

Job Profiling – a study of the Italian fashion-luxury retail sector

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Abstract: Fashion- luxury is one of the most important industries in Italy. Previous research projects revealed a good maturity in terms of application of Supply Chain Management practices in fashion-luxury. Yet in retail the knowledge of Supply Chain topics resulted still underdeveloped. This surprising result – as retail is one of the most relevant stages of the whole luxury value chain –opened an interesting research avenue, with the long-term goal of improving relevant knowledge of retail operators. This required understanding which are the most relevant knowledge areas for retail operator, which on turn required mapping job roles and responsibilities. The present paper thus aims at answering three research questions currently unaddressed by the scientific literature: 1) Which are the job roles characterizing the Italian fashion luxury retail sector?, 2) What are the activities carried out in the Italian fashion luxury retail industry?, and 3) Is it possible to define a taxonomy of responsibilities for each job role? Thanks to an articulated research methodology structured in 5 Steps, data have been collected and systematized through interviews with 9 senior managers working for large Italian fashion luxury companies, analysing the job descriptions of 100+ job postings found online, carrying out an explorative survey with people employed large Italian fashion luxury companies. Results were validated in a workshop with academic experts and triangulating different responses. Key findings are: a list of 95 Job Roles grouped in 7 categories; 58 activities, organized in 7 categories; and a matrix in which activities typically associated to each job role are classified into Core Activities, Potential Activities, and Non Relevant ones. The present paper lays the foundations for a larger project aiming at defining training resources in the knowledge areas of Supply Chain Management, directed to professional employed in retail and distribution in the fashion-luxury business.

Keywords: Job title, Job description, Fashion-Luxury

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1.Introduction

The luxury sector is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. According to the Altagamma Worldwide Luxury Market Monitor (Altagamma Foundation, 2019) study, the global personal luxury goods market was worth €260 billion in 2018 with a steady growth rate of around 6%. Italy plays a leading role in the fashion luxury sector worldwide, with 24 of the Top 100 Global Powers of the luxury sector being headquartered in Italy (Deloitte, 2019), compared with 14 in US, 10 in the UK, 7 in France. This positive trend continued in 2019, with predicted forecasts for 2019 suggesting a steady growth rate of +4/6% (€271-276 bn). The long-term growth forecast (2020-2025) is 3-5% increase per annum, at a constant exchange rate. Danziger (2005) suggested that this sustained trend is because consumers at every income level demand luxury product, as well as those people on higher incomes.

The seminal scientific paper “the Mass Marketing of Luxury” was the first to describe the “magic formula” behind the success of luxury brand (Nueno and Quelch,

1998). In a market where the consumers are expecting *the best*, the downstream part of the supply chain plays a key contribution for the brands’ success. Yet, surprisingly, the first two papers focusing on the Supply Chain Management in Luxury Companies appeared only in 2008 (Brun et al., 2008; Brun and Castelli, 2008). Further work understood the impact of corporate social responsibility in luxury manufacturer supply chains (Towers et al, 2013).

Given the relevance of the “human touch” when delivering the value of luxury goods and services, activities carried out by company employees in the downstream part of the supply chain involving distribution and retail are the foundation for the success of a luxury fashion brand. Achieving success requires having the right knowledge at each stage as well as understanding the whole process involved from raw materials through to sales. Hence the focus of the present paper is at the intersection of the four relevant areas highlighted above:

- the luxury industry: a rapidly-growing one, still quite unexplored from the scientific research point of view;

- Italian fashion-luxury brands, given the leading role of Italian companies in this sector;
- Supply Chain Management practices, as the know-how about Supply Chain and Operational aspect is key and quite underexploited;
- people employed in distribution and retail, as these are the roles that are contributing the most to the creation of value to the customers.

