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## Toward a shared leadership environment: insights into retail salespeople's work environment

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### ABSTRACT

The growing digitization puts more pressure on brick-and-mortar businesses in the retail sector by creating new and more complex customer demands that increase the need for cooperative and trustful exchange relationships between supervisors and salespeople. A promising approach to tackle these challenges lies in implementing less hierarchical leadership structures. While sharing leadership on the team level gains traction among practitioners as a viable form of horizontal leadership, research provides little evidence on the conditions and mechanisms that enable a shared leadership work environment for retail salespeople. Especially the role of formal leaders in such a transition remains unclear. To fill this void, we followed a two-study design. We conducted a large-scale survey with 1,527 salespeople of a German fashion retailer to analyze how formal leadership contributes to the existence of a less hierarchically structured work environment for retail salespeople. Our multiple mediation analysis provides in-depth and context-sensitive insights into conditions and mechanisms that facilitate a shared leadership environment. A subsequent online-based scenario experiment confirms that transformational leadership is a driver for a shared leadership environment. We contribute to the literature by showing that transformational leadership matters not only in business-to-business (B2B) settings but also in traditionally more transactional business-to-consumer (B2C) retail sales settings to create a shared leadership environment.

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### KEYWORDS

Shared leadership environment; transformational leadership; role perceptions; retail salespeople; sales management

### Introduction

In today's fast-changing world, retail salespeople have to perform boundary spanning roles and deal with new customer demands (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005; Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2017; Knight, Kim, and Crutsinger 2007). To address these increasingly complex challenges, it becomes ever more important for supervisors and employees to cooperate successfully (Sharma 2001). Consequently, work environments currently shift from hierarchical structures to team-based environments (Mathieu et al. 2015; Nicolaidis et al. 2014). Extensive research shows that collaborative work in teams leads to positive work outcomes, such as team performance (e.g., Nicolaidis et al. 2014; D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger 2016; Sweeney, Clarke, and Higgs 2019).

Accordingly, the idea of sales teams in retail settings has found increased attention (Janhonen and Lindström 2015). In retail settings, hierarchical structures become less formal and the sales team's internal structure gains in importance (Perry, Pearce, and Sims Jr 1999). While retail salespeople's work environment has predominantly been regarded as non-participatory, this perception has changed to one of retail work environments of autonomous teams whose tasks go beyond following orders (Janhonen and Lindström 2015). Consequently, leadership in retail settings currently also

shifts from leading top-down to empowering the sales teams to make decisions independently (Simintiras et al. 2012). Within a less hierarchical (i.e., shared leadership) environment, retail salespeople assist each other, share a common purpose, and give each other a say to ensure a smooth accomplishment of all daily tasks. The role of formal leaders in this transition process is, therefore, of special interest. In this study, we seek to contribute to the literature by answering the following research question: How can formal leadership contribute to a less hierarchically structured work environment for retail salespeople?

To answer our research question, our two studies build on the fundamental notion that retail salespeople are not to be treated as simple "order-fillers" (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979, 70). Instead, their selling skills are similarly important as the selling skills used in business-to-business (B2B) settings (Simintiras et al. 2012). While acknowledging that business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions are generally more transactional than B2B interactions, the increasing difficulty for retail salespeople to navigate ever more complex customer interactions, customer demands, and also organizational orders gradually evens out the situations between B2C and B2B settings (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005; Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2017). In this sense, retail salespeople are a crucial

source for organizational success (Bush et al. 1990) and in need of supportive supervision (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005; Wieseke et al. 2009). Transformational leadership, which has already been subject to a wide range of studies on salespeople in B2B settings (Dubinsky et al. 1995; Ingram et al. 2005; Schwepker and Good 2010), therefore becomes increasingly relevant for B2C retail settings. Moreover, salespeople's involvement in leadership plays an important role in advanced sales literature in a B2B context (Boles et al. 2001; Johnston and Marshall 2013) and in a B2C context (Janhonen and Lindström 2015).

Extensive research has been conducted on the dyadic, traditional top-down leader-member exchange relationships (e.g., Banks et al. 2014; Thomas et al. 2013). While organizations now start to transform their structures from hierarchical to team-based forms, shifting the focus from individual to collective achievement and shared responsibility (Mathieu et al. 2015), social exchange theory has been used to explain the underlying mechanisms. With horizontal relationships becoming more relevant, team-member exchange theory—as one sub-theory of social exchange theory—was developed to obtain a better understanding of these horizontal relationships (Banks et al. 2014). The vertical, formal leader (e.g., a regional manager), however, still plays a critical role with regard to a salesperson's effectiveness (Boles et al. 2001; Dubinsky et al. 1995), and transformational leadership constitutes high-quality leader-member exchange relationships (Schwepker 2017).

Social exchange theory has further been used to explain employees' role making (Seers 1989). Previous research, aimed at improving salespeople's effectiveness, points to role perceptions being important antecedents of work attitudes and behaviors (Rigopoulou et al. 2012). In the sales context for B2B as well as B2C settings, role ambiguity reduces team members' favorable exchange relationships. Role ambiguity and role conflict are fundamental role stressors and barriers to positive exchange activities (Rigopoulou et al. 2012), job satisfaction, and job performance (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979, Kim, Knight, and Crutsinger 2009; Miao and Evans 2007). We therefore build upon the relevance of role perceptions to analyze how transformational leadership contributes to a shared leadership environment.

Our study contributes to the current literature in several respects. First, we make use of social exchange theory and role theory to explain the underlying mechanisms for positive leadership relationships in a retail sales setting. We argue and show that transformational leaders cultivate leader-member exchange relationships. Furthermore, we argue and show that these relationships promote a shared leadership environment in which retail salespeople improve their team-member exchange relationships and thus accept greater responsibility for choosing and performing tasks independently. These findings complement previous studies (Janhonen and Lindström 2015; Pearce, Wassenaar, and Manz 2014; Schwepker 2017) by highlighting that regional sales managers' vertical, transformational leadership plays a role in the development of shared leadership environments.

Second, we enrich research on sales leadership by demonstrating the relevance of clearly defined, job-related roles for achieving a shared leadership environment that goes along with favorable traits among salespeople, such as voice, social support, and shared purpose. These traits help individuals cope with digitization-induced turbulences (Cortellazzo, Bruni, and Zampieri 2019). Positive work outcomes for the salespeople (Frieder, Wang, and Oh 2018) emphasize that leaders and followers are conditionally dependent (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014), as leadership is only successful if followers are responsive to influence. Our study takes this notion a step further and considers a shared leadership environment in which not only the managers but also the salespeople play a role in leadership (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007). Studying the example of a retail setting, we emphasize the importance of role perceptions for salespeople working in less hierarchically structured team environments.

Third, we demonstrate the relevance of transformational leadership in a B2C context. Although the selling tasks in a B2C context are more transactional by nature than the selling tasks in a B2B context (Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2017), how supervisors need to handle their sales teams does not differ. Retail salespeople need to experience supportive, transformational leadership (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005; Sharma 2001) to build a team environment in which team members give each other a say, support each other, and have a shared purpose. If retail salespeople experience only transactional leadership in terms of outcome and performance orientation, they create short-term interactions with customers (Knight, Kim, and Crutsinger 2007) and do not build valuable customer-salesperson relationships, which are essential for customer satisfaction and retention (Lee and Dubinsky 2003; Simintiras et al. 2012).

