



Re-designing adaptive selling strategies: the role of different types of shopping companions

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of shopping companions in retail sales conversations and the necessity of designing more comprehensive sales training programs. In particular, the characteristics and behaviors of shopping companions and their subsequent effects on accompanied shoppers, the salesperson and the sales conversation are examined. Shopping companions have not played a role in adaptive selling research and most practical trainings for salespeople so far, although they can significantly affect shopper behavior and decision-making, and require distinct approaches by salespeople. Systematizing in-depth interviews with salespeople and qualitative content analysis reveal a variety of different character traits and behaviors of shopping companions that can lead to positive and negative outcomes from a salesperson's perspective. The interactions that take place between customers and salespeople are the core element of customer-oriented service in retailing. When a holistic customer-oriented service is part of their value proposition, retailers should consider re-designing training programs for salespeople and include the influence of shopping companions. In doing so, salespeople's customer orientation can be increased by augmenting their capabilities and enabling them to make use of adaptive selling techniques specifically designed for co-shopping situations.

Keywords Adaptive selling · Shopping companions · Sales interactions · Social influence · Retail shopping

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1 Introduction

Sales conversations between shoppers and salespeople are a natural part of retail shopping and provide shoppers with information regarding a retailer's service quality and customer orientation. A key factor, especially for adaptive selling techniques, which are designed to cater to shoppers' needs on a situational basis, is a salesperson's ability to identify customers' shopping orientation and thus the fitting sales approach (McFarland et al. 2006; Román and Iacobucci 2010). In order to meet the expectations of customers, training programs for salespeople that focus on customer service are inevitable (Bishop Gagliano and Hathcote 1994), and salespeople need to keep their skills up to date constantly (Bradford et al. 2017). Trainings teach salespeople the process regarding how to provide optimal customer service in sales conversations by providing them with what design research describes as a general solution concept, i.e. a general rule regarding how to achieve a certain goal in a given situation (van Aken and Romme 2009). These solution concepts can be, amongst others, an act or a process. While they are general concepts, they must be applied to more specific situations (van Aken 2004), as for instance by salespeople who encounter different types of shoppers in retail sales conversations. Sales trainings and customer orientation guidelines for salespeople are no new concepts. Therefore, by investigating whether shopping companions need to be added to the existing solution concepts how salespeople approach customers in order to provide optimal customer service, we focus on variant design, i.e. the adaption available solution concepts (van Aken 2005).

A high degree of customer orientation can serve as a retailer's distinctive feature against competitors. If retailers manage to put customers in a good mood, for instance by offering superior functional service quality (Sweeney et al. 1997), customers may perceive even objectively weak arguments as subjectively strong arguments (Bambauer-Sachse and Gierl 2009). Particularly, when customer service is personalized and when salespeople relate to customers at a human level, it can reinforce customers' satisfaction and patronage behavior (Mittal and Laszar 1996). In co-shopping situations, shoppers may alter their own behavior due to the additional influence of a shopping companion. In previous research, the parties involved in retail sales interactions have only been considered dyadically, either looking at salespeople and shoppers or at shoppers and their respective companions. Adaptive selling techniques are therefore designed for one-to-one sales interactions between a salesperson and a shopper only. But as the addition of a shopping companion changes the whole shopping experience (Borges et al. 2010; Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger 2011), a salesperson's approach to adaptive selling in co-shopping situations needs to change as well. Although shopping companions sometimes take over tasks that are usually taken over by salespeople, e.g. sharing advice when a consumer is uncertain and providing social support (Haas and Kenning 2014), their influence can be twofold from a salesperson's point of view. That is, besides encouraging purchases or enhancing perceived hedonic value derived from shopping, companions can cause shopping

apprehension in the shopper (Chebat et al. 2014), for instance, because the shopper feels evaluated or judged (Prus 1993; Argo et al. 2005), which could lead to a shopper abandoning or adjourning the purchase. Woodside and Sims (1976) highlighted the benefits of not only convincing the shoppers themselves, but also their companions in order to make them approve of a purchase, which can facilitate the sales conversation for the seller. When looking for clues about the shopper and the adequate selling approach, companions can be of help for the salesperson as well. The presence of a specific type of shopping companion can already provide valuable information to the seller, as they tend to choose certain types of companions over others for the purpose of risk reduction (Kiecker and Hartman 1993), depending on the sort of risk a shopper associates with a specific product. By employing adaptive selling techniques, salespeople try to steer a sales conversation in the desired direction by fitting the sales approach to the customer's character, behavior and needs (McFarland et al. 2006; Román and Iacobucci 2010; Sharma and Levy 1995). In the presence of a companion, this can also include a seller's attempt either to reinforce positive influences of a companion, or to mitigate potentially harmful behaviors. Literature on adaptive selling suggests adequate approaches for salespeople depending on various shopper characteristics (Guo and Main 2017; McFarland et al. 2006; Menon and Dubé 2000), but in order to efficiently deal with the additional influence of a shopping companion, they need to know about the specific characteristics and behaviors of companions that substantiate their influence. Particularly in retail stores that aim at a high level of customer orientation, managers should raise the question whether the concepts used to train salespeople in terms of customer orientation need to be re-designed and additionally account for the influences and effects a shopping companion adds to the sales conversation.

In order to fill the research gap on the contributions of shopping companions to the sales conversation in retail shopping situations, this study has two main objectives. First, to identify different types of behaviors and characteristics of shopping companions from salespeople's point of view and investigate whether they can be clustered in superordinate categories. Second, to understand the consequences the influence different companion types can have on shoppers, salespeople and the sales conversation in general.

By moving beyond the dyadic consideration of the shopper-salesperson and shopper-companion relationships, we add to the body of literature by suggesting five different types of shopping companions based on unique compositions of different characteristics and behaviors they display in sales conversations. Each companion type exerts specific influences on the shopper and the salesperson. Understanding these influences is crucial for retailers in order to grasp the full dynamics of sales conversations and to evaluate the efficiency of their salespeople's approaches. Different behaviors and attitudes of these various companion types implicate a variety of challenges for salespeople that have not yet been addressed by adaptive selling research. From a practical point of view, we propose that a salesperson's ability to effectively evaluate the characteristics and needs of shopping companions is likely to enhance their success in sales conversations. We suggest that salespeople reconsider their approach to customer-oriented service in co-shopping situations and evaluate

whether their set of tools includes adequate techniques for handling shopping companions. A re-design of the education of salespeople and training could lead to higher levels of customer orientation and a higher chance of reinforcing shopping companions' positive behaviors or mitigating possible detrimental effects.

In order to define the scope of this study, we first examine the body of literature on different types of shoppers and how they are influenced by the presence of companions and then outline salespeople's use of adaptive selling techniques. Next, we elaborate on the importance of salespeople considering shopping companions in their adaptive selling approaches in order to appropriately deal with their influences. Subsequently, the exploratory research approach and the expert sample are described, after which we discuss the different types of shopping companion behaviors we identified. Eventually, we discuss our findings in terms of theoretical and practical implications, their meaning for future research, and the limitations of the study.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Shoppers and shopping companions

A lot of research has been dedicated to profiling different types of shoppers, while the characteristics and motivations taken as a basis to define shopper types as well as samples and research contexts varied greatly. Research has clustered types of shoppers by underlying motivations for shopping trips and the importance of certain aspects of the shopping process, based on psychographic criteria, or based on efforts taken by shoppers in order to achieve certain goals (see Table 1).

Adult shopping companions, on the other hand, have nearly exclusively been researched in terms of the impact they have on accompanied shoppers and not based on their characteristics and actual behaviors. Companions influence the behavior of shoppers in terms of time (Gillison et al. 2015; Hart and Dale 2014; Nicholls 1997; Prus 1993; Sommer et al. 1992) and money they spend in the process (Kurt et al. 2011; Mangleburg et al. 2004; Nicholls 1997; Prus 1993; Sommer et al. 1992; Zhang et al. 2014; Mora and González 2016). Negative effects of companions have been documented as well. They may interfere with shoppers' purchase intention, for instance, when shoppers intend to buy a product of very personal nature (Sommer et al. 1992) or when the companions act as the shoppers' bad conscience and prevent them from buying a product they cannot or should not buy (Prus 1993). In contrast to friends, family members as companions can harm the perception of shoppers' enjoyment of the shopping process (Borges et al. 2010).

More detailed descriptions of shopping companions in earlier research either refer to their relationship with shoppers (e.g. children; family members such as spouses, siblings, or parents; or friends) or to their gender. In many cases, however, researchers do not specify the type of companion and define co-shopping as the situation where any kind of person accompanies a shopper (e.g. Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger 2011; Woodside and Sims 1976; Yim et al. 2013; Mora and González 2016; Hart and Dale 2014; Sommer et al. 1992; Nicholls 1997). Only a few studies look

Table 1 Various shopper types described by earlier research

| Author(s) | Described types of shoppers | Research population and context |
|--|---|---|
| Stone (1954), Darden and Reynolds (1971) | Economic shoppers; personalizing shoppers; ethical/moralistic shoppers; apathetic shoppers | Female department shoppers |
| Williams et al. (1978) | Apathetic shoppers; convenience shoppers; price shoppers; involved shoppers | Grocery shoppers |
| Bellenger and Pradeep (1980) | Recreational shoppers; convenience/economic shoppers | Adult shoppers in malls and non-mall locations |
| Westbrook and Black (1985) | High involvement shoppers; medium-high involvement and merchandise choice optimizers; apathetic shoppers; economic shoppers; "average" shoppers | Female department store shoppers |
| Lesser and Hughes (1986) | Inactive shoppers; active shoppers; traditional shoppers; service shoppers; dedicated fringe shoppers | Heads of households from several studies in different regions |
| Lumpkin et al. (1986) | Inactive shoppers; active outshoppers; thrifty innovators | Shoppers from rural communities |
| Babin et al. (1994) | Hedonic shoppers; utilitarian shoppers | Adult shoppers |
| Jarratt (1996) | "Have to" shoppers; moderate shoppers; service shoppers; experiential shoppers; practical shoppers; product focused shoppers | Shoppers from rural trading areas |
| Reynolds et al. (2002) | Basic shoppers; apathetic shoppers; destination shoppers; enthusiasts; serious shoppers; brand seekers | Mall shoppers |

at companions on a more individual level, trying to elaborate on specific reasons that mediate or moderate above-mentioned relationships between their influence and money or time shoppers spend in stores, shopping enjoyment, or emotional attachment to shopping places (Wenzel and Benkenstein 2018; Bellenger and Pradeep 1980; Borges et al. 2010; Chebat et al. 2014). Notable differences exist between male and female companions (Kurt et al. 2011) or when the relationship strength between shoppers and their companions was particularly strong or weak (Kiecker and Hartman 1994). An overview of the documented effects of various types of adult companions on accompanied shoppers is provided in Table 2.