In understanding the job roles and associated activities in fashion-luxury distribution and retail, the aim of the paper is to gain an insight into the job role knowledge areas required in the whole luxury supply chain. This will inform training & education institutions to address job profiling in organisations and knowledge gaps of employees working in this field. In order to accomplish this aim, a detailed analysis of the related academic literature was undertaken, followed by an extensive analysis of job opportunities available online and by interviews with selected experts in the luxury sector. Interviews and job advertisements provided a detailed insight of relevant job roles in the industry, the activities typically performed, and the correlation between roles and activities resulting in the creation of a “responsibility matrix”. Seven roles have been identified within the Italian fashion luxury retail industry: *Area Manager*, *Buyer*, *Merchandiser*, *Operations Manager*, *Sales Assistant*, *Store Manager*, and *Visual Merchandiser*. Moreover, 50 activities have been recognized in this sector, that have been divided into 9 macro-categories: *Customers Service*, *Finance*, *Market Research and New Product Development*, *Display Merchandise*, *Operations*, *Promotions and Advertising*, *Sales*, *Supply Chain Management*, and *Team Management*.

Reliability and robustness of the findings were verified through an academic workshop and a survey submitted to professionals of the sector.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses the scientific background and highlights some gaps in the outstanding literature; Section 3 illustrates the research methodology adopted; Section 4 analyses the results from the data collection steps, while concluding remarks, limitations and future research avenues are discussed in Section 5.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fashion-luxury retailing

The retail is an essential part of the supply chain: it represents the “touch point” with customers, and has the ultimate goal to satisfy the needs of the clientele – which in fashion-luxury is quite demanding.

Nobbs et al. (2012) highlighted that retailing within the luxury sector is different from retailing in other product sectors in three important ways. “First, most luxury retailers sell goods they have manufactured themselves, rather than those made by a third party”. This means that what they sell and how they sell it is inevitably linked (Moore et al., 2010). Second, luxury retailers have been the most prolific of the internationalizing retailers and many manage retail stores on a global scale. For most other retailers, trading activities

(and therefore their retail stores) are primarily in the domestic market. Third, luxury retailers increasingly use direct investment as a technique of foreign market entry, as opposed to the indirect methods of joint-venture, franchising and wholesaling that are used by other retailers (Moore et al., 2010). Clearly, employees play a paramount role in the retail environment. In fact, they are essential to infuse the brand identity and to enhance the clients emotional experience within the store. To pursue this objective, employees have to gain experience, skills, competencies and knowledge. High-end fashion retail work contains recognizable elements of skill and that workers see themselves as distinct, constructing their work as being more skilled than other retail workers (Nickson et al. 2017). Nickson went on stating that in high-end fashion retail employees must have an appropriate mix of both soft and hard elements of skill. “For example, having the required aesthetic and emotional labour to ensure the “right” look and the ability to enact high-quality customer service needs to co-exist with harder, technical elements, such as having and utilizing extensive product knowledge”. Some of the activities to be carried out at the retailers are defined in the contract that the retailer signs with the brands (Brun and Moretto, 2012), and some other activities are emerging in the light of the adaptation of companies to trend such as sustainability (Karaosman et al., 2018) and, lately, the need for sanitization and social distancing required to hamper Covid spread. In order to ensure that the skills that reside in the employees matched the skills demanded by the job, the retailers have to offer extensive training and development (Nickson et al. 2017). This last sentence ignited the interest towards the analysis of job roles and associated activities.

2.2 Roles in fashion-luxury retailing

The job title is one of the most important pieces of information of a job description, and it usually reflects the nature of the tasks performed in the job (Smith et al., 1989). Faizan Javed et al. (2016) reported that the online job recruitment domain is facing a problem of job categorization, since an online platform nowadays has hundreds of millions of job postings, resumes, and job applications. In the past few years, some researchers that have introduced in their papers some important job roles within the fashion retail industry