Lastly, we contribute to shared leadership research by answering Sweeney, Clarke, and Higgs's (2019) as well as Arnold et al.'s (2019) call to expand leadership research through a context-driven study. By applying theory to a real sales setting, we not only bring practice and theory closer together (Tourish 2020) but also emphasize that retail salespeople make a large contribution to a firm's success (Alavi, Habel, and Linsenmayer 2019).

This article is further structured as follows. First, we provide the theoretical background for our hypotheses development and then develop six hypotheses regarding the relationship between transformational leadership and a shared leadership environment for retail salespeople, with particular attention to role perceptions as relevant mediators. Second, to test our hypotheses we present two studies. Study 1 is a field study of 1,527 retail salespeople and 66 regional managers; Study 2 is an online-based scenario experiment with 345 participants. In the last part of the article, we summarize our theoretical contribution, provide valuable insights for practitioners, and highlight interesting future research avenues. Lastly, we conclude that research on retail sales practices in B2C settings must recognize the importance of transformational leadership and clear role perceptions to achieve positive leadership effects.

## Theoretical background and hypotheses

### *Social exchange theory and role theory*

Social exchange theory—building on trustworthy relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005) and reducing reciprocal relational uncertainty (Colquitt et al. 2012)—describes voluntary interactions between at least two parties (Blau 1964). The exchange relationship between leaders and followers (Arnold et al. 2019; Banks et al. 2014) is one of the most researched relationships to help understand workplace behavior (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Leadership research has, therefore, entered a new age of leadership execution (Pearce and Wassenaar 2015). Historically, the notion of leadership was centered around a single leader, with a top-down relationship between leaders and followers (Pearce and Conger 2003). Leadership was regarded as a non-reciprocal dyadic relationship (Martin et al. 2019). A follower-centric view of leadership challenges this notion of a unilateral leadership model (Martin et al. 2019; Mathieu et al. 2015). In keeping with the new understanding of leadership and supported by behavioral theories (Dinh et al. 2014), leadership becomes an activity that also team members can share and provide (Pearce and Conger 2003).

Leader-member exchange theory provides valuable insights into “salesperson-sales manager dyads” (Flatherty and Pappas 2000, 271) by describing a social exchange process rooted in reciprocal dyadic relationships between leaders and followers (Banks et al. 2014; DeConinck 2011). Leader-member exchange jointly addresses employee role making (i.e., role theory) and supervisory leadership (Banks et al. 2014; Seers, Petty, and Cashman 1995). The supervisor and each follower take on different roles, contributing to the quality of their relationship and exchange (Seers, Petty, and Cashman 1995). The main perception of leader-member exchange is that these relationships lead to team members altering their attitudes and behaviors (Ilies, Nahrgang, and Morgeson 2007). As a result, the leaders themselves have become the driving force in the relationships (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). Rooted in cooperation instead of control (Coun, Peters, and Blomme 2019), high-quality leader-member exchanges are characterized by honesty, exchange of information, support, trust, and respect (Banks et al. 2014; Schwepker 2017), and therefore describe transformational leadership (e.g., Purvanova and Bono 2009).

Team-member exchange relationships are based on multiple reciprocal exchange relationships within a team and depend on leader-member exchanges (Banks et al. 2014). Team-member exchange combines the notion of employee role making and work team dynamics (Seers, Petty, and Cashman 1995). Accordingly, the perception of reciprocal dyadic relationships changed into the notion of multiple reciprocal relationships. Ultimately, team-member exchange focuses on the followers’ mutual role as team members (Banks et al. 2014). The amount of help, information, and recognition received, as well as the contribution of ideas, feedback, and assistance given to other team members, defines the team-member exchange quality (Seers 1989; Seers, Petty, and Cashman 1995). High team-member

exchange quality gives room to express oneself, and characterizes a team environment of mutual trust and reliability (Liu, Loi, and Lam 2011).

Team-member exchange goes hand in hand with a shared leadership environment in which team members provide leadership and rely on fellow team members’ leadership (e.g., Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007; Muethel and Hoegl 2013). According to an in-depth literature review by Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007), an internal team environment that enhances shared leadership displays three dimensions: voice, social support, and shared purpose. We refer to this environment as a shared leadership environment. Following previous studies (e.g., Banks et al. 2014; Seers 1989), we further conclude that high-quality team-member exchanges are characterized by giving each other a say, providing each other social support, and pursuing a shared purpose.

While vertical leaders’ role in such environments remains hitherto unclear (e.g., Banks et al. 2014; Morgeson 2005), we expect that a vertical, transformational leader becomes a crucial source of influence for establishing a shared leadership environment. According to Coun, Peters, and Blomme (2019), the relevance of formal leaders increases with the evolution of shared leadership, because the formal leaders adopt the role of “supporting and developing shared leadership by coaching, inspiring, and stimulating informal collaboration among employees” (Coun, Peters, and Blomme 2019, 482). Vertical exchanges through leader-member exchange, and horizontal exchanges through team-member exchange are, thus, equally relevant (Banks et al. 2014). Only vertical leaders can influence team members positively by mentoring and guiding them (Morgeson 2005). Leaders therefore matter for creating environments where team members can build trustful exchange relationships and take on leadership roles themselves (Thomas et al. 2013).

### *Transformational leadership and a shared leadership environment*

Providing support to those on a lower level is an important trait of transformational leaders, as a supervisor’s perceived support determines whether employees feel valued (DeConinck and Johnson 2009). Transformational leadership, defined by charismatic leadership, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen 1995), builds on this notion of individual appreciation to foster inspiration and commitment. Transformational leaders therefore “transform and inspire followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organization” (Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber 2009, 423). In this process of transcending, transformational leaders increase their followers’ perceptions of being valued (Frieder, Wang, and Oh 2018).

Previous research has identified transformational leadership as an important predictor of positive work outcomes, such as effectiveness ratings, support for innovation, and overall organizational performance (Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber 2009; Schaubroeck, Lam, and Cha 2007). A recent study by Tepper et al. (2018) shows that there is an increased

need for transformational leadership due to a rise in challenge stressors, greater uncertainty, and the increased meaningfulness of work, which also applies to the retail context (Simintiras et al. 2012). Retail salespeople are in need of supportive leaders (Ackfeldt and Cooté 2005).

Initial empirical evidence suggests that transformational leaders can have a positive influence on the success of shared leadership (Coun, Peters, and Blomme 2019; Hoch 2013). Retail sales teams in which team members can rely on one another for leadership are highly relevant for their firms (Jones, Kalmi, and Kauhanen 2010). When dealing with new environmental demands, sales executives' and field sales managers' (i.e., vertical leaders) classic leadership practices need to adapt to encourage shared leadership within their sales teams (Ingram et al. 2005). Ingram et al. (2005) highlight the relevance of leadership practices on all organizational levels in the sales context. In an increasingly complex environment, strong bonds within sales teams are crucial (Humphreys 2001; Ingram et al. 2005). Leader-member exchange and team-member exchange are therefore two essential components to understand how leaders influence their followers' behavior (Banks et al. 2014).

