the pocket for you ready.

**FATHER:** Would you show him how to tie the tie?

**A09:** I'll show you.

*[The son has come out of the changing room and A09 approaches him.]*

**A09:** If I may, sir...

*[He puts the tie around the son's neck and slowly talks through the steps of tying the tie. Father attentively observes.]*

**A09:** Cross once, good for this one, makes a smaller knot. For my one, I only did it once.

The final scripts in Table 1 continue this experiential theme. In ‘wrapping up’, changing back into the customer’s own clothes can reinforce their sense of what is appropriate clothing as they experience dissonance between their old clothes and the aspirational setting, as one customer observed to the sales associate: “I feel scruffy now in my own clothes after wearing that!” ‘Collecting’ involves returning to collect an altered suit when, as is typical, some minor alterations are needed; this provides the customer to try on a more confident demeanor when trying the clothes on again for fit. For the salesperson, this progress in social learning is the denouement of the play:

“Just seeing how much charisma and how much confidence it can give a man, I think it is amazing... to work within their need to make you feel confident, to make you feel good about yourself so you can forget about what you are wearing while you are doing your job and still feel strong.” [A16 interview]

The social learning about sartorial artistry may then continue through future purchases:

“I see it as an art because you feel accomplished when you dress them and they are really well presented. And they also pick up a bit of the philosophy of what you are trying to do, and they can take that forward. Some of the clients have grown over a couple of years: they dress a lot better, and they just know not to do certain things, so it’s nice to see that.” [A03 Interview]

### **4.3 Improvisation practices**

The salesperson’s repertoire of scripts, then, both complete a sale and contribute to social learning for the customer as novice. However, the customer’s active role in this learning journey not infrequently forces the sales associate to go ‘off script’ and to improvise. We next describe four improvisation practices we observed.

#### **4.3.1 Role switching**

The expected role repertoires (John, Grove & Fisk, 2006) within a retail context are as salesperson and customer, themselves highly scripted roles incorporating symbolic and moral, as well as commercial, elements (Darr & Pinch, 2013). In our context, we have already seen that these fluidly switch with roles as novice and benevolent mentor. Other instances of role

switching are apparent in our data, as store staff respond to the idiosyncratic actions of the customers as participants in their social learning journey. One example is switching to the role of style custodian, a strict, police-like role, as shown in Scene 3.

### SCENE 3

*[A customer is deeply browsing the morning suit collection. A03 approaches him and asks how he “might be of assistance”]*

**CUSTOMER:** *[Touching the sleeve of a morning suit]* Can you change the buttons for gold?

**A03** *[With a frank tone]* That’s the most formal civilian wear you can wear. If you want to damage your suit you can, but you can do it with cufflinks. You can have gold cufflinks.

**CUSTOMER** *[With a look of bemusement at A03’s stern reaction]:* It’s a violation of the culture?

**A03** *[Confirming]:* For British, yes, it’s a faux pas.

This role contrasts dramatically in assertiveness with that of groom serving his master in a traditional English country house:

“It’s almost like a grooming service. You have to really let them know first of all that they are in your house, and that they don’t have to worry [about] a single thing—literally the only thing you can’t do is put their trousers on them. You do everything else like a little fairy running around them. I’ll give them the shoe horn to put their shoes on; once they’ve put them on I’ll tie the shoelace for them nice and tight; and I’ll tuck in the trousers. They have to just stand there and enjoy it. And then I get up behind them and I quickly put the jacket on them. I put their tie on. I do everything and whisk around, for the big reveal in the mirror. I think they love the finesse of that as well something about being groomed like that. I see them just standing there, feeling this magic and this energy and concentration like Cinderella” (A03, unstructured interview)

In this observation, roles switched to friend/friend and then, serving a drink for the customer, host/guest:

A customer’s partner, of Thai origin, had come to collect a suit alteration. She sat, sipping sparkling wine, patiently waiting for the suit to be retrieved. A22 passing by greeted her— “How are you madam, are you well?”— and joined her in the lounge area. They conversed as if they had known each other for years, finding common ground on travelling and Thailand. A22 recounted: “My parents went to Bangkok in 1996. They loved it. They stayed in The Peninsula Hotel. I remember they sent a postcard and I loved it. They had a TV in their bathroom. Back in 1995 when it meant something.” Realizing that she had been waiting for some time now, he offered: “Would you like a top up? Half a glass, perhaps?” He then ventured downstairs to find out what was taking so long.