Pulcini and Andreani (2014) analysed the influence of the English language over the denomination of job positions in the Italian market. Some of the job titles they analysed were directly related to the retail market, namely *area manager*, *retail sales manager*, *sales account*, *sales manager*, *shop assistant*, *store manager*, *store specialist*, and *visual merchandiser*. Leah Osborn and Teresa Moore (2000), in their work “ACAP – Austin Competency Analysis Profile”, used the following job titles linked to the fashion store environment as the target for their research: “Fashion Coordinator”, “Customer Service Representative”, “Visual Merchandiser”, “Media Coordinators”, “Cashier”, “Team Leader”, “Visual Advertising Specialist”, “Loss Prevention Specialist”, “Data Entry Clerck”, “Merchandiser”, “Area Sales Manager”, “Merchandise Administrator”, “Retail Salesclerck”, “Group Leader”, “Department Manager”,

“Plan-o-gram Coordinator”, “Personal Shopper”, and “Warehouse Administrator”. Lee and Ha-Brookshire (2017) stated that, among the employees of the fashion industry, it is very important to mention all those roles with a lower responsibility level, but essential to reach the final customer, like salesperson, cashier, stock clerks, and supervisor of sales workers. Despite these roles have fewer or no managerial responsibilities, they are fundamental as they are the most direct touchpoint with the end consumer. In the book “Mastering Fashion Buying and Merchandising Management”, written by Tim Jackson and David Shaw in 2000, the roles of the merchandiser and the buyer are described as fundamental in the fashion retail industry.

Thanks to this part of literature, we developed the first step of our research and we used these lists of roles to understand if similar classifications could be applied to Italian luxury market since all these works have been conducted in different countries and focusing on a variety of sectors, while not for the specific fashion luxury sector.

3. Research Questions and Research Methodology

The literature review summarised in Section 2 highlighted two relevant gaps: first of all, we weren’t able to find frameworks that link the job titles of the fashion retail sector (least of all the luxury fashion retail sector) to the activities they should perform; furthermore, papers and books on this topic are mainly focus on the Anglo-Saxon context (American and British markets), never the Italian one. As a consequence, we were able to define the research questions of our research:

- RQ1: *Which are the job roles characterizing the Italian fashion luxury retail sector?*
- RQ2: *What are the activities carried out in the Italian fashion luxury retail industry?*
- RQ3: *Is it possible to define a taxonomy of responsibilities for each job role?*

Given the lack of structured knowledge in the field, we developed a research methodology relying on several independent sources of information, in order to guarantee soundness through triangulation. The whole framework is depicted in Figure 1.

From the methodological point of view, open-ended questions were chosen for the interviews at Step 2 since they allow the interviewees to express opinions without being influenced by the researcher (Foddy, 1993).

Regarding Step 3, we followed the indications in Harper (2012), according to which there is a long history of studies

collecting and analysing job advertisements, with the aim of examining the changing nature of skills which are required in the workplace; this approach is attractive since data are:

- “Easily accessible” (Da Cunha, 2009; Schlee and Harich, 2010);
- “Organic and naturalistic”;
- “Of practical support to job seekers” (Beile and Adams, 2000; Cullen, 2000).

At Step 5, we developed a questionnaire composed by multiple-choice multiple-answer close-ended questions, aimed at understanding the activities performed by the interviewees. Respondents were given the possibility to add new activities in each section if they could not find a specific one among those proposed, thus allowing to test the completeness of the activities identified in RQ2. 97 complete and valid questionnaires were returned, with the following distribution of job titles: 11 Area Managers (11.3% of the sample); 16 Buyers (16.5%); 10 Merchandisers (10.3%); 5 Operations Managers (5.2%); 24 Salespersons (24.7%); 20 Store Managers (20.6%); 11 Visual Merchandisers (21.6%).

For sake of shortness, the interview protocol employed in Step 2 and the questionnaire employed in Step 5 cannot be reported here. Please contact authors for full details.