Transformational leadership provides guidance on how all salespeople can fulfill their tasks (e.g., Dubinsky et al. 1995; Schwepker and Good 2010; Zhu and Akhtar 2014), and is therefore a necessary condition to balance workload during times of digital change. Transformational leaders who base their leadership behavior on their personal value system can convey the organization's mission to their subordinates by fostering an attitude of looking beyond their own self-interests (Humphreys 2001). A shared leadership environment constitutes an internal team environment in which salespeople look beyond their own self-interests by allowing other team members a real say in decision-making processes, encouraging other team members if they are frustrated, and developing common ground (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007). Transformational leaders play a crucial role when shaping a shared leadership environment. By influencing each team member in favor of shared leadership, the transformational leaders' vertical leadership approach needs to empower their followers to actively engage in leadership (Pearce, Wassenaar, and Manz 2014). We therefore hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1. Transformational leadership affects a shared leadership environment positively.*

### **Role perceptions**

Classic role stressors stem from unclear role perceptions, which reveal role ambiguity and role conflict (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979; Miao and Evans 2007; Rigopoulou et al. 2012). Role ambiguity occurs primarily where salespeople lack the required information to perform their job well (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979). Role clarity is the opposite of role ambiguity. Our study focuses on clarity of behavioral requirements (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Role clarity is achieved where salespeople have all the necessary information, receive guidance, and have certainty about their

function and relationships with others. Role conflict arises in various manners, and can be traced back to congruence-incongruence or compatibility-incompatibility (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Our study focuses on "intra-role conflict or person-role conflict, e.g., insufficient capability" (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970, 155). Job stressors, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, are common for retail salespeople who "are often boundary spanners with multiple roles to fulfill" (Ackfeldt and Cooté 2005, 151). These stressors foster turnover intentions while attenuating performance (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979; Kim, Knight, and Cruisinger 2009). Salespeople therefore need to have a clear understanding of their role (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979; Miao and Evans 2007).

Team-member exchange theory highlights that trusting relationships between team members are important to ensure high-quality relationships (Banks et al. 2014) while reducing reciprocal relational uncertainties (Colquitt et al. 2012). More clearly established roles and lower role ambiguity improve team-member exchange quality (Banks et al. 2014). Accordingly, role clarity directly addresses the elimination of reciprocal relational uncertainties because role clarity depends on the availability of relevant information, guidance, and an understanding of the function of all team members and their relationships with others (House and Rizzo 1972; Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Role conflict leading to the inability to fulfill one's role, can destroy trustful relationships (House and Rizzo 1972). Unclear role perceptions are therefore expected to prevent the establishment of a successful shared leadership environment.

Early research into role ambiguity and role conflict demonstrated that these constructs relate to negative subjective perceptions (Jackson and Schuler 1985; Schuler, Aldag, and Brief 1977). In the sales literature, role ambiguity and role conflict are viewed as central constructs to explain decreased job satisfaction and lower job performance for B2B settings (Onyemah 2008; Shepherd and Fine 1994; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975) and also for B2C settings (Ackfeldt and Cooté 2005; Kim, Knight, and Cruisinger 2009). Against this backdrop, we argue that a shared leadership environment for retail salespeople can only be successfully developed if the fundamental role stressors are reduced. If retail salespeople experience role conflict, for example, due to incompatible demands between customers and their supervisor (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979), the retail salespeople are not able to express the positive behavioral requirements of a shared leadership environment because the inability to fulfill one's role leads to conflictual rather than cohesive situations in the retail sales teams (House and Rizzo 1972). Role clarity, instead, increases the likelihood of trustful exchanges (House and Rizzo 1972) and would therefore influence the existence of a shared leadership environment positively. We maintain that clear role perceptions reduce uncertainty and allow for shared leadership practices. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2. Role clarity enhances a shared leadership environment.*

*Hypothesis 3. Role conflict hinders a shared leadership environment.*

Transformational leaders act in accordance with their personal value system (Humphreys 2001) encouraging identification with the organization (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich 2001), which requires crucial information processing. They do not hold back information that could be useful to their followers. Instead, transformational leaders are interested in providing all the necessary information not only to allow their followers to internalize the organizational goals but also to address their followers' individual meaning and personal development needs (Conger 1999). A transformational leader therefore increases role clarity through idealized influence and inspirational motivation.

Previous studies attempted to analyze the relationship between transformational leadership and role perceptions. Shoemaker (1999) found empirical evidence that sales managers' transformational leadership practices (inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, encouraging the heart) influence salespeople's role clarity positively. Beauchamp et al. (2005) concluded that transformational leadership will prevent multiple forms of role ambiguity. Transformational leaders provide their subordinates with clear perspectives and thus ensure increasing role clarity (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich 2001). We therefore hypothesize as follows for our retail setting:

*H4. Transformational leadership affects role clarity positively.*

Furthermore, transformational leaders ensure that all their followers' skills are aligned with their expected roles to avoid person-role conflicts resulting from the followers' insufficient capabilities (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970) or from incompatible job demands (Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975). By encouraging creative thinking (Bass 1997) and by adopting a long-term perspective for each of their followers, transformational leaders stimulate them intellectually (Dubinsky et al. 1995). A situation in which the salesperson's capabilities do not match the demands of the leader, customer, or other role partner will therefore not ensue.

Beyond that, transformational leaders pay attention to each salesperson, encouraging them to learn and develop (Bass 1997). Empirical evidence highlights the effect of decreasing role conflict when transformational leaders manage salespeople. In a multilevel model, Diebig, Bormann, and Rowold (2017) predict a direct negative relation between transformational leadership and role conflict. Similarly, Kammerhoff, Lauenstein, and Schütz (2019) demonstrate that transformational leadership reduces task and relationship conflicts at work. Consequently, we hypothesize that transformational leadership decreases the risk of role conflict also in our retail setting:

*H5. Transformational leadership affects role conflict negatively.*

Early sales research investigated not only role stressors' linear effect on favorable work outcomes and unfavorable work outcomes (Singh 1998), but also role perceptions' mediation effect on leaders' and their subordinates' behavior (Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975). Accordingly, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich (2001) found empirical support for role perceptions' mediating effect on the relationship between transformational leadership and salespeople's in-role

performance. Decreased role conflict and increased role clarity are likely to encourage salespeople's positive leadership practices (Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975). Kammerhoff, Lauenstein, and Schütz (2019) show that relationship conflict mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and different subordinates' outcome variables.

Since a transformational leader can influence role perceptions by altering the degree of role clarity and role conflict, we argue that these role perceptions mediate the link between transformational leadership and shared leadership environments. Through clear role perceptions, transformational leadership should strengthen a shared leadership environment. By reducing retail salespeople's uncertainty with regard to how they should do their job (role clarity) and through eliminating incompatible work demands (role conflict), vertical transformational leadership influences a horizontally shared leadership environment positively. We therefore hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 6. Role clarity (a) and role conflict (b) mediate the effect of transformational leadership on a shared leadership environment.*

Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model.

## Study 1: Exploring the antecedents of a shared leadership environment

### Sample and data collection

We collected data in collaboration with a large German clothing retailer. This firm fulfills the standard retail sector characteristics of a high proportion of part-time and female employees (Janhonen and Lindström 2015). This organization's stores experienced increased workloads, as its salespeople had to handle online and offline sales simultaneously. The sample organization was chosen carefully due to its context-specific match with our research approach. The situation under investigation allowed us to analyze a sample firm dealing with an increasingly complex work environment due to technological advances and new customer demands. Furthermore, the clothing retailer had developed its own leadership guidelines to nurture empowering leadership behaviors and to highlight the relevance of leadership practices during digital change.