In order to gain a better understanding of why these different effects of shopping companions on shoppers emerge, a more specific context is helpful, i.e. these effects need to be attributed to specific characteristics and behaviors of companions. Creating this context defines the scope of this research. To obtain a complete understanding of shopping companion's effects on sales conversations, the perspective of salespeople is crucial as well. Retail salespeople encounter interactions with shoppers and their companions on a daily basis and thus deal with many different characters. In order to grasp how salespeople influence sales conversations themselves, the next section will provide an overview of different adaptive selling techniques of salespeople and the criteria based on which these techniques are chosen.

Table 2 Effects of shopping companions found by earlier research

| Influenced factors of shopping companions | Type of companion | Author(s) |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Time spent | Family members and/or friends | Haytko and Baker (2004), Borges et al. (2010), Gillison et al. (2015), Mangleburg et al. (2004), Hart and Dale (2014) and Haytko and Baker (2004) |
| Time spent | Not specified | Hart and Dale (2014), Mora and González (2016) and Sommer et al. (1992) |
| Money spent | Family members and/or friends | Kurt et al. (2011), Mangleburg et al. (2004), Zhang et al. (2014), Haytko and Baker (2004) and Prus (1993) |
| Money spent | Not specified | Hart and Dale (2014), Mora and González (2016) and Sommer et al. (1992) |
| Emotions/confidence/hedonic value/risk perception | Family members and/or friends | Borges et al. (2010), Chebat et al. (2014), Mangleburg et al. (2004), Hartman and Kiecker (1991), Lim and Beatty (2011), Gillison et al. (2015), Prus (1993), Kiecker and Hartman (1993), Wenzel and Benkenstein (2018), Kiecker and Hartman (1994), Minahan and Huddleston (2010) and Bell (1967) |
| Emotions/confidence/hedonic value/risk perception | Not specified | Mora and González (2016), Hart and Dale (2014) and Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger (2011) |
| Purchase intention or impulsive behaviors | Family members and friends | Luo (2005), Yim et al. (2013), Cheng et al. (2013), Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2014), Haytko and Baker (2004), Gentina et al. (2013), Prus (1993) and Zhang et al. (2014) |
| Purchase intention or impulsive behaviors | Not specified | Nicholls (1997), Woodside and Sims (1976), Yim et al. (2013) and Lindsey-Mullikin and Munger (2011) |

2.2 Retail salespeople and adaptive selling techniques

In adaptive selling, salespeople adjust their sales approach with respect to the specific characteristics and needs of a customer (McFarland et al. 2006; Román and Iacobucci 2010; Sharma and Levy 1995). At the beginning of a sales encounter, salespeople often use intuitive judgments to assess the customer's needs and characteristics (Hall et al. 2015). When salespeople need to correct their initial judgment and alter their approach, changes need to be made in the right direction, as otherwise, they are ineffective or can even harm the influence attempt (Evans et al. 2012; Hall et al. 2015). High levels of empathy facilitate a salesperson's customer-orientation (Delpechitre et al. 2019) and in order to adapt their selling strategies accordingly within a sales conversation, listening skills are of crucial importance. Salespeople with good listening skills can adapt their approaches better, create more trust with customers and thus increase their perceived value (Itani et al. 2019; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). Salespeople are one of the most important contributors to customers' attitudes toward the retailer itself (Babin et al. 1999), and those who possess the ability to recognize a shopper's individual needs and characteristics and can adjust their selling approaches accordingly are more successful than others (McFarland et al. 2006). In fact, adaptive selling is one of the most important determinants of a salesperson's performance (Verbeke et al. 2011). The importance

of functional and technical service quality for customers' willingness to make a purchase (Sweeney et al. 1997) and the connection between a salesperson's customer orientation and their sales performance (Homburg et al. 2011), as well as customer satisfaction (Román and Iacobucci 2010; Stock and Hoyer 2005), are familiar concepts. When engaging in adaptive selling, the categorization of shoppers is crucial for salespeople in order to better understand and serve their needs (Sharma and Levy 1995). Yet, considerable parts of the literature focus on analyzing the use of various customer-oriented selling techniques without considering specific characteristics and behaviors of shoppers (e.g. Bailey 2015; Sweeney et al. 1997; Homburg et al. 2011). Common techniques salespeople use in sales conversations comprise information exchange or recommendations, verbal prompts, threats, or promises, ingratiation or inspirational appeals (Ebster et al. 2006; McFarland et al. 2006; Alavi et al. 2018; Plouffe et al. 2014; Hochstein et al. 2019). In adaptive selling, however, these tools should not be used universally but under the assumption that customers are different and therefore require different approaches (Plouffe et al. 2014), also in order to view a salesperson as a credible source of information (Arndt et al. 2014). Differences in shopper characteristics can be due to situational circumstances, as for instance a customer's level of informedness about a product (Hochstein et al. 2019) or their tendency to approach or avoid stimuli in the shopping environment (Guo and Main 2017), which requires salespeople to choose either autonomy-oriented or interaction-oriented approaches. Moreover, shoppers can display different orientations toward focusing on tasks or interactions (McFarland et al. 2006), which is linked to the more effective use of either information-related selling tactics, ingratiation and inspirational appeals, or threats and promises in order to maximize their success. How a shopper processes information can further determine the approach a seller should take (Hunt and Bashaw 1999). If, for instance, a salesperson fails to respond to a shopper's display of certain positive or negative emotions adequately, the shopper may leave the store and become dissatisfied (Menon and Dubé 2000).

Consequently, in customer-oriented selling environments, salespeople, who employ adaptive selling approaches, need to match selling techniques with shoppers' personalities and characteristics in order to convince and provide a higher degree of satisfaction. Customer-oriented salespeople therefore need to be equipped with an adequate set of diagnostic tools not only to recognize the type of shopper at hand. The same accounts for the characteristics of a shopping companion, who may become an additional part of the sales conversation that possibly requires a different approach than the shoppers themselves in order to be convinced or to collaborate with the salesperson.

2.3 Shopping companions in retail sales conversations

Including shopping companions in adaptive selling research is inevitable, given that the required level of credibility to make a successful influence attempt (Evans et al. 2012) needs to be established with a second person at the same time. However, research on salespeople's interactions with customers has focused on single shoppers to date, and not yet included the presence of shopping companions. The ability

to categorize shoppers makes salespeople more successful (Weitz et al. 1986) and which selling approach is chosen by a salesperson depends on whether salespeople have a sufficient skillset regarding the categorization of a shopper (Román and Iacobucci 2010) or, in the case of co-shopping, a shopping dyad, and whether they can identify their characteristics and needs properly. The complexity of this task for salespeople in co-shopping situations becomes more apparent when looking at the internalization process of interpersonal influence suggested by Kelman (1961). McFarland et al. (2006) have transferred Kelman's "processes of opinion change" to the adaptive selling context. According to them, internalization in a sales context occurs when a shopper follows the suggestion of a salesperson because they deem it appropriate for solving their problem. In co-shopping situations, a companion is added to the equation and, in a worst case scenario from a salesperson's point of view, provides contrasting advice to the shopper. In these situations, the shopper has to decide whether to listen to the companion, whom they may have a strong relationship with or to the professional (salesperson), or, whether to avoid making a decision at all and leave the potentially uncomfortable situation. How a shopper makes such a decision corresponds to the coping strategies from psychological stress research, where a person either approaches a stressor or avoids it, i.e. turns away from a stressful situation (Roth and Cohen 1986). How stressful a situation is perceived as is also related to a person's psychological resources, i.e. their resilience toward stressful stimuli (Ong et al. 2006). People with higher levels of resilience show higher probabilities of perceiving a stimulus as a challenge rather than a threat, because they feel more self-confident and thus able to overcome said stimulus (Folkman 2013). A salesperson, however, can hardly assess a shopper's resilience and thus rely on them approaching rather than avoiding a stressful situation in the store. Therefore, they need to focus on preventing such negative stimuli from emerging in the first place. In order to do so, their understanding of a companion's behavior and influence is crucial. Research on typologies of shoppers and on adaptive selling both lack the inclusion of a shopping companion's character traits and behaviors, and therefore have not formed a connection so far between the salesperson and their reaction to a shopping companion and vice versa. Instead, participants of sales conversations have been researched in dyadic interactions only, i.e. as a companion-shopper interaction or as a shopper-salesperson interaction. Adding an accompanying person has the seller facing a second variable in the equation, who might require a different approach to be convinced. As the shopping companion is not involved in the purchase per se, they are likely to have a more objective view on the decision and might easily advise the shopper against making a purchase. A companion could even intervene in situations where the salesperson had already been successful in closing the sale in a one-on-one conversation, by reminding the shopper that they should not buy the product (Prus 1993), or by stating a negative opinion regarding the product or the price. Dealing with a shopper's objections is a crucial part of the regular selling process (Jobber and Lancaster 2015) and, in situations of co-shopping, companions may elicit additional objections the salesperson needs to handle. In order to be successful in their influence attempt, salespeople therefore must understand the needs and characteristics of both characters, the shopper and their companion.