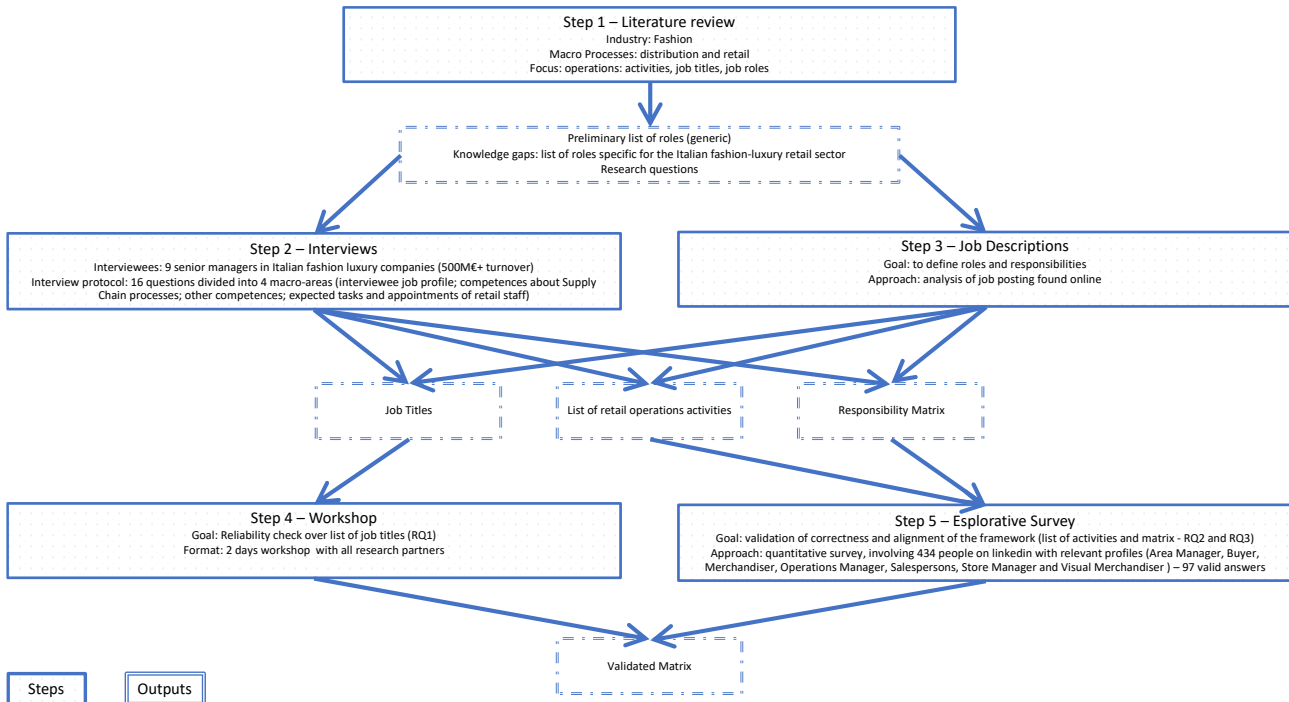
4. Data Analysis

The interviews with 9 senior managers provided useful information regarding the structure and dynamics of the market. The interviews were analysed in parallel with the job descriptions to clarify the trivial points, helping to target the job titles to be included in the following analysis. A combined analysis of the two approaches is proposed.

Table 1: first classification of job roles by qualitative clustering of job titles

Macro-Category	Sub-Category
Store Manager	Department Manager, Floor Manager, Store Manager
Buyer	Buyer
Merchandiser	Merchandiser
Sales Associate	Sales Assistant, Senior Sales Assistant
Visual Merchandiser	Visual Merchandiser
Director	Area Manager, Director of Operations, Director of Retail Operations, Regional Manager

Figure 2: overview of the research framework



A second iteration was performed considering the literature categorization of the macro-activities performed, along with further insights from interviews. Table 2 reports the 7 macro-activities emerging from the literature.

Table 2: summary of macro-activities emerging from the literature.