Transformational leadership and shared leadership within the retail sales teams are part of the sample organization's DNA. The tasks of the salespeople in our study include (1) self-organizing their workforce, (2) managing the stores, (3) making decisions on how to arrange and advertise products, (4) consulting customers when browsing, and (5), of course, assisting customers in their purchase. Their jobs, therefore, go beyond handling simple and similar transaction-related tasks. Sales representatives of the organization were interviewed to confirm these facts. A sales director, for instance, explains that "transformational leadership is an essential leadership style in dealing with our salespeople." Furthermore, he confirms that "teamwork is the requirement for smooth store operations and our staffing structure." His colleague endorses: "shared

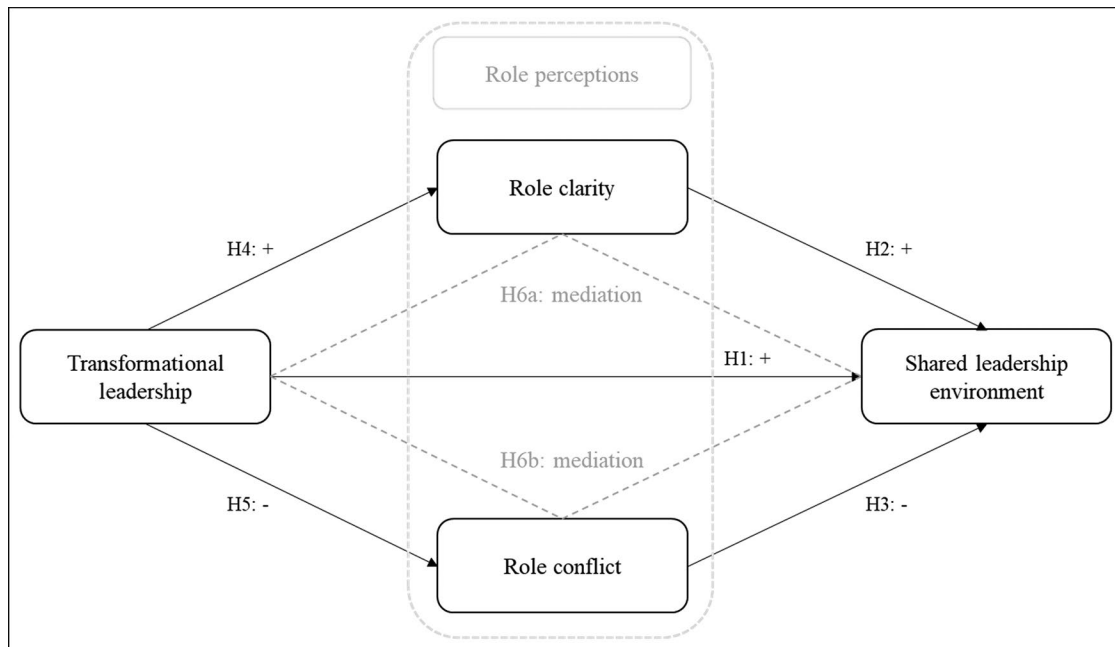


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

leadership (...) is part of our DNA. (...) each team manages the fortunes of their store responsibly (...). In this context, flexible response to individual customer wishes is of great importance." These statements support the shift toward more responsibility for each salesperson within B2C retail stores and justify the fit for our study purposes.

The sample organization runs approximately 1,850 stores, most of which are located in Germany, with only a small number in Austria. The survey was designed in collaboration with the company in a cross-sectional meeting on August 2, 2018. Between October and December 2018, the survey questionnaire was posted to 9,230 salespeople and 70 regional managers. Of the 9,230 salespeople contacted, 2,089 replied, giving a response rate of 22.63%. Due to missing data, 1,527 salespeople and 66 regional managers were included in the final sample. Consequently, the final sample contains data from Germany only. Most of the salespeople in the sample (81%) were older than 40.

### Measures

If not stated otherwise, we used a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree).

#### Shared leadership environment

We capture *shared leadership environment* along the three dimensions of an internal team environment that enhance shared leadership. First, to capture *voice*, the participants indicated to which extent they agree with the following statement: "As a member of this team, I have a real say in how this team carries out its work." *Social support* is measured with the item: "The members of my team give encouragement to team members who seem frustrated." *Shared*

*purpose* is measured with the item: "The members of my team discuss our team's tasks and objectives to ensure that we have a fair understanding" (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007, 1233 f.).

#### Transformational leadership

The multifactor leadership questionnaire by Bass (1985) reveals the most important approach to the conceptualization of *transformational leadership*. Charismatic leadership, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation define transformational leadership (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen 1995). To measure transformational leadership, the participants indicated to which extent they agree with the following statements: "My leader encourages me to express my ideas and opinions" (*charismatic leadership*), "My leader treats each subordinate individually" (*individual consideration*), and "My leader enables me to think about old problems in new ways" (*intellectual stimulation*) (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen 1995, 473).

#### Role perceptions

The most prominent study of role clarity and role conflict in organizations is the study by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970). Role clarity has become the most important dimension for reduced uncertainty at work (Zheng et al. 2016). Consequently, our study concentrates on role clarity of behavioral requirements by focusing on four distinct aspects (e.g., "I know what my responsibilities are"). Role conflict (i.e., person-role conflict) is measured by means of two reverse coded items (e.g., "I don't have to work under vague directives or orders"). An overview of all the items is presented in Appendix A.

**Controls**

We controlled for important but potentially distorting factors (Lu and White 2014). First, we included the *age* of each salesperson (1 < 40 years, 2 > 40 years). Second, we included *organizational identity* and *error management culture*. Both factors are important organizational mechanisms linked to the work climate (Ravasi and Schultz 2006; van Dyck et al. 2005) and are relevant when examining leadership and a shared leadership environment. Third, we controlled for the *gender of the regional managers* and the *size of the regional team*, as the size determines the frequency of contact between salespeople and their regional manager (Rapp et al. 2020).

**Analysis**

We undertook factor analyses to identify the underlying latent variables (see Table A1 in the Appendix A). To reduce common method variance, we set up a complex multiple mediation model ex post and ran Harman’s single factor test, which revealed uncritical results (Podsakoff et al. 2003; Chang, van Witteloostuijn, and Eden 2010). Furthermore, we followed Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips (1991) and checked whether the highest correlation was below 0.9 to make sure that common method variance is not an issue. We bootstrapped the multiple mediation model with 5,000 replications to achieve robust results (e.g., Hayes and Preacher 2014). Lastly, the variance inflation factor revealed uncritical results, verifying that data collection is free from multicollinearity (Thompson et al. 2017).

**Results**

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study’s main variables. Both shared leadership environment and role clarity reveal a high mean of 5.09 and 5.13, respectively. Role conflict shows a rather low mean of 2.18, which indicates that most of the salespeople did not experience high levels of role conflict. Role clarity and role conflict are highly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.73$ ), showing a strong correlation with transformational leadership but with a different direction of influence.

**Model quality indicators**

To ensure indicator and construct reliability, we checked for content validity, indicator reliability, construct reliability, and discriminant validity (see Hofeditz et al. 2017). Our results prove content validity through an in-depth literature review as well as a thorough selection of indicators. Factor loadings between 0.68 and 0.92 reveal a good indicator reliability (Hulland 1999). Construct reliability is determined by means of a satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha between 0.62 and 0.91. The average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5 and the squared correlations per construct are smaller than the AVE, revealing robust discriminant validity (Hair et al. 2012). Table A1 in the Appendix A presents an overview of all criteria.

**Multiple mediation**

We perform a multiple mediation analysis to test our hypotheses. To account for our multilevel data structure, we clustered the standard errors based on the regional managers’ identifiers (IDs) (Krull and MacKinnon 2001). Replications are based on 66 clusters (i.e., regional managers) with 1,527 observations (i.e., salespeople). Table 2 presents our results. The results of the final multiple mediation analysis with controls are presented in Model 5. The control variables showed mixed results. Age ( $\beta = 0.13, p < 0.05$ ), for example, revealed a significant effect on a shared leadership environment. Organizational identity, error management culture, the gender of the regional manager, and the size of the regional team do not have a significant direct effect on the model.