Some minutes later, he reappeared with the suit and handed it over. He closed the interaction with “have a great holiday.” She replied, “See you soon.” [Field notes]

The waiting area with comfortable chairs and an ottoman became the sales associate’s living room. A22 acted as the perfect host, engaging her in polite conversation.

In some of these examples, the customer is equally switching roles. The ‘collecting’ step, for example, is a moment where the novice may try on a more experienced demeanor: “When a customer comes in and they see you doing alterations...something happens when they come back they suddenly become all knowledgeable in tailoring, noticing things” [A02, observed training session].

#### ***4.3.2 Nurturing***

Luxury retail can be intimidating, as we saw in Scene 1 when the customer admitted that “this is all a little too much”. This becomes even more so during the later, more experiential scripts such as trying on, which is also physically intimate. The social identity transformation that can be involved adds a further layer of vulnerability. Another improvisation practice is to spot these moments where the customer is daunted or vulnerable and extemporize a way of nurturing the customer. A27 recounts an interaction in which a client opened up about his personal life and as A27 said “it turned into a therapy session”. A28, in a separate discussion with the researcher, reported a client saying “you are like my therapist, only you are more expensive and funnier!”

In these examples the conversation goes entirely off the material scripts of Table 1. In some other cases, the script is modified to nurture the customer.

A customer’s fiancée is browsing the ready-to-wear collection ahead of their wedding. A14 approaches her. Sensing her anxiety at an overwhelming choice, he reassures her that she has made the right decision [coming] “to the best road in the world”, before taking her through to the made-to-measure department to explain and simplify the product range. [Field notes]

The aim is to teach, but gently, with an awareness of the insecurities that can be involved:

“For me it’s taking someone and making them realize that you can look good, no matter who you are, no matter what you are, no matter your experiences. You smile, knowing your cuts, knowing your tones, and being able to relay that information, but to the same level of them not actually

realizing that they have just been taught. Being honest, that's what you want them to have." [A16 interview]

The salesperson perceives that in large part, the experience is intimidating due to customers' identity assumptions: "no matter what you are" is another English code tacitly referring to class and status in society. Sales associates gain altruistic value through helping novices' social learning of sartorial etiquette—and an aspect of that learning is to acquire the confidence that marks England's establishment. A03 sees it as a matter of principle that "no matter how scruffy they are [I] always make sure when they leave they are going to get that look." 'That look' goes beyond the clothes to the wearer exhibiting the self-esteem to take on the suit's characteristics – structured silhouette, rope shoulders – and performing in society with confidence and style. Nurturing that transformation is a primary goal for the sales associates:

"the customer puts something on and they'll look in the mirror and you can see they've got a smile on their face or they'll say 'this is the most comfortable suit I've ever worn, it just feels so completely different', and they're the compliments that really mean something to us." [A27, interview]

#### **4.3.3 Status asserting**

Another trigger for improvisation can be moments of status conflict between a customer and a sales associate. Status asserting improvisations can result, begun by either party. We have already seen, for example, that tying real bow ties can be a topic that is daunting for customers and that offers a ready opportunity to assert superiority from the salesperson as mentor. In Scene 4, the novice takes orders from the mentor ("I wouldn't let you have a ready-made [tie]!!") in good spirit, and the conversation reverts to a straightforward coaching session.

#### **SCENE 4**

*[A09 is fitting a dinner suit with an inexperienced customer]*

**CUSTOMER** What about the bow tie?

*[A09 collects a black bow tie from a drawer]*

**CUSTOMER:** Is this ready-made?

**A09:** *[as if insulted on his sartorial being]* I wouldn't let you have a ready-made!!

*[Customer laughs, surprised at the seriousness of the reaction, but looks nervous at the prospect]*

**A09:** *[Observing his apprehension]* I'll give you a tutorial.

What I say is practice on your leg, so you can see.