Function	References
Store Management	1; 2; 3
Buying	1; 4; 5
Merchandising	1; 2; 3; 5
Sales	2; 3; 6
Visual Merchandising	2; 3
Operations	2; 3
Managing Areas	2; 3

1 = Frazier and Cheek, 2005; 2 = Pulcini and Andreani, 2014; 3 = Osborn and Moore, 2000; 4 = Alper Sen, 2008; 5 = Jackson and Sham, 2001; 6 = Lee and Ha-Brookshire, 2017

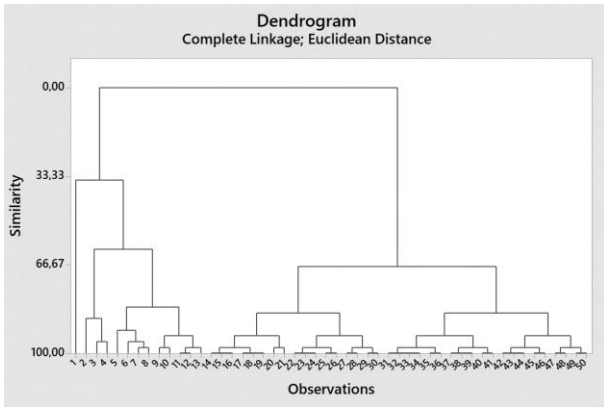
It could be easily noticed that the macro-activities emerging from the literature have quite a clear match with the job roles pointed out in the interviews. This resulted in 95 job roles, grouped as follows: Area Manager (8 job titles associated), Buyer (18), Merchandiser (15), Operations Manager (11), Sales Assistant (20), Store Manager (14), Visual Merchandiser (9). The resulting roles were validated in the expert’s workshop thus could be considered a satisfactory answer to RQ1. We then applied an open coding technique to the texts of the job descriptions, to identify, label and cluster the listed activities. The first iteration of the process was executed avoiding being influenced by the existing literature. In a second stage we proceeded comparing results from the empirical analysis with the literature. In the first stage we singled out 58 activities, organized in 7 categories. This classification was screened against the framework proposed by Leah Osborn

and Teresa Moore (2000), resulting in the identification of 2 more categories and a simplification and streamlining of the activities: in particular we had 50 activities classified in the following 9 categories: *customer service, finance, market research and new product development, merchandise display, operations, promotions and advertising, sales, supply chain management, and team management.*

As a further step, in the survey we allowed respondents to add new activities to each category in case they did not find activities considered relevant. This approach allows to test the completeness of the activities identified. Out of the 97 respondents, 15 activities were suggested but they were all already available. Thanks to the validation through the survey, we considered the activity list a satisfactory answer to RQ2.

We then moved on to the third Research Question, aimed at studying the correlation between the two classifications, job roles and activities. The objective was defining for each job role which activities it was responsible for. The value used to define the relevance of an activity for a specific job role was the relative frequency of activity i in job role j , f_{ij} , calculated as the number of number of occurrences of activity i in the job descriptions of job role j , divided by the total number of job descriptions of job role j . We then created a matrix containing all f_{ij} , which constituted the input of a Cluster Analysis on the activities, performed through the statistical software Minitab. As illustrated in the Dendrogram in Figure 2, the level of similarity between activities associated to different job roles was so low that we were not able to find clusters of job roles (e.g. the level of similarity with 3 clusters is 61%, dropping to 33% in case of 2 clusters). This, from a certain perspective, could be considered an interesting result: each activity has its own idiosyncrasies, to the point that no two activities could be clubbed into a single “package”.

Figure 2: Dendrogram illustrating the level of similarity between activities associated to different job roles.



Hence, we proceeded grouping activities within each job role, coming to the following three clusters:

- **Core activities:** activities with a very high frequency of occurrence in the job descriptions, customarily associated with this job role: not appointing an employee with these activities would practically mean having assigned her/him a different job role.
- **Potential activities:** activities that were mentioned fewer times in comparison with core ones, yet enough to justify being “potentially” relevant for this role: a person in the considered job may end up not being appointed with these activities without modifying the essence of the job role.
- **Non-Relevant activities:** activities not mentioned at all or mentioned with an extremely low frequency, hence not relevant for the analyzed role.

The number of activities in each cluster associated to each job role is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of Core (C), Potential (P), and Non-Relevant (NR) activities for each job role, and Similarity level resulting from the Cluster Analysis.