In Hypothesis 1, we proposed that transformational leadership enhances a shared leadership environment. Our results confirm that transformational leadership has a positive and significant coefficient in Model 3 ( $\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$ ) and in the final Model 5 ( $\beta = 0.20, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that transformational leaders have a positive effect on a shared leadership environment, which confirms Hypothesis 1.

In Hypotheses 2 and 3, we suggested that role clarity enhances, but role conflict hinders, a shared leadership environment. Our results confirm these hypothesized effects. Both explanatory variables have a significant influence on a shared leadership environment at the 95% confidence interval. Role clarity reveals a positive coefficient of  $\beta = 0.31 (p < 0.001)$ , but role conflict reveals a negative coefficient of

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

#	Construct	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Shared leadership environment	5.09 (0.92)	–							
2	Role clarity	5.13 (0.64)	0.52***	–						
3	Role conflict	2.18 (0.88)	-0.49***	-0.73***	–					
4	Transformational leadership	4.67 (1.20)	0.46***	0.58***	-0.65***	–				
5	Organizational identity	5.92 (0.25)	0.08**	0.13***	-0.14***	0.11***	–			
6	Error management culture	6.15 (0.36)	0.04	0.05†	-0.08**	0.02	0.61***	–		
7	Age	1.81 (0.39)	0.04	-0.01	0.04†	-0.05*	-0.01	0.03	–	
8	Gender of regional manager	1.40 (0.49)	0.01	-0.03	-0.03	0.07**	0.01	-0.01	0.03	–
9	Size of regional team	135 (45.07)	0.07**	0.03	-0.06	0.09***	0.34***	0.26***	0.14***	-0.15***

Note. Age measured as 1 < 40 years and 2 > 40 years; gender regional manager measured as 1 = female and 2 = male. Organizational identity measured on a Likert-scale 1–6; Error management culture measured on a Likert-scale 1–6.

† $p < 0.1$ ,  
\* $p < 0.05$ ,  
\*\* $p < 0.01$ ,  
\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



**Table 2.** Results of regression analyses.

Dependent variable	Role clarity		Role conflict		Shared leadership environment		
Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5		
Transformational leadership	0.58*** (0.02)	-0.65*** (0.20)	0.46*** (0.02)	0.20*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.03)		
Role clarity				0.31*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.03)		
Role conflict				-0.13*** (0.03)	-0.13*** (0.03)		
Age							0.13* (0.06)
Organizational identity							-0.03 (0.11)
Error management culture							0.01 (0.07)
Gender of regional manager							-0.03 (0.04)
Size of regional team							0.00 (0.00)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.42	0.21	0.31	0.32		
N	1,527	1,527	1,527	1,527	1,527		

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered on the regional manager ID. Models 1 and 2 represent the simple linear regression of transformational leadership on role clarity and role conflict. Model 3 represents the simple linear regression of transformational leadership on a shared leadership environment. Model 4 shows the multiple linear regression results without controls, and Model 5 shows the multiple linear regression results with controls.

\* $p < 0.05$ ,

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ,

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

$\beta = -0.13$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) in the final model. We therefore confirm Hypotheses 2 and 3.

In Hypotheses 4 and 5, we argued that transformational leadership increases role clarity and decreases role conflict. Our results confirm both hypotheses. Model 1 reveals a significant positive effect of  $\beta = 0.58$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) for transformational leadership on role clarity, thus confirming Hypothesis 4. Model 2 reveals a significant negative effect of  $\beta = -0.65$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) for transformational leadership on role conflict, thus confirming Hypothesis 5.

In Hypotheses 6a and 6b, we predicted that role perceptions have a mediation effect. Our analysis confirms a partial mediation, as 57.46% of the total effect is mediated. The indirect effect of role clarity and role conflict is significant at the 95% confidence interval, with a coefficient of  $\beta = 0.18$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) and  $\beta = 0.08$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), respectively. The results are shown in Table 3. We confirm Hypotheses 6a and 6b.

### Post hoc analysis

The main analysis reveals a positive relation between transformational leadership and a shared leadership environment,

which is mediated by clear role perceptions. Since the three dimensions of a shared leadership environment represent distinct although highly interrelated and mutually reinforcing constructs (see Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007), we conducted further analyses to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership and each of the three dimensions of a shared leadership environment. We therefore performed mediation analyses with all three sub-dimensions of a shared leadership environment. Tables 4a, 4b, and 4c show the mediation results. The results confirm transformational leadership's hypothesized influence on a shared leadership environment, as this relationship is significantly positive for all three sub-dimensions of a shared leadership environment. Furthermore, the results reveal significant mediations through role clarity and role conflict to explain the relationship not only between transformational leadership and social support but also between transformational leadership and voice. Interestingly, we identified an insignificant mediation through role conflict for the relationship between transformational leadership and shared purpose. These findings are discussed below.

**Table 3.** Results of the multiple mediation analysis.

Shared leadership environment	Coefficient	SE	Conf. Interval	
Indirect effect through role conflict	0.08	0.03	0.02	0.14
Indirect effect through role clarity	0.18	0.03	0.13	0.23
Total indirect effect	0.26	0.03	0.22	0.32
Direct effect of transformational leadership	0.20	0.03	0.14	0.25
Age	0.13	0.05	0.02	0.24
Organizational identity	-0.03	0.11	-0.25	0.18
Error management culture	0.01	0.07	-0.13	0.16
Gender of regional manager	-0.03	0.04	-0.12	0.05
Size of regional team	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.01

Note. The number of observations is 1,527 with an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.32. Results are clustered by 66 regional managers.

**Table 4a.** Post hoc results of multiple mediation analysis for voice.

Dependent variable	Voice			
Independent variable	Coefficient	SE	Conf. Interval	
Indirect effect through role conflict	0.12	0.04	0.04	0.19
Indirect effect through role clarity	0.17	0.03	0.12	0.23
Total indirect effect	0.29	0.03	0.23	0.35
Direct effect of transformational leadership	0.12	0.03	0.05	0.18
Age	0.15	0.07	0.03	0.28
Organizational identity	-0.12	0.13	-0.38	0.13
Error management culture	0.00	0.09	-0.17	0.18
Gender of regional manager	-0.02	0.05	-0.12	0.09
Size of regional team	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Note. The number of observations is 1,527 with an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.23. Results are clustered by 66 regional managers.

**Table 4b.** Post hoc results of multiple mediation analysis for social support.

Dependent variable	Social support			
	Coefficient	SE	Conf. Interval	
Indirect effect through role conflict	0.09	0.03	0.03	0.14
Indirect effect through role clarity	0.17	0.03	0.12	0.22
Total indirect effect	0.26	0.02	0.21	0.30
Direct effect of transformational leadership	0.10	0.03	0.05	0.16
Age	0.10	0.06	0.00	0.21
Organizational identity	-0.07	0.11	-0.28	0.15
Error management culture	0.03	0.07	-0.12	0.17
Gender of regional manager	-0.05	0.04	-0.14	0.03
Size of regional team	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01

Note. The number of observations is 1,527 with an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.23. Results are clustered by 66 regional managers.