*[He leads them to the mannequin, which is dressed in black tie, to use as a teaching aid. Customer and his companion, placed at either side of mannequin, look on with deep concentration]*

**A09** *[reassuringly]*: It is just like tying a shoelace, it's more difficult because of its thickness.

Not all status-asserting improvisations end with victory for the salesperson – see Scene 5. Here, the customer rejects the advice of the salesperson. The sales associate's peeved reaction shows that despite his previous courteous wording, his 'advice' was intended as a mentor's instructions to a novice, and he expected them to be followed.

### SCENE 5

**A22:** Will you wear braces, waistcoat? I'd recommend it. If in the photos the shirt is coming out, it won't look as good. It is some advice and is what I would do.

**A22:** I would suggest wearing braces to help stop the shirt coming out in photos. It's just my personal advice, it is up to you.

**CUSTOMER:** I don't think I will wear braces.

**A22** *[standing with one hand on his hip]*: It will just look better in the wedding photos.

Quite apart from norms for customer relationships that suggest the customer is in control, assertiveness and independence of mind is to be expected, and indeed welcomed, in novices as they become more confident and skilled, as every parent or teacher will acknowledge. Nonetheless, the sales associates tended to express deep discomfort at the perceived threat to their own status that such status asserting could cause, as A3 expresses:

“If [customers] try to challenge you, you have to remember that they don't know what they are talking about. They're not the tailor. Bottom line is they don't know. They know what they like, but you know the product and you know about the measuring and fit. So when they challenge me? I challenge them back.” [A03 interview]

On other occasions, though, the salespeople accept a more subservient role if that doesn't interfere with the purchase process proceeding. In Scene 6, the scripts of Table 1 are still in evidence, but some of the advisory roles in the 'assisting', 'trying on' and 'celebrating' scripts

are being performed by the customer's companions. The associate only steps in when an element of the script – defining adjustments needed to the suit – is missed by the companions.

## SCENE 6

*[A04 approaches a customer and his companions, a friend (F1) and his fiancée (F2), in the seasonal suit section of the store. Customer indicates that he wants to try on a light grey two-piece suit. A04 takes the suit off the rail and leads him to the changing room and his companions to the nearby lounge area. His companions take a seat and he stands in front of the mirrored door of the changing room. A04 hands him the jacket to put on. He puts it on and looks in the mirror.]*

**A04:** *[Standing to the side of the customer]* That fits you well.

*[Customer turns round to F1 and F2 for confirmation.]*

**F2:** Yeah, it looks good.

*[A04 waits on the rim of the interactional space, while the customer discusses the suit with his companions]*

**CUSTOMER:** Can I try on the trousers?

**A04:** *[Steps forward]* Of course.

*[A04 places the trousers inside the changing room and the customer enters. A04 retakes their position in the wings. The customer comes out and faces his companions]*

**F1, F2:** *[In unison]* They look good.

*[Customer looks in the mirror, examining how he looks. He smiles as he reads his reflection.]*

**CUSTOMER:** *[Looking in the mirror]* Oh crap - I like it. It's nice. Do you have a waistcoat?

**A04:** We don't sell separate waistcoats, but you can buy one *[from another store]* and add it.

**CUSTOMER:** Yeah.

*[The customer, F1 and F2 talk amongst themselves.]*

**CUSTOMER:** Burgundy would stand out. I want a color that will stand out.

**F2:** Why don't you try one on?

**CUSTOMER:** *[Turns to A04]* Can I try one on? *[From a 3-piece suit, to get an idea of the look]*

**A04:** Yes, of course. *[Not able to find his size on the shop floor]* I'll get you one from downstairs.

**F2:** You can go for burgundy. A contrasting color.

*[A04 brings up a cream waistcoat and handed it to the customer. He tries it on.]*

**F1:** *[Jokingly]* Don't breathe. Don't breathe for four hours.



**CUSTOMER:** [*Looking into the mirror, addressing his companions*] Look, see what difference it makes.

**F1:** It looks good. It makes such a difference. You can get separates. Or get a different color waistcoat to make it stand out.