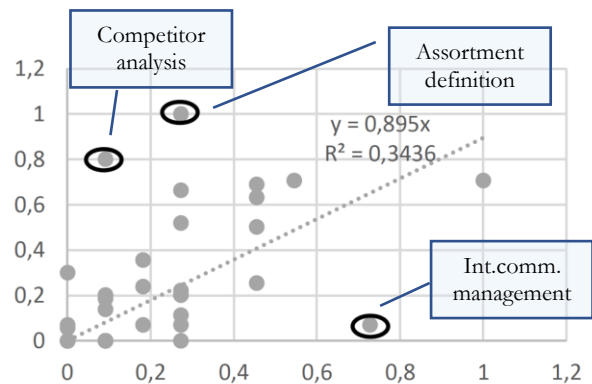
Job	C	P	NR	Sim.
Area Management	1	7	42	63%
Buyer	4	11	35	71%
Merchandiser	1	6	43	73%
Operations Manager	2	3	45	73%
Sales Assistant	1	8	41	75%
Store Manager	4	13	33	70%
Visual Merchandising	1	3	46	67%

Noteworthy examples of Core activities: for the Area Manager, the only one core activity is Define Strategic Sales Objective, indicated in 100% of cases; Buyer has 4 core activities including Procurement and Predict fashion trends; Merchandiser has one core activity which is the Sales analysis. To test the result of our classification, we asked to the survey respondent to indicate the relative relevance of each single activity within their job role. In order to obtain “relative” measurements, we employed a point-based system, where 1000 points assigned to each

respondent were equally divided among all the activities ticked by the respondent. The point-based approach allowed to give more weight to those respondents that focused their answers on just a few tasks, with the extreme case of a job role to which it was assigned a single task: that very task would receive all 1,000 points. For every job role we performed a regression analysis placing every activity on a scatterplot where the X-Axis corresponded to the frequency of occurrence in the job description while the X-Axis was the average relative relevance resulting from the survey. Three job roles resulted in a very strong linear correlation ($R^2 > 0.7$): *Merchandiser*, *Sales Assistant*, and *Visual Merchandiser*. In the other cases, there was a general linear trend, with some activities being clear outliers. See for instance the following Figure 3, illustrating the case of the *Merchandiser*: the activities “Product Assortment Definition” and “Competitor Analysis” were regarded as very important by the experts answering to the survey: hence, these points belonging to the P or NR category according to the job description, considering the indication of experts were re-labeled as Added-Core. In case of a conflict the suggestions of the survey respondents was regarded as more significant than the job description, since - as explained by one manager - job descriptions may have to skip some key activities for lack of space on the job portal. On the contrary, the point in the bottom left corner (Internal Communication Management) was demoted to the NR category. Here the reason is that in the Job Description analysis every time an activity was mentioned counted as 1, but the survey allowed to assess the relative relevance of the various activities, so one activity appearing frequently is not necessarily core to the role.

Figure 3: Scatterplot of Activities relative relevance in case of the Merchandising job role.

Horizontal-axis (X): relative importance defined through the job description analysis
 Vertical-axis (Y): relative importance defined through the survey



5. Conclusions

5.1 Summary of findings

RQ1. The study identified 7 job roles in the Italian fashion luxury retail industry, namely *Area Manager*, *Buyer*, *Merchandiser*, *Operations Manager*, *Sales Assistant*, *Store Manager*, *Visual Merchandiser*. Each of these job roles identified was recognized as relevant by the experts interviewed and was

found to be associated with specific job titles. The reliability check performed in a workshop confirmed the alignment of expert (scientific researchers) with the proposed classification.

RQ2. This work identified 50 activities typical of this domain, on turn grouped in 9 categories: *Customer Service, Finance, Market Research and New Product Development, Merchandise Display, Operations, Promotions and Advertising, Sales, Supply Chain Management, Team Management*. 97 professional employed in Italian fashion luxury companies checked the completeness of the list, and no further activity was added through the survey.