**Table 4c.** Post hoc results of multiple mediation analysis for shared purpose.

Dependent variable	Shared purpose			
	Coefficient	SE	Conf. Interval	
Indirect effect through role conflict	0.03	0.03	-0.03	0.09
Indirect effect through role clarity	0.16	0.03	0.10	0.22
Total indirect effect	0.19	0.03	0.14	0.25
Direct effect of transformational leadership	0.37	0.03	0.30	0.43
Age	0.12	0.06	0.00	0.25
Organizational identity	0.13	0.13	-0.11	0.38
Error management culture	0.00	0.08	-0.16	0.17
Gender of regional manager	-0.04	0.05	-0.14	0.06
Size of regional team	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Note. The number of observations is 1,527 with an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.30. Results are clustered by 66 regional managers.

## Study 2: Verification of the transformational leader’s role

### Sample and data collection

Our second study’s goal was to verify transformational leadership’s direct effect on a shared leadership environment for retail salespeople, as research had previously neglected the B2C retail sales context for the analysis of transformational leadership. We set up an online-based scenario experiment and used the survey platform *Prolific* to collect our data. Our final sample consists of 345 participants, 77.68% from the UK and 22.32% from the USA. All participants work in the retail sector and face customer contact in their daily work routines. Sixty-two point nine percent are female and 35.94% are male, which again represents the classic female predominance of the retail sector. The mean work experience is 13.8 years.

### Measures

#### Leadership

We manipulated our independent variable leadership through scenarios. First, participants were informed that they work for SONAL (a fictional company) who operates in the retail sector, and that their daily work routines include customer contact. Afterward, they were informed that SONAL assesses its leadership philosophy and that their task is to evaluate the presented leadership proposal against specific criteria. Participants were then randomly assigned to either a transformational scenario or a transactional scenario (see Figure A1 and A2 in the Appendix A). Both scenarios were

designed based on the research of Bycio et al. (1995). Following Bycio et al. (1995), transformational leaders are characterized by (1) faith, respect, inspiration, (2) attention and support, and (3) enablement of subordinates. Transactional leaders are characterized by focusing on (1) rewards and (2) continuity (Bycio et al. 1995, 468). These characteristics make up the facets of each leadership style. *Transformational leadership* is created through charismatic leadership, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation, whereas *transactional leadership* includes contingent reward and management by exception (Bycio et al. 1995, 468).

#### Shared leadership environment

Similar to the first study, we followed Carson et al. (2007) to measure the *shared leadership environment*. Due to the online-based scenario, we adjusted the wording slightly to the third person singular. Participants were asked to indicate, based on the scenario they saw, how they expect the team environment to be like: “Members of the team have a real say in how the team carries out its work” (*voice*), “Members of the team give encouragement to team members who seem frustrated” (*social support*), and “Members of the team discuss their team’s tasks and objectives to ensure that everyone has a fair understanding” (*shared purpose*). The overall variable revealed a construct reliability of Cronbach’s alpha of 0.89.

To check for potential gender effects, Table 5 shows the means of a shared leadership environment separately for the transformational and the transactional leadership treatments and for both genders. Table 5 shows that the perceived shared leadership environment is substantially higher in the transformational leadership treatment than in the transactional leadership treatment for both women and men. Gender differences are low and not statistically significant.

#### Manipulation checks

To ensure high-quality data, we included manipulations checks. In the first manipulation check, the participants saw two statements. The one statement revealed that “leaders at SONAL pay attention to their employees by focusing more on performance than on the employee’s individual needs” (*transactional*) and the other statement revealed that “leaders are role models and pay attention to their employees by recognizing and valuing the potential of each employee” (*transformational*). If employees did not pick the right statement based on the scenario they saw, their answers were not used for the final sample. A second manipulation check was an attention check, where we asked if the participants agree (on a seven-point Likert scale) that SONAL currently assesses its leadership philosophy. We only

**Table 5.** Mean of shared leadership environment by gender and treatment.

	Transformational leadership	Transactional leadership
Female	5.89 (0.73)	3.65 (1.27)
Male	5.80 (0.92)	3.79 (1.27)

Note. Standard deviation in parentheses.

used data from those who answered with a five, six, or seven. In total, these two assessments required an exclusion of 31% of the participants. Since the excluded subjects do not significantly differ in gender, age, or work experience, sample attrition bias is very unlikely to influence our results. The final sample consists of 345 participants. One hundred and ninety six participants were exposed to the transformational scenario and 149 participants to the transactional scenario.

## Results

In both scenario groups, the demographic variables age, gender, and work experience are similarly distributed. For the transformational scenario, the mean age is 32 years and the mean work experience is 13 years. Of this subsample, 64% was female, 34% male, and 2% diverse. For the transactional scenario, the mean age is 33 years and the mean work experience is 14.5 years. Sixty-one percent of the participants in this scenario are female, 38% are male, and 1% has stated to be diverse.

Since our goal was to verify transformational leadership's significant positive effect on a shared leadership environment, we performed a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to check for significant group effects. The transformational scenario is coded 1 and the transactional scenario is coded 0. The analysis reveals a statistically significant effect ( $F(1, 343) = 372.49, p < 0.0001$ ), indicating a significantly higher mean for a shared leadership environment in the transformational scenario ( $M = 5.86$ ) compared to the transactional scenario ( $M = 3.69$ ). The results of the regression analyses in Table 6a further confirm the hypothesized positive effect of transformational leadership on a shared leadership environment (H1) in Models 3 to 5.

Compared to transactional leaders, transformational leaders have a positive and statistically significant effect on a shared leadership environment. Age and work experience as controls had no significant effect. Role clarity and role conflict show mixed results. Results of the scenario

experiment in Table 6b reveal a significant mediation through role conflict but not through role clarity.

## Discussion

Our study investigates how vertical transformational leadership influences a horizontal shared leadership environment in retail sales teams. This examination adds to current research debates on the vertical leader's role in respect of horizontal leadership behaviors (Banks et al. 2014). Our field study's results confirm the positive relationship between transformational leadership and a shared leadership environment in a B2C retail setting. The vertical leader takes on a crucial role in shaping a shared leadership environment. Regional sales managers must ensure that there is clear communication with regard to a salesperson's role when applying a transformational leadership style. If salespeople have a clear understanding of their role, they trust the other team members' decision-making power (*voice*), encourage one another (*social support*), and establish a common working ground (*shared purpose*).

In our post hoc analysis of Study 1, we further observe an insignificant indirect effect of role conflict on the relationship between transformational leadership and shared purpose. Accordingly, role conflict does not show the same effect as for the overall construct or for the other two dimensions of a shared leadership environment. This could possibly be ascribed to the superordinate nature of a shared team purpose. Other than encouragement through social support or proactive behavior through voice (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007), having a common sense of purpose does not affect the daily team routines and is thus not affected by the consequences of role conflict. Voice and social support directly address daily aspects of the exchange between team members, and therefore role conflict is a barrier to positive exchange relationships. This analysis highlights the value of an overall construct for a shared leadership environment but simultaneously sensitizes for mixed effects when studying all three dimensions separately.

**Table 6a.** Results of regression analyses of treatment effects.

Dependent variable	Role clarity	Role conflict	Shared leadership environment		
Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Transformational treatment	0.048 (0.10)	-0.48*** (0.13)	2.17*** (0.11)	2.05*** (0.11)	2.05*** (0.11)
Role clarity				0.13* (0.07)	0.13* (0.07)
Role conflict				-0.24*** (0.05)	-0.24*** (0.05)
Age					0.01 (0.01)
Work experience					-0.01 (0.01)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0007	0.04	0.52	0.58	0.58
N	345	345	345	345	345

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Models 1 and 2 represent the simple linear regression of the transformational treatment on role clarity and role conflict. Model 3 represents the simple linear regression of the transformational treatment on shared leadership environment. Model 4 shows the multiple linear regression results without controls; Model (5) shows the multiple linear regression results with controls.