**A04:** [*Faces the customer*] Whose wedding is it?

**CUSTOMER:** Ours.

**A04:** Really, I thought you were guests!

**CUSTOMER** [*Laughs*]: No! I like it. See, the waistcoat changes the look completely. I'll take it.

**A04:** [*Walks over and points to the ripples on the back of the jacket*] Ok. I'll just pin it.

[*After pinning, the customer enters the changing room to redress. A04 then takes the suit over to the counter for payment and F2 follows.*]

The concept of 'face work' in brand conversations (Andriuzzi & Michel, 2021), whereby individuals look to save face without others losing face, might help to explain the customer's sometimes meek response to status asserting practices – and might equally explain some occasions when a salesperson is meek when the customer status–asserts.

#### **4.3.4 Show rescuing**

Both customers and employees show an interest in ensuring that the performance of the store visit proceeds uninterrupted. Staying in role and continuing to follow a script can avoid the possibility of embarrassment (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010), and for the sales associate, there is organizational pride (Gouthier & Rhein, 2011) as well as sales success to consider. The final category of improvisation practice we observed was *show rescuing*: practices involving extemporization to ensure show continuity. A sales associate related a show-rescuing incident initiated by a customer, who proceeded through the sales process seemingly to avoid embarrassment.

A09 had “invested” nearly an hour with a customer going through the ‘signposting’, ‘assisting’ and ‘trying on’ scripts, but the customer left the store without buying. A09 approached A45 and held up the suit that the customer had tried on: “I thought I had it, but it gets to the point where it’s awkward for them to say no, so they continue until they can escape in the changing room and then hand me

the suit and it's, ah! It's not that I don't think he could afford it. Its £2k, you have to think about it, if he just told me... I thought I was going to have to make him breakfast, I danced with him, I brought him in close." A45 responded: "I feel for you." [Extract from field notes]

Once away from the customer, the performance ended, A09 and his colleague discussed what had happened in their roles as salespeople, not gentleman mentors.

Show rescuing can equally be initiated by the sales associates. We saw a simple example in Scene 1, where the sales associate rapidly glossed over his discovery that a mannequin had a 'fake', pre-tied bow tie, rapidly moving to another mannequin. Given that his script had emphasized the vital importance of tying one's own bow tie, the credibility of his character might have been jeopardized by the discovery that even his own store was inconsistent about this practice. The suspension of disbelief inherent in theater is equally threatened when cracks appear in the veneer of the "Stradivarius"-like [A38] quality claims made by the sales associates. In Scene 7, sales associate A09 improvises to rescue not just the sale but the brand performance.

#### SCENE 7

*[The customer is having his suit refitted by A09 after alterations. They are in front of the mirror with the customer's wife sitting observing.]*

**CUSTOMER:** *[with pensive expression]* I think the trousers are too short.

*[A09 standing to the side of the customer looking at the fall of the trouser]*

**A09** *[open and direct]:* I would agree. I would have it longer at the back, three quarters of an inch. It's sitting too high. It depends on how you like your trousers...

*[A09 bends to hem the trouser and then stands back up, looking down at his hemming]*

**A09:** That's better, sits more on the top of the lacing, it's a good marker. It may be a case that my colleague hasn't pinned enough or that the tailor didn't want to take it in too much. Obviously it's a little frustrating for you, and me also.

[...]