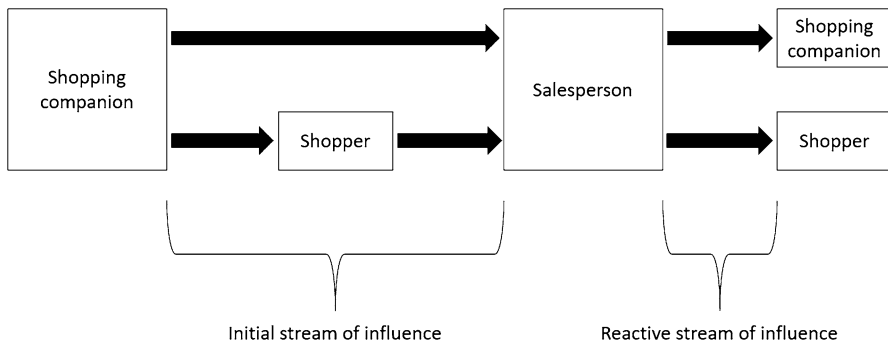


Fig. 1 Proposed streams of influence in co-shopping situations

The influence of shopping companions on salespeople (or: the sales conversation) may take place in two different ways (see Fig. 1). First, in a direct way, when companions communicate and interact with the salesperson directly. In the second way, their influence is supposed to be mediated by the shopper. We call this the initial stream of influence, as it cannot be influenced by the salesperson before they are confronted. A companion's interaction with a shopper is supposed to elicit consequences not only for the shoppers themselves, but also for the salesperson due to changes in attitude or behavior of shoppers because of to the companion's influence. Being at the end of the initial stream of influence, the salesperson is now in the position to react. Depending on the approach they choose, they may address the companion or the shopper, or both of them. This study aims at exploring both influence streams by investigating shopping companions' characteristics and their behaviors displayed in sales conversations, as well as the consequences of their behavior for the shopper and the challenges arising for salespeople.

3 Methodology

3.1 Qualitative content analysis

The goal of this study was to explore behaviors and characteristics of shopping companions during sales conversations from the perspective of salespeople, and to learn about their subsequent effects on the accompanied shopper, the salesperson and the sales conversation itself. Due to its exploratory nature, the research was conducted by means of a qualitative approach. Particularly in exploratory research stages and when theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited, conventional qualitative content analysis is appropriate (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In order to access practical insider knowledge we choose systematizing expert interviews as the tool for data collection (Bogner and Menz 2009). To maintain flexibility during the interviews as well as the ability to guide the interviews in the intended direction, a semi-structured interviewing approach was deemed appropriate. This approach should also allow room for respondents to spontaneously describe situations that

substantiate their answers and to provide more detailed information (Brinkmann 2014a, b), which is encouraged by conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), in order to understand the latent content of the data (Sandelowski 2000) as well. Although the data collection approach is explorative and qualitative in nature, prior theoretical knowledge about existing concepts regarding the researched area was crucial (Flick 2018), particularly for the conceptualization of the interview structure. Earlier research provides a variety of categorizations of different types of shoppers, their behaviors, and attitudes, as well as various effects of shopping companions on accompanied shoppers regarding their emotions, thinking processes and behaviors (see chapter 2.1). We used the findings of this body of literature to develop the questionnaire guiding the interviews, which allows the capturing of behaviors and attitudes of shopping companions from the perspective of salespeople. To be able to attribute certain effects of shopping companions on a shopper, as described in earlier research, to specific behaviors or characteristics of shopping companions, questions aiming at these effects on shoppers and the sales interaction itself were included as well. We pilot-tested the interview questionnaires regarding their structure and plausibility in two independent interviews with a fellow researcher from a different field and a department manager from a clothing store who would not participate in the study.¹

Due to the study's focus on social influences in retail shopping situations, the category of products salespeople in the study deal with needed to be associated with a certain intensity of decision-making by shoppers as well as a higher level of susceptibility to interpersonal influences. Various product categories are usually linked to a different level of customer involvement, i.e. a consumer's perceived relevance of a product based on individual criteria (Zaichkowsky 1985; Pansari and Kumar 2016), which leads to an extended acquisition of information and a more active processing of product-related information (Warrington and Shim 2000). A higher level of involvement is assumed within the category of shopping goods, as opposed to convenience goods. Shopping goods typically involve a certain amount of consideration prior to the purchase regarding the price, quality and suitability of a product (Bucklin 1963; Holton 1958), which increases a shopper's susceptibility to interpersonal influence. When the purpose of a product is to transport a specific self-image of a shopper (Jacoby and Kaplan 1972) or when a product is related to a consumer's social identity (Feinberg et al. 1992), the susceptibility to social influence increases even more. Therefore, we focused on the category of shopping goods and included different product types from this category, since shoppers may vary in the degree to which they are susceptible to the product-related influence of others depending on the product type (Witt and Bruce 1970), namely clothing and shoes, glasses as well as consumer electronics.

¹ The interview guideline is available from the first author upon request.

3.2 Sample

The interviews were conducted among sales associates from stores located on shopping miles in big cities in the Rhine-Main region in Germany. We interviewed salespeople from retail stores with a focus on clothing and/or shoes, glasses, or consumer electronics, whereas each store was specialized in at least one of these product categories. We did not discriminate between the hierarchy levels of the participants, but they needed to have at least 3 years of practical experience working as a salesperson within one of the selected product categories. In addition to their profession, these criteria were established to ensure a certain level of experience as well as solid numbers of active participation in co-shopping situations with customers, making the participants actual experts in the field (Meuser and Nagel 2009). 14 different stores and 25 sales associates took part in the study, 15 of which were female and ten of which were male. The average age was 40 years, with a range from 23 to 73. Regarding the participants' level of experience, 17 sales associates were considered to have a high level of experience, meaning they had more than 5 years of experience on-the-job after finishing their training or apprenticeship, while eight participants were considered to have low experience (at least 3 years of experience but less than 5 years on-the-job). An overview of the participants and their respective field of expertise and position at the store is shown in Table 3. All participating stores were required to offer customer-oriented consulting services as a routine part of their service. We recruited participants via direct contact with the respective store managers, informing them about the research topic and subsequently arranging appointments with them or one or more people from their sales staff. All interviews were conducted face to face, the overall average net duration was 24 min. The interviews were then fully transcribed by the main author. Transcription of interviews resulted in 342 pages of data material and followed a denaturalized approach, capturing the substantial meanings and perceptions of the interview partners with the highest accuracy possible, but leaving out accents or other idiosyncratic elements of speech, as well as any involuntary vocalization (Oliver et al. 2005). We conducted the interviews in German and, where necessary, translated statements quoted in this article into English.

3.3 Inductive category formation

The data gathered during interviews was analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis, a systematic, rule-bound mixed methods approach that contains both qualitative and quantitative steps during the analysis (Mayring 2014). To be able to build categories of shopping companions directly from the participants' input and not from theoretical considerations, we used the technique of inductive category formation (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Thomas 2006; Mayring 2014). The approach is similar to the open coding process from the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 2015), but "more systematic" (Mayring 2014, p. 79). In a first step, the relevant parts of the material and the level of abstraction have been determined by going through the data line by line and assigning codes based on the research goals

Table 3 Background information on the participants in the study

| Expert | Age | Product category | Position | Experience |
|-----------|-----|----------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Asya | 23 | Clothing/shoes | Saleswoman | Low |
| Anonymous | 58 | Clothing/shoes | Salesman | High |
| Caglar | 28 | Glasses | Master optician | High |
| Carmelo | 46 | Clothing/shoes | Store manager | High |
| Elke | 52 | Clothing/shoes | Store manager | High |
| Ezgi | 27 | Clothing/shoes | Saleswoman | Low |
| Gülsah | 24 | Clothing/shoes | Saleswoman | Low |
| Günther | 66 | Clothing/shoes | Salesman | High |
| Javier | 38 | Clothing/shoes | Salesman | High |
| Jessica | 28 | Clothing/shoes | Store manager | High |
| Johann | 24 | Consumer electronics | Salesman | Low |
| Jolanta | 34 | Glasses | Saleswoman | High |
| Karin | 60 | Clothing/shoes | Saleswoman | High |
| Kathrin | 51 | Clothing/shoes | Store manager | High |
| Katja | 42 | Glasses | Optician | High |
| Kristian | 26 | Consumer electronics | Salesman | Low |
| Lara | 23 | Clothing/shoes | Department manager | Low |
| Peter | 73 | Clothing/shoes | Salesman | High |
| Regine | 56 | Clothing/shoes | Store manager | High |
| Rhia | 28 | Glasses | Master optician | High |
| Sarah | 27 | Glasses | Department manager | High |
| Susanne | 34 | Glasses | Optician | High |
| Susanne | 49 | Clothing/shoes | Saleswoman | High |
| Thorsten | 29 | Consumer electronics | Salesman | Low |
| Werner | 62 | Clothing/shoes | Salesman | High |