\* $p < 0.05$ ,

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ,

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 6b.** Results of the multiple mediation analysis of the scenario experiment.

Shared leadership environment	Coefficient	SE	Conf. Interval	
Indirect effect through role conflict	0.11	0.04	0.03	0.19
Indirect effect through role clarity	0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.04
Total indirect effect	0.12	0.05	0.03	0.21
Direct effect of transformational leadership	2.05	0.11	1.84	2.26

Note. The number of observations is 345 with an  $R^2$  of 0.58.

An evaluation of the results suggests that in physical stores a well-organized work environment is highly relevant. With the shift toward digital transformation, salespeople need to handle both online services and offline services, leading to an increased workload and a need for work coordination. To achieve a successful horizontal work environment, transformational leaders need to support and empower their followers to engage in leadership practices by ensuring roles are defined clearly. Reduced ambiguity at work has a positive effect on the customers' perception of the salespeople working in the store (Arnold et al. 2009).

Furthermore, our findings add to previous research on transformational leadership in sales in two respects. First, our study shows that transformational leadership is highly relevant where there is a physical distance between the salespeople and their leaders. Adding to previous studies, we show that transformational leadership behavior can foster positive exchange relationships between retail salespeople. The current study thus adds to the sparse knowledge about shared leadership in retail sales settings. Second, our results highlight the relevance of taking salespeople's role perceptions into account. Transformational leadership combined with clear role perceptions allow salespeople to handle their large role sets and to create a shared leadership environment.

The additional online-based scenario experiment demonstrates a causal relationship of transformational leadership on the establishment of a shared leadership environment. The scenario experiment also shows a significant mediation effect of role conflict. Transformational leadership decreases role conflict, which, in turn, facilitates a shared leadership environment. That we did not find a mediation effect of role clarity in the scenario experiment can be explained via the following issue: In the fictitious transformational leadership setting (focus on inspiration, attention and support, enablement), participants anticipate clarity due to feedback and individual support, while in the transactional leadership setting (focus on rewards), participants anticipate clarity on how to be rewarded. Paired with the field-based Study 1, results are thus enriched with real organizational data, profiting from each other's complementarity (Sonnemann et al. 2013).

A possible explanation for the partial mediation effect of role perceptions, especially of role conflict, is the need to reduce uncertainty in the workplace (van den Bos and Lind 2002). Research by Thau et al. (2009) shows that poor supervision and high uncertainty in the workplace result in negative work outcomes, whereas clear role perceptions can decrease uncertainty (Cicero, Pierro, and van Knippenberg 2009). When combining social exchange theory with role theory, we can conclude that clear role perceptions assume the function of fairness-related information and decrease

uncertainty in social relationships (van den Bos and Lind 2002). In this manner, clear role perceptions explain a positive shared leadership environment in which salespeople allow leadership and rely on others' leadership (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007).

### Theoretical contribution

Our study contributes to the literature in several respects. First, we add to the classic sales literature by highlighting transformational leadership's relevance for B2C retail settings, which are originally characterized by a more transactional order processing (Kadic-Magljalic et al. 2017). Accordingly, Study 1 and Study 2 show that transformational leaders influence a shared leadership environment between retail salespeople positively. This finding adds to previous research and assigns retail salespeople a key role in customer persuasion and customer orientation (Simintiras et al. 2012). If salespeople experience appreciative, valuing leadership (i.e., transformational leadership), this behavior will also mirror their attitude toward colleagues and customers.

Second, this article expands sales leadership research by combining leader-member exchange theory and team-member exchange theory. Our findings highlight vertical leadership practices' critical effect on horizontal leadership formats. Social exchange theory and role theory are relevant to understand vertical leadership and horizontal leadership. Consequently, we contribute to current but contrasting research on both leadership formats. In line with the research by Pearce, Wassenaar, and Manz (2014), our results not only demonstrate vertical leaders' important role in shaping a shared leadership environment but also indicate new theoretical perspectives for leadership theories. Our findings demonstrate that initial leader-member exchange relationships, which characterize vertical, transformational leadership behavior, improve a shared leadership environment.

Third, this study contributes to the relevance of focusing on the role of followers to explain positive work outcomes (Frieder, Wang, and Oh 2018). Leadership and followership are conditionally dependent on each other (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014), as leadership can only be successful if the followers are willing to be influenced. Our article takes this notion a step further and elaborates on a shared leadership environment in which followers allow for and rely on other salespeople's leadership (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007). This goes along with favorable traits among salespeople, such as having a voice that is heard, receiving social support, and having a shared purpose. These benefits are critical for coping with dynamic changes in the environment, for example, the conditions resulting from increased digitization. Referring to a recent debate on specialized versus generalized sales roles in this matter (Singh et al. 2019), our results emphasize that it is essential to at least provide clear role perceptions to successfully establish less hierarchically structured work environments for salespeople.

Lastly, we answer a call by Sweeney, Clarke, and Higgs (2019) to expand leadership research through a context-driven study. In retail sales teams, role ambiguity functions as a barrier to the creation of a shared leadership environment.

Similar to a study by Arnold et al. (2019), our results emphasize the relevance of context-specific (sales) leadership research. Our study adds to previous research on transformational leadership and salespeople's role perceptions (e.g., Beauchamp et al. 2005; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Rich 2001; Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975), and highlights the importance of salespeople having clear role perceptions to enable a shared leadership environment. Whereas previous role perception studies in classic management research showed role ambiguity's positive effects on favorable work outcomes (Cicero, Pierro, and van Knippenberg 2009), we confirm that in a retail sales context, role ambiguity and role conflict are detrimental to shared leadership environments.

### **Practical implications**

By proving a significantly positive effect of transformational leadership on a shared leadership environment, our results highlight the still omnipresent relevance of vertical leaders not being integrated into their followers' daily tasks. Regional sales managers are responsible for the development of a positive team atmosphere in their retail stores. In accordance with transformational leadership, leadership practices should be encouraging, personalized, and stimulating. By following these three transformational leadership principles, regional managers can nurture a shared leadership environment that is associated with positive work outcomes. Furthermore, this finding highlights the notion of retail salespeople not being simple "order-fillers" (Dubinsky and Mattson 1979, 70). Instead, they are the direct connection with the customers in the stores. The manners in which retail sales managers lead their salespeople influence how the salespeople behave in their particular selling team and how they treat customers in the store (Ackfeldt and Coote 2005; Kadic-Magljajlic et al. 2017; Simintiras et al. 2012).

Furthermore, our article shows that clear role perceptions are particularly relevant to explain the mechanisms that support the development of a shared leadership environment at a German fashion retailer. Transformational regional sales managers therefore need to ensure role clarity and avoid role conflict. By doing so, they can reduce uncertainty and ensure the fairness of their leadership practices, thereby nurturing a shared leadership environment in all their stores.

In the past, a vertical leadership approach was common in sales practices (Perry, Pearce, and Sims Jr 1999). By considering the interplay between vertical leadership and horizontal leadership, our study highlights the importance of expanding the scope of regional managers' merely classical vertical leadership practices toward shared leadership practices. Our results indicate that regional sales managers can encourage the development of a strong bond within their retail sales teams by applying transformational leadership practices and ensuring that all salespeople have clarity regarding their respective roles.

The results of our study reduce the differences between B2C and B2B sales research on behaviors of salespeople.