*[After a quick alteration, the customer looks into the mirror]*

**A09:** Here that looks right. The guy just rushed it for me, the trousers fit better. Have you bought from us before?

**CUSTOMER:** *[Turns to face A09]* No, it's the first time.

**A09:** It's a shame when you are paying, even in the sale, you *[still expect high standards]*.

**CUSTOMER:** You've been helpful, thank you.

**A09:** Hope it's the level that you would expect. Is that okay for you?

**CUSTOMER:** Yeah.

[*The customer re-enters the changing room to redress into his own clothes. A09 approaches the customer's wife*]

**A09:** Where do you normally buy your suits from?

**Customer's wife:** [*Says competitor name.*] He has a V shape, so we need it tailored.

**A09:** When you find a tailor you tend to stick to it. I'm not just saying it, but we make the best quality suits. When he wears it, he will find that it is more comfortable than his other suits.

Show rescuing practices improvise a way of getting the performance back on script; by the end of this scene, the salesperson is back in his accustomed pattern of conversation and behavior.

## 5 DISCUSSION

This study investigated how social learning occurs in a retail setting when the products are to be used in a collective consumption context—in our case, formal, high-status events where luxury tailoring is the norm for men. We find that within this context, sales associates guide the customer's social learning through a set of scripts we term mentoring scripts, listed in Table 1. These are complemented by four relatively unstructured improvisation practices: role-switching, nurturing, status asserting and show rescuing. These findings make two main contributions to retail literature, and in particular to the substantial subset that applies theatrical metaphors to the retail context.

The first broad contribution concerns the purpose and scope of scripts for retail staff. We have seen that a variety of types of script have been identified in previous work: functional scripts (Harris et al., 2003), cognitive scripts (Abelson, 1981) and material scripts (Darr & Pinch, 2013), for example. We add the category of *mentoring scripts*. The scripts we have

described also have other purposes, such as performing necessary functions (e.g. paying) and dealing with material objects (e.g. adjusting and packing clothes). However, the overarching story they invite the customer to participate in is one of being mentored in how to perform when in the post-purchase consumption context, from a ‘society wedding’ (yet another class-related English euphemism) to a Westminster Abbey royal investiture. The scripts make use of two learning styles, both echoed in other learning contexts. *Unpacking* makes explicit the tacit understandings of experts in the consumption context. This is reminiscent of Kelleher et al.’s (2019, p. 130) contention that learning practice performance requires “demystifying” through “explanatory commentary and demonstrations for novices”—what Wenger (1998, p. 58) call “reification”, or ‘making real’. The second style, *experiential learning*, gives customers practice in the behaviors they will need in the consumption context. Mentoring scripts require extension of the role repertoire (John et al., 2006) of both retail staff and customers, who need to add roles as mentor and novice to their conventional retail roles as service provider and customer. We summarize this finding in the following proposition as a basis for further research; as with the propositions that follow, further research is required to check the extent to which this proposition transfers to other collective consumption contexts.

In retail settings where products/services are used in collective consumption contexts:

P1. Mentoring scripts incorporating both unpacking & experiential learning act to coach the customer in practice performance within the consumption context.

Our second contribution concerns the importance in social learning not just of scripts but also of improvisation practices. We have seen that while improvisation forms a vital part of much contemporary theater, literature applying the theatrical metaphor to customer relationships has predominantly compared these to more conventional theater through such language as roles, scripts and staging (Van Marrewijk & Broos, 2012). Exceptions have included the use of improvisation to tailor or personalize a service (John et al. 2006; Whalen et al., 2002) and the general importance of “thinking on one’s feet” in a sales context (Banin et al., 2016). We extend

this work by revealing improvisation practices that specifically have a social learning role. Improvisation seems to be needed because learning to participate in consumption practices is inevitably highly interactive and coproduced (Banin et al., 2016)—just as high degrees of improvisation are necessary in immersive theater when unpredictable customers are enlisted as actors (Machon, 2013). We might therefore expect improvisation to equally play an important role in other sales contexts requiring participative learning prior to collective consumption: ‘taster sessions’ for university courses or addiction classes, for example. Hence, we propose:

P2. Improvisation occurs involving both customers and supplier representatives, so as to coach novice participants through practice participation.