(Thomas 2006; Mayring 2014), which is crucial for the following analytical process. Our goal was to identify different types of shopping companions based on their respective characteristics and behaviors, as well as on subsequent effects on shoppers, salespeople and the sales conversation. Therefore, we included all material referring to how shopping companions behave in and contribute to sales conversations and examined the interview data for characteristics and behaviors of shopping companions that interviewees mentioned most frequently. We then used axial coding to search for relationships between and among the established categories and to relate matching categories with their subcategories (Hutchison et al. 2010). We took several measures to ensure the reliability and validity of our findings. We coded and analyzed all interview transcripts with qualitative data analysis software QSR NVIVO 11 Plus and handled them with due diligence and caution. The coding progress was continuously discussed and evaluated among all authors in order to encourage a variety of different perspectives (Güttel et al. 2015), which follows the established procedure for inductive category formation technique by Mayring (2014). This requires a revision of the established categories after 50% of the process

at the latest, in order to evaluate whether the level of abstraction was too specific or too general, and whether the initial coding definitions need to be realigned. However, due to continuous evaluation of the coded material for possible ambiguity caused by overlaps in the coding process, this was not the case. After approximately half of the interviews had been reviewed, no additional new categories were found. After establishing superior categories of displayed attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics of shopping companions, we examined how they interacted with and related to one another within a larger context (Neeley and Dumas 2016). In the process, different manifestations of above-mentioned characteristics were merged (e.g. Karhu and Ritala 2018) in order to suggest a variety of different overall types of shopping companions. In order to demonstrate the plausibility of our results and to address the validity issue of referential adequacy (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), exemplary informants' statements regarding the various characteristics of shopping companions and their subordinate value dimensions is provided in "Appendix A". In "Appendix B" we provide exemplary statements regarding the major challenges that arise for salespeople due to the presence of a shopping companion in sales conversations.

4 Research findings

The goal of our study was divided in two main objectives: first, the identification of different types of shopping companions from a salesperson's perspective, and second, to understand differences in the effects different types of shopping companions have on the accompanied shopper, the salesperson and the sales conversation as a whole.

4.1 Characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of shopping companions

In order to achieve the first goal of designing superior categories of shopping companion types, we examined the interview data for characteristics and behaviors of shopping companions that would occur most frequently. We identified seven fundamental characteristics that shopping companions display in sales conversations.

First, shopping companions can be grouped by their *level of activity*, which showed in active, dominant or passive form. Active companions participate in the sales conversation willingly and proactively and advise the shopper, suggest alternative products and provide feedback. Dominant companions engage in the same activities as active companions, but at the same time take over the dominant role in the conversation, due to either their expertise or their personality traits. They command the shopper regarding what to try or what to buy, and function as the primary contact partner for the salesperson, leaving the shopper in a predominantly passive role. Passive types of shopping companions often leave or avoid the sales conversation and, for instance, sit down at some place in the store, or tag along while not participating in the process until being addressed by the other parties.

Second, companions display different *attitudes toward the shopper*. Benevolent companions pay attention to a shopper's particular needs and suggest alternatives

and new ideas accordingly, or pose questions to the salesperson on behalf of the shopper. If companions discourage the shopper from buying something nice or make suggestions that are inappropriate and that would embarrass the shopper, the companion's attitude toward the shopper is classified as envious. Companions who mainly display interest in their own agenda and therefore ignore or do not pay attention to the shopper's needs are considered indifferent.

Third, we find that different companions provide different *types of support*, which we divide into two basic categories suggested by earlier research: social (or symbolic) support and functional support (Hartman and Kiecker 1991; Kiecker and Hartman 1993, 1994). Companions provide functional support when they serve as a source of knowledge and information for the shopper, provide advice on product features, prices, retail stores, or find product alternatives for the shopper. Their support is of a social nature when they accompany the shopper for social reasons, provide moral support, affect the shopper's confidence, or share feedback on the suitability of a product.

A fourth characteristic of companions is their displayed *level of expertise* during a sales conversation. Companions with high expertise have extensive knowledge about a product or a product category, which may stem from professional backgrounds, their distinct sense of fashion, or, in terms of glasses, because they wear glasses themselves. Shoppers usually rely on the competence of high expertise companions. We assumed low expertise when the companion either does not display any particular expertise in a product category or just claims to be an expert but, according to the interpretation of the interviewees, in fact is not.

The fifth characteristic considers the *nature of a shopping companion's impact on the shopper's decision-making process*. Behaviors of shopping companions that nourish the shopper's decision-making process, such as genuine feedback, the suggestion of product alternatives or the encouragement to try certain products, are facilitative from the shopper's perspective. When companions annoy or pressure the shopper, they become an obstacle on the shopper's way a decision and thus have an obstructive impact on the decision-making process. Companions who do not interact with either the shopper or the salesperson and remain passive in any way are considered neutral for the decision-making process.

The sixth attribute refers to the importance of a companion's opinion for the shopper and therefore *the strength of their influence* on the shopper's eventual purchase decision. Companions' influence strength is considered high when their opinion or judgment is obviously crucial for the shopper's considerations and therefore strongly determines the outcome of the process. Their influence strength is considered low when a shopper defies the influence attempt of the companion and decides against it, or does not consider it any further.

The perception of shopping trips in terms of hedonic and utilitarian outcomes has previously been researched with a focus on the shopper (Babin et al. 1994; Borges et al. 2010). We include *companions' enjoyment of the shopping process* as the seventh characteristic and distinguish between high and low levels of enjoyment. As far as salespeople could provide specific insights regarding a companion's derived enjoyment from the process, a low level of enjoyment was assumed when a companion told the shopper they do not want to continue the shopping trip or otherwise

expressed discomfort or annoyance. When a companion took an active role in the process, regardless of whether their influence was of facilitative or obstructive nature, without signs of negative emotions or annoyance caused by the process itself, a high level of enjoyment was assumed.

During the interviews, participants described varying numbers of situations where they encountered shopping companions with different attitudes, behaviors and characteristics. Interviewees would sometimes even mention several different companion characteristics in one sentence in order to distinguish them from each other. The displayed level of activity of companions was taken as the starting point to cluster different types of companions. We then grouped all statements referring to either active, passive or dominant types of companions together. In a second step, we successively evaluated how interviewees described each of these different groups in terms of the remaining characteristics described above. This procedure resulted in five general types of shopping companions, each of which is characterized by a unique composition of these underlying characteristics (see Table 4). We labeled these types according to their most distinguishing attribute.

4.2 Types of shopping companions

We suggest five different general types of shopping companions by agglomerating statements of the interviewees that described similar behaviors and attitudes of shopping companions. Some of the interviewees provided very detailed information on certain companion types' characteristics, which served as a benchmark to correlate the statements that provided not as much detail. We will now describe these five general types of companions by using exemplary statements that stem from the above-mentioned detailed information provided by some respondents.

The *active supporter* usually displays a benevolent attitude toward the accompanied shopper and their relationship is harmonious and balanced. They offer advice in the shopper's best interest and their opinion is taken into careful consideration by the shopper. Except for situations where shoppers display high self-confidence and rather make decisions on their own, active supporters usually have a strong influence on the shopper's purchase decision.

... And then, there is the partner, for instance, that is always a good thing for us, who participates. The one who basically participates actively and says 'hey, I like this, try that on!'. The one who benevolently approves without being too dominant, who just positively reinforces the shopper. ... (Carmelo, clothing/shoes, store manager)

This type of supporter actively participates in the shopping process by providing feedback, discussing product alternatives and how they could be combined with products the shopper already possesses, and by fetching items for the shopper. Acting in the shopper's best interest, they sometimes express negative opinions as well to protect the shopper from a bad decision. Consequently, while active supporters typically facilitate the shopper's decision-making process, this can also result in the

Table 4 Classification criteria and suggested types of shopping companions

| Companion type/companion characteristic | Active supporters | Patromizers | Experts | Destructives | Apathetics |
|---|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Level of activity (active/dominant/passive) | Active | Active/dominant | Active/dominant | Active or passive | Passive |
| Attitude toward shopper (benevolent/envious/indifferent/unknown) | Benevolent | Benevolent/envious | Benevolent | Envious/indifferent/unknown | Benevolent/indifferent/unknown |
| Type of support (social/functional/unknown) | Social | Social | Social and/or functional | Unknown | Unknown |
| Level of expertise (high/low/unknown) | Unknown | Unknown | High/low | Low/unknown | Unknown |
| Nature of influence on the shopper's decision-making process (facilitative/obstructive/neutral) | Facilitative | Facilitative/obstructive | Facilitative | Obstructive | Obstructive/neutral |
| Influence strength on shopper's decision (high/low/unknown) | High/low | High | High | High | Low |
| Enjoyment of shopping process (high/low/unknown) | High/unknown | High/unknown | Unknown | Low | Low |

shopper deciding against making a purchase. They are very familiar with the shopper and therefore can provide valuable information about the shopper's needs and style and, in doing so, help the seller suggest product alternatives that fit the shopper's needs better:

... If there is an active companion, I always try to respect that they know the shopper better than I do. I try to use them as an aid, so they can support me in my consulting. ... (Asya, clothing/shoes, sales associate)

Active supporters increase the shopper's perceived hedonic value derived from the shopping process and often enjoy the experience themselves. They mainly serve to enhance the shopper's confidence and derived pleasure by offering their honest opinion, therefore rather providing social support to the shopper instead of high product expertise. Sometimes active supporters even encourage shoppers to buy more than they initially intended. Several interviewees pointed out that they sometimes try to convert this type of companion into a future customer as well.