Although representing different business relations, behavioral requirements in terms of leadership and team characteristics have become more similar as retail sales teams become more autonomous (Janhonen and Lindström 2015). Whereas for B2B selling interactions, need-based buyer-selling relationships are key to successful exchange relationships (Bass 1997; Jones et al. 2005) and therefore require transformational leadership to achieve collaboration and value co-creation (Lambert and Enz 2012), a similar mechanism is observed in B2C retail interactions. Our results highlight the importance of clear communication and high-quality exchange relationships with regard to transformational leadership for B2C retail settings to achieve a shared leadership environment in retail selling teams.

Lastly, the results of both studies demonstrate that transformational leaders are needed to establish a shared leadership environment in retail sales teams. By implication, this requires the selection of transformational leaders to lead a team that is characterized by a shared leadership environment, and also implies that transactional leaders are less attracted to work as part of a shared leadership environment because transactional leaders follow different guidelines compared to transformational leaders (e.g., Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber 2009; Bycio, Hackett, and Allen 1995).

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has certain limitations with regard to its scope and method, which provide promising avenues for future research. By providing valuable insights into real sales data, we attempt to apply new leadership theory to retail sales practice. Our main study explores transformational leadership and a shared leadership environment by examining the data collected from 1,527 retail salespeople, which allowed us to create a valuable data set. Furthermore, through an online-based scenario experiment we validated the direct effect of transformational leadership on a shared leadership environment. Further validation in terms of field sales data is necessary to become more familiarized with transformational leadership and shared leadership environments in different retail contexts.

Furthermore, studies of shared leadership in a retail sales context should go a step further in terms of measurement. We used cross-sectional data for our main study, and verify the main effect through an online-based scenario experiment. In this manner, we can eliminate biased estimates due to common method variance (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Future research should further consider a longitudinal research approach to take dynamic leadership evolutions into account. In this manner, research will be able to control for transformational leadership's effect on already strong or weak shared leadership environments too. Moreover, our study applied an aggregate measurement of a shared leadership environment, which is purported to be the crucial antecedent of shared leadership. Further studies need to address shared leadership among retail salespeople more directly by employing a social network approach (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger 2016).

In the sales context, previous leadership research demonstrates a link between behavioral work outcomes and the related culture (Mulki, Caemmerer, and Heggde 2015). While most leadership studies were undertaken in the USA (Gelfand, Erez, and Aycan 2007; Mulki, Caemmerer, and Heggde 2015), our main study was carried out in Germany, a country that scores high on Hofstede's (1991) uncertainty avoidance dimension. This cultural context might explain the positive role perceptions' significant effect on a shared leadership environment. Consequently, when considering role perceptions' effect, future research on vertical sales leadership and a shared leadership environment should also analyze the cross-cultural (dis)similarities. By doing so, leadership research could make important contributions to our understanding of salesforce issues in a global context (Mulki, Caemmerer, and Heggde 2015).

Moreover, the results of Study 2 reveal that work experience does not have a direct significant effect nor a significant moderation effect on a shared leadership environment. This highlights the impact of transformational leadership independently of experience. Future research should, however, pay closer attention to tenure, as the belonging to a specific company or team may reveal more statistically significant power.

Lastly, Study 1 and Study 2 add to current research to understand the role of transformational leadership for a shared leadership environment in a retail sales setting. Current research thus far investigated the direct influence of leadership on shared leadership team phenomena (e.g., Conger 1999; Coun, Peters, and Blomme 2019; Ensley, Hmieleski, and Pearce 2006), and retail scholars have just started to recognize the relevance of more authority that lies with each retail salesperson (e.g., Janhonen and Lindström 2015). In terms of measurement error, future studies could thus also explore the effect of an already existing shared leadership environment on leaders' behavior to tackle a possible reverse causality relationship. This indicates that future studies could directly analyze if the presence of a shared leadership environment also leads to the sole recruitment of transformational leaders, excluding transactional leaders from the possibility to be recruited. Following these results, future research should explore the possible influential effect of a shared leadership environment on the leadership style within a follow-up experimental design setting.

## Conclusion

How can formal leadership contribute to a less hierarchically structured work environment for retail salespeople? This study provides a context-specific analysis of vertical sales leadership and horizontal sales leadership. Our results present evidence of a positive interplay between vertical, transformational leadership and a horizontal, shared leadership environment. Regional managers who successfully transfer their overarching values to their retail salespeople through their leadership practices, engender a shared leadership environment in their stores. In sales, clear role perceptions

enable retail salespeople to participate in leadership because role clarity decreases the uncertainty in their social relationships. We also find that clear role perceptions are essential mechanisms for conveying vertical, transformational leadership on a horizontal level. Research on retail sales practices in B2C settings must recognize the importance of transformational leadership and clear role perceptions for achieving positive leadership effects.

## Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Survey items and construct validity.

Constructs and items	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Maximum squared correlation	Loadings
<i>Shared leadership environment</i> <sup>1</sup>				
1. As a member of this team, I have a real say in how this team carries out its work. (Voice)	.836	.759	.265	.897
2. The members of my team give encouragement to team members who seem frustrated. (Social support)				.894
3. The members of my team discuss our team's tasks and objectives to ensure that we have a fair understanding. (Shared purpose)				.820
<i>Transformational leadership</i> <sup>2</sup>				
1. My leader encourages me to express my ideas and opinions. (Charismatic leadership)	.919	.862	.417	.934
2. My leader treats each subordinate individually. (Individual consideration)				.920
3. My leader enables me to think about old problems in new ways. (Intellectual stimulation)				.930
<i>Role clarity</i> <sup>3</sup>				
1. I know what my responsibilities are.	.726	.574	.518	.825
2. I know exactly what is expected of me.				.760
3. Explanation is clear of what has to be done.				.723
4. I feel certain about how much authority I have.				.718
<i>Role conflict</i> <sup>3</sup>				
1. I don't have to work under vague directives or orders. (reverse coded)	.652	.745	.518	.863
2. I receive an assignment with adequate resources and materials to execute it. (reverse coded)				.863

Note. Following <sup>1</sup> Carson et al. (2007), <sup>2</sup> Bycio et al. (1995), <sup>3</sup> Rizzo et al. (1970).



Proposal:

### Leadership Philosophy at **SONAL**\*

\*Proposal to be evaluated


May 2021

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At SONAL, the employees are the priority for each supervisor. Supervisors are role models for their employees. They recognize and value the potential of each employee. Supervisors empower each employee to rethink old problems in new ways. Three leadership-pillars characterize the leadership philosophy at SONAL:

<p> <b>Faith, respect, inspiration</b></p>	<p>Leaders at SONAL encourage their employees to express their ideas and opinions.</p>
<p> <b>Attention and support</b></p>	<p>At SONAL leaders treat each employee individually.</p>
<p> <b>Enabling</b></p>	<p>Leaders at SONAL enable their employees to think about old problems in new ways.</p>

**Figure A1.** Transformational leadership scenario.




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## Proposal: Leadership Philosophy at **SONAL**\*

\*Proposal to be evaluated

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At SONAL, goal attainment is the priority for each supervisor. Supervisors concentrate more on performance than on employees' individual needs. As long as the old ways work, supervisors guide their employees not to change anything. Two leadership-pillars characterize the leadership philosophy at SONAL:

 <b>Reward</b>	<p>At SONAL, leaders tell each subordinate what they should do if they want to be rewarded.</p>
 <b>Continuity</b>	<p>As long as things are going all right, SONAL-leaders do not try to change anything.</p>

**Figure A2.** Transactional leadership scenario.