Some of our more specific improvisation practices may also transfer to other collective consumption contexts—though equally, other contexts may reveal further practices. Firstly, we find that improvisation for social learning involves not just the fleshing out of a script (Banin, et al., 2016) but also the very choice of role. Role-switching practices seem to be needed because of the complexity of social learning. In this context we have seen that sales associates double up as welcoming hosts, caring mentors, subservient grooms, equal friends, and intimate therapists, switching between these fluidly. In classical music, some orchestras pay attention to who might perform some equivalent mentoring roles in a post-sale consumption context, some of this work being done by other customers (Kelleher et al., 2019); what happens with novices *before* the sale in such service categories, as well as other product categories such as jewellery, requires focused examination.

P3. Role-switching improvisation practices enable retail staff to flexibly perform multiple roles to aid the customer’s social learning journey.

In our data, the learning customers seek is not just cognitive or even skills-based: customers also need to find their place in the consumption community. Again, this has been explored within collective consumption contexts themselves (Schau, Dellande & Gilly, 2007), but significantly less so in how a retail environment can begin this process. Two improvisation

practices, nurturing and status asserting, handle this in different ways, developing social confidence while also negotiating status positions within the social group of sartorially sophisticated English gentlemen. These practices may prove to have equivalents in other collective consumption contexts around a strong social identity (Champniss et al., 2016), such as the purchasing process for high-involvement, strongly-branded educational products such as MBAs and PhDs, or equipment and clothes retailing for social leisure pursuits such as skiing. They have correlates in improvisatory and immersive theater, where customers may need encouragement to build their confidence in joining in the show (Machon, 2013).

P4. Nurturing improvisation practices act to build customers' confidence and signal their acceptance into a collective consumption community.

P5. Status-asserting improvisation practices act to negotiate status positions within the collective consumption context.

The final improvisation practice equally has echoes in the world of improvisatory and immersive theater. Show-rescuing improvisations deal with the existential challenge, as far as the 'show' of brand-building and social competence-building is concerned, of ensuring that the retail performance can continue. Otherwise, the participants face the deeply uncomfortable experience of all the characters stepping out of role and thereby losing all the structuring benefits that those roles and their attendant scripts provide in guiding participants on what to do and say next (Champniss et al., 2016).

P6. Show-rescuing improvisation practices allow social learning in the retail setting to continue by extemporizing a return to familiar roles and scripts.

Further research is needed to explore the extent to which these propositions transfer to other collective consumption contexts. Our theoretical development leads us to conjecture that these propositions may apply in other retail contexts satisfying the two conditions that give rise to the need for social learning within luxury men's tailoring: 1) That the product/service is used in a collective consumption context, hence requiring the customer to participate in social practices; and 2) That some customers, at least, within the retail environment are novices within

that collective consumption context, hence providing the opportunity for the retail environment to begin that social learning. Examples might include the contexts we mentioned in our Introduction: team-based leisure activities, classical music, education, fine dining, and multi-player gaming (Bruce et al., 2019; Kelleher et al., 2019). It is also possible that while the existence of improvisation practices (proposition P2) applies across multiple such contexts, the specific practices themselves (propositions P3-P6) vary, in whole or in part.

Overall, mentoring scripts and improvisation practices act to advance social learning within the retail setting – social learning that presumably continues within the collective consumption context of an event such as a formal classical music concert (Kelleher et al., 2019). Another clear research direction is to explore the relationship between these sales and usage settings, as to date they have generally been studied separately. For example, are similar improvisation practices to those we have identified found in usage settings? Who performs these practices, and in what roles, when multiple other customers are present? Within a category such as luxury tailoring, golf or opera, how do the roles, scripts and improvisation practices of the two settings relate? How do customers experience the transition between the two? And what is the impact of this transition on customers' social identity?

There is also scope for research taking a critical marketing (Maclaran, Goulding & Elliott, 2007) perspective on the theatrical approach to social learning we have observed. In the theater, customers are acutely aware of the fictional nature of the journey they are taken on, and a societal norm is to reflect on the relationship between that journey and life by talking to friends and reading reviews. In retail contexts, however, are customers aware of the extent to which their mentor is playing a role as a member of a social group to which he or she may not even belong outside the store? All social identities are by definition constructed, but does the customer's construction of a social group such as sartorial English gentleman within the retail context bear any relationship to the world they experience within the consumption context?