Expert companions display active or dominant levels of activity. They support the shopper by providing explanations about products and their components, resources or capabilities, by discussing technical details with the salesperson or by posing important questions on behalf of the shopper. Due to the nature of their task, i.e. to help the shopper make the best possible decision, their attitude toward the shopper is benevolent and their influence facilitative for the shopper's decision-making. Sometimes their knowledge turns out to be superficial or only based on test reports. If, however, the companion has sound knowledge about the product category at hand, they contribute to the process by reinforcing the shopper's confidence or in the way that salespeople can use their own expertise to lead a fact-based discussion and support their sales proposal. Their influence on a shopper's decision naturally is strong, as in some cases, expert companions even make the decision on behalf of the shopper. It remained unclear whether expert companions derive any hedonic value from the shopping experience itself.

... from what I have experienced until now, customers remained rather passive because they relied on the expert. This means, they know "okay, he knows what he is talking about, this is why I brought him. If he says it like this and if he agrees with what the salesperson says, it will be correct". ... (Johann, electronics, sales associate)

Patronizing companions not only actively take part in the selling process; they take the leading role in the conversation and often dominate the shopper. They may instruct the salesperson regarding what the shopper needs and, sometimes, even go as far as taking over the actual job of the salesperson as a consultant.

... there are the dominant types, let's put it like this, they try to show "listen, the boy needs this and that to wear". And then I say "okay, what is my role going to be? Do I just need to bring the products?"... (Carmelo, men's clothing/shoes, store manager)

Patronizers do not necessarily possess high levels of expertise and thus rather provide moral support to the shopper, although their way of influence is not comparable to that of the active supporter, who only *advises* the shopper to buy or not to buy something. Instead, patronizing companions often lead the shopper to make the decision they consider appropriate, either by directly telling them what to do, or sometimes in a subtler way. Either way, their influence on the shopper's eventual purchase decision is downright strong.

... And then there are married couples where the woman says, I am just going to say a [random] name now, "Karl, you don't like this, do you?". With that said, she already pointed out that this is not going to be purchased. And then, the man says "No, I don't like this". ... (Günther, men's clothing/shoes, sales associate)

Although commanding in character, patronizers usually display a benevolent attitude toward the shopper, for instance, when a wife directs her husband toward new clothes that suit him well. Yet, envious behaviors of dominant companions were reported, too. In these situations, they allegedly do not want the accompanied person to buy something nice. When this happens, their influence obstructs the shopper's decision-making process, while in most cases, they contribute in a facilitative way. That is, most of the time, a patronizing companion intends to steer the shopper toward buying something nice and leads the way to get there.

... There is the wife, who relies on my help and says "I would like you to sell my husband an outfit that looks nice and suits him well". ... (Werner, men's clothing/shoes, sales associate)

Destructive companions can be active or passive in their level of activity. They do not reveal a specific role they take over for the shopper or a specific level of expertise regarding the products at hand, but their behavior suggests they do not derive any hedonic value from the shopping process. Instead, their behavior makes the sales conversation unpleasant for the shopper or the salesperson—often for both at the same time. Typical ways destructive companions obstruct sales conversations are:

- Overt display of displeasure throughout the sales conversation
- Pressuring the shopper toward making a purchase or toward abandoning the purchase out of egocentric objectives, i.e. to end the shopping process as quickly as possible
- Suggesting unsuitable product alternatives that embarrass the shopper and make them feel uncomfortable
- Constantly and, often unfoundedly, rejecting all ideas and suggestions from a salesperson or a shopper
- Rude and unfriendly behavior toward the salesperson, sometimes even ignoring the salesperson
- Disparagement of the products in the store or even of the salesperson's professional expertise.

... and then, they say something like “No, I don’t like this at all. There is a crease and there, with the trousers, there is a bulge.” But actually, there is nothing and then I do not know what she actually wants. That is what I am really having problems with. ... (Carmelo, men’s clothing/shoes, store manager)

Sometimes, some of the different behaviors mentioned above occur together at the same time. The influence strength of destructive companions on the shoppers’ actual purchase decision usually is high, particularly in the moment it occurs as shoppers then often yield and abort the trip. Yet, the companion does not have a strong influence on the actual purchase intention of the shopper, as they would often come back later to make the purchase without the companion. Consequently, in the presence of a destructive companion, successful closures of sales are unlikely, as they can also actively utter their disinterest and pressure the shopper toward ending the shopping trip.

... (...) it is a challenge, when you realize there is somebody, who (...) does not want to continue shopping anymore. That makes it harder to encourage the companion, because, maybe, in their mind they are already having a nice cup of coffee. (...) Then you get the feeling that they want a quick ending, that the friend gets it over with quickly. And in some situations it cannot be done quickly, and then it is more like a rejection and [the shopper says] “I come back another time in a more relaxed atmosphere”. ... (Jessica, clothing/shoes, store manager)

Apathetic companions, like their counterparts from shopper typology research, do not derive any enjoyment from the shopping process. Instead, they often seem bored and disinterested in the shopper and their needs and choices, and do not display a particular level of expertise or any other form of support for the shopper. They remain passive and sometimes avoid or even leave the conversation, unless either the shopper or the salesperson addresses them.

... [typical behaviors of companions are] they come up the escalator and immediately look for the next seating accommodation. (...) I sometimes find it very funny when they are sitting on the chairs or fighting about who is to sit there next. ... (Lara, women’s clothing/shoes, department manager)

Their behavior suggests an indifferent attitude toward the shopper most of the time. They display benevolent behaviors at times when a shopper asks for their opinion, which may be connected with their desire to spend time with the shopper for social reasons. However, to a great degree, when being addressed by the shopper, they simply say “yes” to everything proposed to them. Although passive in their behavior, they can obstruct a shopper’s decision-making process, for instance, when the shopper feels pressured by them apparently not wanting to be around. As with destructive companions, shoppers in such situations would sometimes table the purchase and come back another time without the companion.

... [the customer] usually stays calm. It is something like “the men never have time for this anyway”, (...) but other customers also say “my husband

is always pressed for time and now he is sitting there and does not want to wait. I will come back next week or tomorrow, put this aside for me". ... (Karin, clothing/shoes, sales associate)

Due to their non-participating nature, their influence strength on a shopper's decision is considered low or even neutral, when the shopper can ignore them. Interviewees noted that when a passive companion is around, the shopper often relies on the salesperson even more.

4.3 Consequences of shopping companions for salespeople

Different types of companions can make the sales conversation more pleasant, but they also pose a variety of challenges for salespeople that add to those that come with sales conversations without a shopping companion. Wherever possible, these challenges are described with attention to the respective type of companion at hand.

From the seller's point of view, *active supporters* have a positive and a negative side. Interviewees described situations where they considered a supportive and benevolent companion's advice to the shopper as bad because of either a lack of expertise or a lack of judgment. Disagreement between a shopping companion and a salesperson can lead to uncertainty with the shopper if salespeople do not handle these disagreements properly.

... There are shoppers who become completely insecure and who do not make a purchase decision because they are unsettled and don't know any more what they like and what not. (...) For instance, when we say "those [glasses] look very good", because they fit shape-wise, they fit color-wise, and then the [companion] says the exact opposite, then the shopper does not know anymore: "okay, whom should I trust now?". ... (Jolanta, glasses, sales associate)

However, active supporters can be a valuable asset in the form that they make the whole conversation more pleasant for all parties involved and provide the salesperson with information about the shopper. Also, in situations of agreement between the companion and the seller, they enhance the shopper's confidence.

Although they are supposed to provide functional support in particular, not all *expert companions* actually possess the level of expertise they claim to do. In some situations, they display superficial knowledge about the product category that does not match the salesperson's professional opinion, which complicates the process. *Expert companions* and *patronizing companions* have in common that they often make decisions on behalf of the shopper. The salesperson then has to convince the respective companion rather than the shopper in order to sell a product.

... if the shopper has brought an expert to the sales conversation, it is mostly the case that I have to convince the companion about the product and less the shopper himself. ... (Johann, electronics, sales associate)

The importance of convincing the companion, however, exists regardless of the companion type. Most interviewees acknowledged that shopping companions affect

shoppers significantly, and in most cases, they named it as their biggest challenge that they have to convince a second person about the purchase. If salespeople fail to convince the companion in addition to the shopper, the successful closure of a sale can become jeopardized, even if shoppers felt comfortable with their choice in the first place.

... The worst case would be [if the companion says] [...] “I don’t want that, please don’t buy it”, then it will not get purchased, that is the worst case. Or “yes, buy it, if you are comfortable with it, but I don’t like it”. Then the shopper has a bad conscience, although he felt comfortable with his choice. ... (Susanne, glasses, optician)

When salespeople fail to convince the shopping companion in addition to the shopper, disagreements can also emerge between those two parties of the conversation. A shopper with high levels of confidence was described as able to defy the companion’s influence attempts on their decision-making process when they do not agree with them. These shoppers also are less insecure when the companion disagrees with the salesperson. If, however, the shopper was described as a passive or insecure person and the companion had dominating character traits, the disagreement between a companion and a salesperson would lead to shoppers becoming even more insecure. This could prevent the shopper from committing to a purchase. Therefore, many salespeople would often try to find points of agreements with the companion in order to prevent situations of disagreement and shopper apprehension.

When it comes to handling *apathetic companions*, interviewees often explained how they try to integrate them in the conversation by asking their opinion. However, they rated the influence of an apathetic companion as rather not important for the shopper’s decision and would therefore most often just leave them be and rather focus on the shopper. Instead, they feel that destructive companions pose bigger challenges, as they can lead to a shopper feeling uneasy or pressured and leave the store without making a purchase. Our findings indicate that both destructive and apathetic companions can elicit said negative outcomes, while mostly differing in their level of activity.