RQ3. Having analysed the job descriptions along with the interviews, a responsibility matrix linking the different job roles to the core and potential activities was created, according to the following classification: C: Core activity, derived from the Cluster Analysis; A-C: Added-Core activity, added to the matrix based on evidences in the literature review or the survey results; P: Potential activity, derived from the Cluster Analysis; A-P: Added-Potential activity, added to the matrix based on literature review or the survey results. There are cases in which the same activity is core for two roles, such as for instance in the noteworthy case of Product Assortment Definition being core for both merchandiser and buyer. The role of the merchandiser is understanding the market and the competition, evaluating past information about the sales, and define which products should be part of the collection for the next season. The role of the buyer is to follow the procurement process, ensuring that the right goods are provided to the right store. Yet the buyer may also be in charge of predicting what will be more likely to be sold and selecting the merchandise from the collection that best fits with the forecasts and the stores clientele. It is easy to notice that there is some overlapping between two roles, even though in a single company, there is typically just one role in charge of Product Assortment Definition, sometime it is the merchandisers and sometimes the buyer.

5.2 Usefulness of this research

The results of this research can be useful for the following three categories:

- **Recruiters:** they are provided with a framework helping them in understanding which competencies they should look for in applicants or helping them in defining the most correct job description when publishing a job offer.
- **Applicants:** thanks to the framework presented, it will be easier to understand the requirements to apply for a specific job position, defining which knowledge gap an applicant should fill or, depending on one's specific competences, which job position would suit the best with his/her own profile.
- **Educators:** consider, e.g., the 5 academic institutions participating to the Erasmus+ research project. All of them have training courses at Bachelor, MSc and post-graduate levels in the area of Supply Chain Management and Operations Management. The

professors responsible for defining the course syllabi can rely on a structured matrix, helping them defining the job positions to be targeted depending on the topics of the course or, on the other hand, selecting the knowledge areas and specific topics that are most useful for the specific job position targeted in the training program.

By aligning the knowledge of these three categories over the specific job roles' responsibilities, it would be possible to improve the efficiency and the efficacy of the selection, hiring and training processes, providing gains to both firms and applicants.

5.3 Limits of the research and future research avenues

This study presents some limitations that must be considered while applying and evaluating the results obtained. The following list points out the main limitations that future practitioners and studies should take into account:

- **Evolution of Functions over time.** By observing Table 2, it looks like the age of publication of the papers might influence the name of the Function. An historical evolution of macro-activities in retail could constitute a future research avenue.
- **Differentiation by Seniority.** Our analysis focused on the differences between the job roles but did not take into account the seniority or hierarchical organization of each function (e.g. Junior Buyer vs. Buyer vs. Senior Buyer). Introducing this additional axis, hence conducting a three-dimensioned analysis, might clarify some undetermined points or lead to new interesting findings.
- **Sample sizes.** The limitation is associated with the dimension of each sample taken into consideration. Starting from the interviews, 9 experts were involved in the first analysis. Referring to the job descriptions analysed, numbers around 100 job descriptions are considered as sufficient, but considering that we were dealing with 7 job roles, further analysis can focus on improving the framework by taking into account a hundred job descriptions for each role. The same consideration applies to the survey, where a higher number of respondents might provide a sample size needed for deeper analysis, especially regarding the angular coefficient.
- **Brands DNA, Culture and Critical Success Factors.** Factors partially mentioned in the interviews that might influence the definition of the responsibilities can be the single company's and Brand's DNA, organization and culture, as well as the “Critical Success Factors” upon which the brand is leveraging to gain a competitive advantage. These factors may influence the assignment of the responsibilities but were not considered in our analysis: further studies should understand the possible impact of these elements.
- **Geographical focus.** Despite our study took into consideration only companies operating on a global

scale, they were all characterized by an Italian heritage. Taking into account foreign companies operating on the Italian territory or even collecting data from different countries might lead to interesting comparisons and new findings.

In conclusion, this study provides a starting point for future works focused on the assignment of responsibilities in the Italian fashion luxury retail industry. Combining experts' opinions, job descriptions and advertisements, surveys and academic workshop, we were able to integrate different sources understating where a lack of alignment is more profound.

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