And what value is created or destroyed – from wellbeing and wealth to environmental resource usage – through social mentoring when its motives are enmeshed with commercial ones?

Retailers with a corporate responsibility orientation may also be interested in the social impact of mentoring practices – practices that appear to have arisen somewhat organically. In any case, social learning is evidently a key part of the value customers seek, so paying it more conscious attention would seem to be commercially wise, as it seems to be largely outside the scope of formal retailing processes. One obvious step would be to bring social learning within the scope of customer insight processes, through both qualitative work and attention to the design of customer satisfaction surveys. Survey instruments might be a vehicle for the introduction of metrics that add a social learning dimension to the evaluation of salesperson performance: how confident customers feel when leaving the store, for example. There may also be opportunities for customer training that is explicitly focused on social learning, rather than this being an implicit part of the sales process. Another opportunity is to focus on the efficacy of social learning in the design and evaluation of training programs for store staff.

Humans are quintessentially social creatures. Many of our purchases are socially motivated, as a large body of work on consumer culture theory makes clear. What we buy does not of itself deliver social status, however. Operating in social groups also requires learning, and that learning can only be gained through participatory practice (Wenger, 1998). That practice can begin within the retail space, with profound implications for what happens within that space and with what consequences for the retailer and the customer. If we learn through practice participation, the theater metaphor that applies to such a space is a participatory one, closer to immersive theater than a more passive traditional one. Salespeople are not the only actors in a store; scripts are about mentoring the customer as much as about selling; and all participants need to improvise to keep the show on track. If retail is theater, we need a far more democratic, co-created view of what that theater looks like.



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**Table 1: Mentoring scripts and social learning in luxury men’s tailoring**

<b>Script</b>	<b>Sales associate’s script summary</b>	<b>Customer’s social learning</b>
<b>Act 1</b>		
1: Observing	Observe and assess customer behavior. Recognize if a prior customer. Judge experience level and likely motives.	Customer observes the upper-class setting and aspirational dress code of staff as representatives of the desired social group.
2: Introducing	Select opening line. Approach and initiate conversation with customer.	Customer observes the sales associate’s demeanor.
3: Signposting	Explore usage occasion, usage needs, and preferences, to direct customer to right product range; build trust to ensure customer feels comfortable when fitting.	Customer learns about broad sartorial conventions dependent on the event, the time of day, the role of the customer at the event and so on.
4: Assisting	Guide browsing and selection. Educate customer on appropriate choices. Inform customer about sartorial heritage and excellence, of this brand in particular.	Customer learns more specific guidelines on what items to wear and how, and what constitutes quality in luxury tailoring.
5: Trying on	Aid trying on. Discuss match to ‘the look’. Iterate as needed. Assess and mark necessary alterations. Educate customer about wearing practice. Offer drink.	Customer experiments with talk around luxury clothes, with wearing them, with moving in them, and with demeanor. Customer notes hints on wearing in the planned usage event(s).
6: Celebrating	Recommend suit and gain customer acceptance. Celebrate transformation of customer to sartorial English gentleman.	Customer gains confidence through articulating their choice, and through the approbation of others about their look.
<b>Act 2</b>		
7: Wrapping up	Guide customer to change back into own clothes. Take payment. Reassure regarding choice and relax customer.	Customer experiences dissonance in old clothes that no longer match their new role, reinforcing role learning.
8: Departing	Walk customer to door. Write up docket and prep the suit for alteration. Reflect on process with backstage staff – tailors, support staff.	Customer is reassured as accepted initiate.
<b>Act 3</b>		
1: Collecting	Customer returns for altered suit. Guide trying on. Reassure. Fine-tune wearing and suit as needed. Pack up. Reinforce guidance about usage.	Customer has an opportunity to try on a more confident demeanor in wearing luxury clothes and commenting on them.
2: Using	Customer’s wearing of product at events; sales associate absent.	(Not observed.)