Along with the various characteristics of different types of companions, our interviewees mentioned a number of techniques they employ in order to handle their specific influence. Seeking agreements was common among most types of companions that participated in the sales conversation. While most interviewees stated they want to appear authentic to the customer, most of them also acknowledged that points of agreements facilitate the closing of a sale. With expert companions, however, concessions were made only, when salespeople felt the companion was right. Interviewees were also aware that customers become uncertain when companion and salesperson express different opinions. Still, and particularly, when the companion has low expertise or provides no factual arguments, interviewees would sometimes contradict the companion’s opinion, try to highlight the positive side of a product and reassure the customer in their opinion. In situations where a companion would behave in a particularly negative way, interviewees often weighed between trying to appease the companion or, if they saw no chance for success or if a dominant companion was too overwhelming, retreat from the sales conversation. Salespeople

would also try to involve apathetic companions, who did not take part in the conversation before, by asking their opinion or asking for ideas. In doing so, they aimed at taking some pressure off the actual customer, who might feel rushed to make a decision or to abandon a purchase, as they may not want to be a burden for the apathetic companion, who prefers to leave the store quickly.

5 Discussion

5.1 Challenges for salespeople

The main challenge for salespeople identified during the course of this study was that of having to convince a second person of a purchase. We suggest five different overall types of shopping companions based on unique sets of different attributes, and regardless of whether the companion takes the role of an expert adviser or a provider of moral support; naturally, they often act and feel different than the shopper and therefore require a different approach in order to be convinced. However, the companion types we suggest should not be considered as rigid types that would display the same characteristics throughout all sales encounters to the same degree. Instead, we recommend salespeople to carefully observe the characteristics and behaviors of a shopping companion and bear in mind that those may change, even during the process of the same sales encounter. Particularly with regard to bad-tempered companions, a few interviewees noted they would often try and sometimes succeed in boosting their mood, thus making the conversation much more pleasant for themselves and for the shopper as well. Therefore, it seems likely that companions not only possess the power to influence a shopper and a salesperson, but a salesperson can also convert a disturbing companion into a more pleasant one. The early recognition of a companion's characteristics and a well-chosen approach to deal with them can therefore enhance a salesperson's chance of success in co-shopping encounters.

The second major challenge for salespeople is the actual recognition of the characteristics displayed by a companion. Despite the findings of earlier research that it is crucial for the salesperson's performance to know how and when to use a specific sales approach (Plouffe et al. 2014), many interviewees pointed out that they would mainly rely on their experience and intuition and not plan ahead. They often found it difficult to categorize shopping companions and pointed out that each sales conversation is unique. However, our analysis shows that a categorization of shopping companions based on a variety of attitude-related and behavior-related variables is possible. Naturally, salespeople can only evaluate some of the characteristics of shopping companions during the actual interaction on an intuitive basis. However, in order to perform on an optimal level, subsequent deliberative judgments about customers and their needs have to be accurate as well, otherwise salespeople may perform lower in terms of effectiveness and efficiency (Hall et al. 2015). An inadequate inventory of diagnostic cues for salespeople to meet or adapt to the service expectations of customers in one-on-one sales interactions can cause negative emotions with shoppers (Menon and Dubé 2000) or lead to salespeople employing the

wrong selling strategy (Hall et al. 2015). When they feel that the salesperson is taking the wrong approach, it is likely that also shopping companions develop negative emotions and a negative attitude toward the salesperson. Moreover, when only relying on intuition and experience rather than considering behavioral cues of shopping companions, salespeople run the risk of missing out on opportunities to reinforce a companion's positive influence. In line with earlier research, we find that particularly encouraging companions can foster additional purchases, particularly when the salesperson reads their influence properly.

Third, while it is important in situations of co-shopping to acknowledge the particular needs and characteristics of a companion, salespeople still are confronted with at least two people. They therefore must not neglect the shopper's personality, which may co-determine the type and strength of a companion's influence, as for instance for risk reduction purposes. The type of companion at hand can already provide the salesperson with important information regarding the shopper's personality, and vice versa. Based on our findings, when one part of the shopping dyad had dominant personality traits, the other part was usually described as passive or reluctant. Consequently, a confident shopper did not rely on the influence of a shopping companion as much as an insecure shopper did. A possible explanation for the significant differences in personalities between a shopper and their respective companion could be found in the idea that people look out for regulatory focus complementarity in relationships, i.e. individuals seek interaction partners who complement their own approaches regarding how to achieve a goal (Bohns and Higgins 2011). Under the premise of goal congruence, this can result in higher relationship well-being (Bohns et al. 2013). Although this research has been conducted among romantic partners, it could shed some light on why co-shopping partners may differ significantly in their personality. Particularly in situations where expert companions are present, shopping dyads often agree on a specific goal, such as to buy a nice TV or a good-looking suit for the shopper. Here, the task of providing all information necessary regarding what the product is needed for or what it should look like remains with the shopper. The companion takes over the task of narrowing down all available products to a set of viable options by using their expert knowledge in the store and during a sales conversation, trying to maximize the shopper's satisfaction with the eventual purchase. Salespeople must therefore pay close attention to the shopping dyad's relationship dynamics to understand why a companion's influence on an accompanied shopper is strong or weak and how this influence is exerted.

We found that expert companions were particularly present in all interviews conducted with salespeople from electronic retailers. As these products are usually of a more complex nature than clothes or glasses and therefore pose more functional risks, this finding is not surprising. It does, however, highlight the importance of salespeople taking the presence of companions seriously in the context of complex products. They should acknowledge them as peers regarding expert knowledge in the respective product category and treat them accordingly in order to benefit from their strong influence on the shopper.

5.2 Selling techniques and the education of salespeople

While all participants named examples of usual selling techniques in the interview process, such as socializing or humorous elements, ingratiation, inspirational appeals, pressure or just providing information to shoppers, they did not view them as selling techniques. Notably, when asked whether their approach in sales conversations would generally differ when a shopping companion was present, most interviewees' immediate response was "no". However, in the remainder of the interviews, they would describe a variety of situations where they dealt with various influences of a shopping companion by adjusting their approach according to their specific behavior. These approaches serve the exclusive purpose of handling a shopping companion's specific influence and add to the seller influence tactics most commonly used in marketing literature (see Hochstein et al. 2019). In Table 5, we use these mentions as a proposing basis for how salespeople might deal with different types of shopping companions in addition to commonly researched selling strategies.

Situations involving a shopping companion contain a second determinant to consider for salespeople, which may lead to the necessity of employing different approaches for both, shopper and companion. Besides the aforementioned approaches as indicated by our interviewees, established selling techniques can be of use as well. Bad-tempered or indifferent companions, such as Destructives or Apathetics, show characteristics of Guo and Main's (2017) avoidance-oriented shoppers and the same seems to account for some types of patronizing companions, as they want to take over the role of the main advisor. Salespeople are therefore well-advised to consider autonomy-oriented approaches toward the companion in these situations. While humorous elements can be a useful tool in order to improve trust perceptions and the seller's relationship with any sort of customer or companion (see Bompar et al. 2018; Bergeron and Vachon 2008), in the case of bad-tempered companions, it could additionally take some pressure off the shopper, who is bothered by the companion's behavior or attitude. On the other hand, interaction-seeking companions, who at the same time pursue a certain goal for the accompanied shopper, such as Active Supporters or Patronizers, should be approached by means of information exchange, ingratiation and inspirational appeals (McFarland et al. 2006). Expert companions particularly take on the role of an advisor for the shopper and often are well-informed [while "informed" may include knowledge as well as beliefs (Hochstein et al. 2019)]. Following Hochstein et al., a suitable approach for salespeople would be the focus on sharing objective information and recommendations and to discuss product details in order to acknowledge the companion's informedness and to achieve better collaboration. If, on the other hand, the salesperson is able to recognize a companion is being informed to a lesser degree, the use of inspirational appeals or ingratiation techniques as well as threats or promises could be more appropriate (e.g. Hochstein et al. 2019). Experts as well as patronizing companions appear to have a clear goal in mind that the salesperson can help to achieve better and quicker. For this purpose, salespeople should display resolving behaviors that display a clear orientation toward achieving the shopper's (and their companion's)

Table 5 Selling techniques and their potential applicability to shopping companions

| Companion type/selling approach | Active supporters | Patronizers | Experts | Destructives | Apathetics |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|
| <i>Established selling techniques</i> | | | | | |
| Information exchange | × | × | × | | |
| Recommendations | × | × | × | | |
| Resolving behavior | × | × | × | | |
| Threats and promises | × (if uninformed) | × (if uninformed) | × (if uninformed) | | |
| Humor | × | × | × | × | × |
| Ingratiation | × | × | × (if uninformed) | | |
| Inspirational appeals | × | × | × (if uninformed) | | |
| Autonomy-oriented approach | | × | | × | × |
| <i>Approaches to deal with shopping companions mentioned by interviewees</i> | | | | | |
| Agreement-seeking | × | × | × (if informed) | | |
| Contradicting | × (if uninformed) | × (if uninformed) | × (if uninformed) | × (if uninformed) | |
| Appeasing | | | | × | × |
| Involving | | | | | × |
| Retreating | | × | | × | |

goal (Singh et al. 2018). While retreating seems to be more the lack of a strategy rather than a selling technique, the insights we gathered from participants suggest that when being confronted with particularly difficult or dominant types of companions, salespeople often appear helpless and overchallenged.

Altogether, 80% of participants noted they would mainly rely on their intuition and experience when it comes to the identification of the type of shopping companion at hand and how they would approach them. In order to be successful with the application of intuitive judgments, salespeople need to be empathic and also require some domain-specific experience (Hall et al. 2015). It appears that salespeople are reluctant to commit to the fact they use selling techniques on customers in order to sell their products. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that salespeople are afraid to appear dubious and seek to hide ulterior motives, while seeing themselves as relationship builders rather than sellers. Interestingly, only one out of the 25 participants had already attended trainings or workshops that included shopping companions to at least some degree, which could also explain their heavy reliance on intuition and experience. Consequently, especially apathetic companions were often considered to have no influence on the shopper, although earlier research suggests that even strangers in the environment can influence shopper behavior (McGrath and Otnes 1995), even if they do not interact with them (Argo et al. 2005; Luck and Benkenstein 2015). While these studies focused on strangers in retail settings, the potential negative influence of passive companions on a shopper's emotions and thought processes should not be discounted rashly, as we also found isolated evidence for a shopper feeling pressured in situations where an apathetic companion was present. Due to the interviewees' reliance on their experience and intuition, no specific insights could be gathered regarding the actual procedure of their approaches to dealing with shopping companions. For instance, in situations of disagreement between a companion and the salesperson, interviewees shared consensus in two important points: First, disagreements between a companion and a salesperson can lead to a shopper becoming insecure and not making a purchase. Second, seeking points of agreement is a viable measure to reduce the shopper's uncertainty, but only when these agreements are reasonable, as the ultimate goal of a good salesperson is that the shopper will come back for another purchase because they felt well-advised. Yet, interviewees provided no insights regarding the specific approach they would take to achieve said points of agreements. Also, when a companion constantly advises the shopper against buying something without offering comprehensive arguments, salespeople remained vague in how they would tackle this influence to make sure the shopper does not leave without making a purchase. One possible explanation for why companions influence a shopper in a negative fashion could be the fact that their derived hedonic value from the shopping experience is low. Understanding the underlying reasons for a companion's behavior could facilitate a salesperson's approach to more effectively deal with it and provide solutions. Therefore, they need a more elaborate set of tools that includes not only efficient ways of dealing with certain characteristics and behaviors of shopping companions, but that also includes the knowledge regarding which diagnostic cues to look for and how to recognize them as early as possible. Alavi et al. (2019) find that salespeople interpret adaptive selling as mainly altering their argumentation and

communication styles based on customers' needs, personality, and body language. Our findings facilitate the transition of these insights to situations of co-shopping, where salespeople should pay attention to said characteristics of an accompanying person as well.

6 Theoretical and practical implications, limitations and further research

6.1 Theoretical implications

This exploratory study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to consider shopping companions as an important part of the sales conversation from a salesperson's point of view. By investigating the characteristics and contributions of shopping companions, we offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of sales conversations and highlight the importance of considering companions as an additional factor of the sales conversation, which can significantly influence their outcome. We introduce a segmentation approach of companion types based on seven criteria referring to character traits and behaviors of companions that are observable by salespeople. Future research could use the suggested segmentation criteria to quantitatively evaluate the occurrence of the identified characteristics and behaviors of shopping companions in research addressing both parties involved, shoppers and salespeople. For obtaining a more complete understanding of how the influence of shopping companions works, shoppers that regularly engage in co-shopping should be addressed. By using qualitative measures, their ways of processing and dealing with the specific behaviors and characteristics of their respective companions and the meaning for their decision-making process should be evaluated.

Companions can contribute in positive and negative ways and the results of this study suggest that salespeople are capable of handling both types of influence, provided they choose the right approach. An exception is provided by strong negative encounters, where salespeople sometimes retreat. While research on adaptive selling has only discussed selling techniques aiming at shoppers, we identify a variety of tools salespeople use that aim at dealing with shopping companions. For example, salespeople try to identify points of agreement with companions, contradict them or counteract negative contributions, appease bothersome companions or try to involve passive companions in the conversation. These approaches add to classic research on adaptive selling that suggests different selling techniques and styles (e.g. McFarland et al. 2006; Plouffe et al. 2014) and further highlights the importance of strong salespeople-customer (or co-shopper) relationships (see Crosby et al. 1990). Our findings provide a starting point for future research regarding how salespeople could use established as well as alternative selling techniques in order to deal with different types of shopping companions. The existence and frequency of these additional techniques should be on the agenda of further explorative research in order to improve the efficacy

of adaptive selling techniques and salespeople trainings under the consideration of co-shoppers.

The finding that shopper uncertainty and the danger of abandoning a purchase due to disagreements between a salesperson and a shopping companion qualifies findings by earlier research, according to which a companion does not seem to inhibit a shopper's susceptibility to a salesperson's recommendation (Goff et al. 1994). We suggest that in order to assess the strength of both social influences on a shopper's decision correctly, a variety of additional factors need to be considered. Depending on the product category and a consumer's lack of expertise, a companion may be the actual decision-maker for the shopper. In these cases, the companion is the one that needs to be convinced and who evaluates a salesperson's suggestion on behalf of the shopper.

6.2 Managerial implications

Our findings have important implications for retail managers. Frontline employees, such as salespeople, represent a store and take over marketing functions. It is therefore essential for retailers to offer training programs to salespeople that enable them to meet customer expectations (Bishop Gagliano and Hathcote 1994). Particularly when retailers distinguish themselves from competitors by means of superior service, they need to reconsider whether their salespeople are trained well enough to provide the level of customer service needed in situations of co-shopping as well. Functional service quality, i.e. how a service is provided, has a strong influence on consumers' willingness to make a purchase (Sweeney et al. 1997), which further highlights the importance of customer-focused selling approaches. Not surprisingly, it seems easier for salespeople to meet customers' expectations when shoppers display positive emotions rather than anger or anxiety (Menon and Dubé 2000). Although handling negative emotions of shoppers is a difficult task, salespeople need to be able to deal with this task, and even more so when it comes to negative behaviors of a shopping companion who may consequently prevent a shopper from making a purchase. A particular focus in salespeople trainings needs to be on their listening skills. The degree to which a salesperson is perceived to be a good listener enhances a consumer's trust in the salesperson and facilitates the building of lasting relationships (Itani et al. 2019; Ramsey and Sohi 1997). Interviewees mentioned they would sometimes try to convert active companions, who facilitate sales conversations and show interest in the products themselves, into future customers. To succeed in doing so, they need to be able to listen not only to the openly expressed needs and wishes of the main customer, but also to those of the shopping companion that may remain a more latent part of the sales conversation. Our insights and suggested approaches can help to improve salespeople trainings accordingly by adding specific elements that aim at better co-shopper-oriented services.

Design knowledge generally describes classes of cases, while professionals, i.e. salespeople, have to apply this knowledge to unique situations, for which prescriptions for specific situations are crucial (van Aken 2005). Our results indicate that salespeople are reluctant to admit the use of specific techniques in order to cope with shoppers or their companions. The assessment of a situation and the corresponding

identification of an adequate selling technique by salespeople is crucial for the application of solution concepts that aim at high customer-oriented service in sales conversations. Retailers should therefore pay close attention to the awareness of their salespeople regarding the availability of various approaches in specific situations and facilitate the application of this knowledge to unique sales conversations. If retailers fail to include shopping companions in education and training for salespeople, they risk that companions become dissatisfied with their service and share negative feedback with the shopper, which may result in the abandonment of an intended purchase. While we identify certain sets of characteristics of shopping companions, we also note that they may change over the course of sales conversation or due to the intervention of the salesperson. Consequently, when designing trainings for salespeople and service processes to facilitate a higher degree of customer orientation, it is necessary to leave room for salespeople, who are involved in the process, to allow process improvements and redesign (van Aken 2005). In doing so, continuous improvements to individual selling approaches and techniques for co-shopping situations can be ensured.

6.3 Limitations and outlook

The study successfully explores the characteristics and specific behaviors of shopping companions and their subsequent effects on shoppers and salespeople by means of qualitative data and thus highlights the need for the inclusion of shopping companion in the education of salespeople's education. Reliable statements regarding the commonness of the character traits and behaviors of companions identified here are not possible and need to be evaluated by means of quantitative research approaches. In addition, a closer look needs to be taken at the relationship between a shopper and their respective companion. The level of confidence a shopper possesses may serve as a solid moderating variable for the relationship between a companion's influence and a shopper's subsequent buying behavior. Ideally, the underlying attributes of shopping companions should be matched with personal character traits of a shopper to achieve a more founded understanding of why certain changes in buying behavior occur due to a shopping companion's influence. Such character traits of shoppers, besides their level of confidence, could include their resilience toward stressful situations, which could potentially mitigate the pressure a disturbing companion applies. Moreover, we cannot provide solid arguments with regard to the personal agenda of different types of shopping companions, i.e. why they behave the way they do and which goals they pursue. Understanding the underlying motives of companions that influence shoppers in a negative way and disturb their decision-making would provide retailers with the opportunity to address these motives and potentially solve the problem of negative influences on the shopper before they occur. Potential motives retailers could easily deal with are for instance the craving for a glass of water, a chair to sit down and wait, or an electric socket to charge their phone.

In summary, we provide a first step toward a better understanding of how shopping companions influence sales conversations and how salespeople are challenged by their presence. We show that salespeople alter their behavior in co-shopping situations in different ways than in one-on-one sales encounters. While a variety

of techniques and approaches based on shopper characteristics are well-known for regular sales encounters, salespeople tend to base their approaches to co-shopping situations on their experience and intuition. However, the behavioral patterns of shopping companions and their subsequent effects on sales conversations call for a more systematic and individual approach. Retailers are challenged to rethink their approach to the education and training of salespeople by including the various characteristics of shopping companions in order to provide higher levels of customer-oriented service.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A: exemplary statements for various companion characteristics (n = 25)

| Informant statements | Subordinate characteristic of companion | # |
|--|---|----|
| “Well, they also take a look around and say ‘oh, do you have this in other colors as well?’ or ‘is there a complementary jacket?’. So, they maybe want to get a whole outfit then, while the woman was initially only looking for new trousers and then they say ‘come on, let’s look for a nice sweatshirt as well!’, that happens, too.” (Susanne clothing/shoes, sales associate) | Level of activity: active | 24 |
| “When I ask what they would like to see and the shopping companion then already says, for instance, ‘it has to be like this’ or ‘she wants it that way’, then I realize that they are more in charge than the shopper themselves, who this actually is about.” (Susanne, glasses, optician) | Level of activity dominant | 14 |
| “If they do not hear me out or if, to any glasses I show them, the immediate response is always negative and as soon as [the shopper] puts on the glasses, they say ‘no, not this one, not this one’, and instead start looking for alternatives themselves, then, yes.” (Caglar, glasses, master optician) | | |
| “There are types who are really reluctant, who do not want any attention or are disinterested, [...]” (Karin, clothing/shoes, saleswoman) | Level of activity: passive | 22 |
| “There are companions, of course, who really stay out of the conversation and do not say anything at all.” (Rhia, glasses, master optician) | | |

| Informant statements | Subordinate characteristic of companion | # |
|---|---|----|
| <p>“There are companions who are well-disposed toward the shopper and want them to have a nice experience. They help them and also reflect on what else they could try and actively help with that.” Regine, clothing/shoes, store manager)</p> | Attitude toward shopper: benevolent | |
| <p>“Envy plays a big role. [...] They make quirky remarks, easy to recognize. Or they say ‘no, that does not look good at all’ or ‘see how that makes you look!’. That happens a lot.” (Karin, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> | Attitude toward shopper: envious | |
| <p>“Yes, this has something to do with [the companion] begrudging the [shopper] anything. [...], because they turn down anything. Also if I am convinced of something and think that it technically and esthetically fits well and they still negate everything and find something that is wrong everywhere, although I do not find anything wrong.” (Jolanta, glasses, saleswoman)</p> | Attitude toward shopper: indifferent | |
| <p>“There are people who wait, wait, and then you are nearly done, you provide three glasses to choose from and then there are some [companions] who say ‘I like all three, you are the one who has to like them’, [...], I think they do not really want to be there.” (Caglar, glasses, master optician)</p> | Attitude toward shopper: indifferent | |
| <p>“Well, if one is trying something on, the other evaluates whether it suits her well, and if something does not fit, they tell them.” (Ezgi, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> | Type of support: social | 22 |
| <p>“They give their opinion ‘I like it, I don’t like it’, they proactively suggest alternatives: ‘here, this could look nice on you’ or ‘this would not’. They try to participate.” (Gülsah, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> | | |
| <p>“There are many women who like it tight-waisted, and then there are many women who do not like it that body-accentuating. And then, it is very often the case that they ask a shopping companion ‘what do you think, can I wear it like that?’.”(Jessica, clothing/shoes, store manager)</p> | | |
| <p>“Then there are companions, who for instance wear glasses themselves, who can make much better judgments, who have a better feeling for this. And they consult pretty well, indeed.” (Jolanta, glasses, saleswoman) [Male shoppers need a female companion’s advice] “Because they are not confident enough and don’t know what suits them well.” (Javier, clothing/shoes, salesman)</p> | Type of support: functional | 17 |
| <p>“There is the technic-freak who accompanies, who allegedly knows everything and thus supports the shopper.” (Kristian, electronics, sales associate)</p> | Level of expertise: high | 24 |
| <p>“Well, with the friend who is very slim and thinks she knows a lot about fashion</p> | | |
| <p>“[...], it may take a while until I really get in touch with her.” (Elke, clothing/shoes, store manager)</p> | | |
| <p>“Women have very clear ideas [regarding what the man should wear] because they picked up on it sometime or because they saw somebody [wear it]. Overall, my perception is that 50% of women do not know how a suit should be worn, but [the men] [...] listen to her.” (Javier, clothing/shoes, sales associate)</p> | Level of expertise: low | 14 |
| <p>“If there is somebody who does not really know what they are talking about, but thinks they actually are well-informed, and then suggests abstruse alternatives that nobody can actually comply with, (...) it detains the process, costs time, and is not really productive.” (Anonymous, clothing/shoes, salesman)</p> | | |

| Informant statements | Subordinate characteristic of companion | # |
|---|--|----|
| <p>"[...] , most of the time it is the wife who says 'you will buy this, I like it!'. Often, the man then says 'but I do not like it' and if the wife was not there I would look bad. She then tells him 'you will try that on!'." (Günther, clothing/shoes, salesman)</p> <p>"Well, when the customer does not have an own opinion and the companion has a strong [influence] on them, it really becomes difficult to talk to them. Then, you can talk for hours but you will not [sell them anything]." (Thorsten, electronics, salesman)</p> | Strength of influence on shopper: strong | 24 |
| <p>"Then, [the shopper] says 'but I am going to wear this and it suits me well' and 'it is nice that you have your own opinion, but...'" (Ezgi, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> <p>"If [the shopper] is, let's say, very self-confident, they sometimes block [the influence of a companion] a little bit." (Katja, glasses, saleswoman)</p> | Strength of influence on shopper: weak | 9 |
| <p>"If [a companion] sees the shopper as they really are. [...] They advise the shopper favorably, practically, let's put it like this. [...] Or they go and get a scarf or a necklace or a shirt for their outfit and say 'let's try this on, it's a different color' or something like that. That is really pleasant for the shopper." (Elke, clothing/shoes, store manager)</p> <p>"It happened many times that the wife takes the salesperson by the hand: 'okay, let's get something for my husband'. And then she walks around the store and brings the clothes, [...]. (Günther, clothing/shoes, salesman)</p> | Derived enjoyment from shopping process: high | |
| <p>"Well, often the men are, I don't really like to say this, very bored. They are busy with their phones, lie in the armchair sleeping, or apply pressure [...]" (Karin, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> <p>"The customer feels annoyed [...] from all the nagging. [...] For instance, 'it takes too long', 'no, this all looks stupid' and whatever negative [the companion] says on top of that. I think this is really annoying and takes away the fun from shopping, as most women like going shopping." (Susanne, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> | Derived enjoyment from shopping process: low | |
| <p>"The shopper feels more confident in their decision and becomes quicker in making a choice." (Asya, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> <p>"They feel more secure. [...] Yes. They realize that their companion agrees with what the salesperson said. Then, the shopper's trust in the salesperson immediately increases." (Johann, electronics, salesman)</p> | Facilitative influence—shopper feels more confident | 14 |
| <p>"I rather involve the woman in the sales conversation and then I see, if she has that happy and nice look, that I won. Then, the man gets the suit that she wants and it is done." (Peter, clothing/shoes, salesman)</p> <p>"[...] , when they inspire the shopper and provide positive impulses and say "wow, that looks great" or "I like this very much as well". Then it may even end with an additional purchase." (Carmelo, clothing/shoes, store manager)</p> | Facilitative influence—shopper makes a purchase or buys more than intended | 15 |
| <p>"Most of the time, this is aborted by the customer. She then says 'okay, let's go and have a cup of coffee. I will come back another time.'" (Elke, women's clothing, store manager)</p> | Obstructive influence—shopper leaves the store/does not make a purchase | 17 |

| Informant statements | Subordinate characteristic of companion | # |
|--|---|----|
| <p>“When I am consulting somebody and [the companion] interrupts, than it is something different because then, they think differently [...]. ‘Oh, my friend is telling me something and the saleswoman is telling me something’. Then, she is different and thinks ‘okay, now I am confused, what should I do?’” (Ezgi, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> <p>“The worst case would be “‘no, I do not want that’ or ‘I do not want that, please don’t buy that’. Or simply ‘yes, buy it if you feel comfortable with it but I do not like it’. Then the shopper has a bad conscience, although they felt comfortable in the first place.” (Susanne, glasses, optician)</p> <p>“Of course, there are always shoppers who say ‘oh, I have to hurry up, he is getting nervous already’. That happens, of course, and it’s rather counterproductive.” (Susanne, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> | Obstructive influence—shopper feels uneasy or pressured | 13 |

Appendix B: exemplary statements for major challenges for salespeople

| Informant statements | Challenge for salespeople |
|---|--|
| <p>“The biggest challenge is actually to size up a companion’s character. [...] Most of the time, you realize when saying hello if the companion is really open and ‘hey, we are searching together’, or if it rather is something like ‘hello, we just want to have a look’. Then, you realize pretty quickly whether the companion is amenable or if she rather is a bit like ‘Hm, I actually don’t really want to be here, I just had to tag along’.” (Jessica, store manager)</p> <p>“If it is a reluctant, passive companion I have to jump in quicker because I have to consult the shopper then.” (Asya, clothing/shoes, saleswoman)</p> <p>“Usually, you have to adapt yourself to one person, now you have to adapt to two people, it’s as simple as that. And then, all three parts need to be in line. And here, the one-on-one conversation of course is easier.” (Anonymous, sales associate)</p> <p>“Yes, you have to care about two people. [...] The clothes have to be appealing to both of them, in most cases, even more to the companion.” (Carmelo, store manager)</p> <p>“You have to convince the partner or the friend as well, because the people who want to buy are really convinced of their friends. And that influences them a lot. Let’s put it like this, it is a tough challenge.” (Ezgi, sales associate)</p> <p>“Then it is a bit more difficult to approach the whole thing, because then you have to rather convince the companion of the product most of the time. Particularly if it is a customer that is very susceptible to their influence and has very little their own opinion.” (Lara, department manager)</p> <p>“Regarding how they know the person they accompany, it is rather helpful because we as a consultant do not know the [shopper]. We know just the fragment of how the customer is sitting in front of us and make our own interpretation, we do not see how they look in a suit when coming home from work, and we do not know how they look privately.” (Sarah, glasses, department manager)</p> | <p>Recognizing the type of companion at hand</p> <p>Adapt to/convince an additional person</p> <p>Account for the relationship between shopper and companion</p> |

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