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Top online luxury apparel and accessories retailers: what are they doing right?

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Abstract

Many luxury firms have successfully adopted online sales and online sales growth has outperformed offline sales growth. As online luxury sales continue to grow, service expectations in digital and instore channels are also expected to grow. To add to the research literature, the top performing 46 luxury apparel and accessories websites identified in the *Luxury e-Commerce Report* from Internet Retailer were content analyzed to determine the state of the art in top performing luxury retail websites in providing needed information (international customer service attributes). Those top performing websites were then compared to 44 randomly selected similar websites on the same attributes to determine how the two groups of websites compared in terms of international customer service attributes. Although top performing luxury retail websites are providing important customer service information that facilitates online purchasing, there is room for improvement. In comparing the two groups of online luxury merchants, each group had strengths and weaknesses. Overall, merchants performed at a suboptimal level on provision of many customer service attributes, need improvement on others, and performed well on a few attributes. These luxury fashion online retailers are at an early stage in providing important customer service attributes on their websites.

Keywords: Luxury, International, Websites, Customer service

Introduction

With the development of information technology, e-commerce has been revolutionized (Wahi et al. 2015). Retail has embraced e-commerce with omni-channel retailing seamlessly integrating online and offline experiences. Not only has e-commerce diminished business boundaries between countries, but it has also intensified competition among e-retailers globally (Barns 2016).

The luxury fashion market is growing. In 2017 the personal luxury goods market experienced worldwide growth, reached a record high of \$307 billion in sales, and was expected to continue robust growth (Luxury goods 2017). Research shows that 63% of luxury good purchases occur in physical stores; mature market luxury consumers tend to shop instore while emerging market consumers tend to shop online (Global powers 2017). Millennials, an emerging group of luxury shoppers, are an important target

market of luxury brands (Bailis 2017). They are the most digitally-influenced luxury consumers; 42% are purchasing online, which is becoming more popular across generations (Global powers 2017). Upcoming Generation Z is more technology-driven than past generations and more comfortable shopping online using various devices and media (Lee 2018).

The traditional luxury market now faces the challenge of adopting e-commerce pressured by the fast-growing omni-channel retail industry (E-tailing group 2015). There is concern that if luxury firms adopt an online retail format, they may lose their pleasurable sensory experience, exclusivity, and brand image (e.g., Baker et al. 2018; Shen et al. 2017). These researchers and a Deloitte report (Global powers 2017) note luxury firms' difficulty moving to a digital distribution system, while maintaining quality and brand image. Such concerns contribute to a lag in e-commerce implementation and omni-channel strategy adoption. Deloitte surveyed over 1300 luxury consumers (Global powers 2017); nearly half believed a digital format will become increasingly important in the future.

Moreover, luxury goods consumers are willing to purchase online at full price (Dauriz et al. 2014). Many luxury firms have successfully adopted online sales and online luxury sales growth exceeds instore sales growth (D'Arpizio et al. 2019; 11 growth drivers 2019). The luxury market grew by 5% in 2018, while sales in the online luxury market grew 22% and is expected to grow to 25% by 2025. As online luxury sales grow, service expectations online and instore are also expected to grow (Luxury e-commerce 2018). Excellent service quality sets luxury retailers apart, so it is important to reinforce service quality in a digital environment (Kim and Kim 2017).

Most luxury firms are from Europe and the USA, but consumers from emerging markets (e.g., China, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Mexico, and Brazil) drive luxury market growth (11 growth drivers 2019; Global powers 2017). In 2016 the growth rate for Chinese online luxury firms was 25%, well above the growth of online luxury firms in North America (15.5%) or Europe (14.3%) (Luxury e-commerce 2018). Yet, regional price disparities remain. For example, U.S. luxury items cost over 50% more in China than in France or Italy at dollar-adjusted prices (Global powers 2017); thus, Chinese or other emerging market consumers are more likely to buy luxury goods online or when traveling. Facilitating such sales, most luxury firms shipped globally by 2012 (Hansen and Bjørn-Andersen 2013). Yet, little research has focused on the online luxury industry.

The current study focuses on luxury websites' e-service attributes¹ that facilitate international online shopping since (a) luxury goods sales are growing faster online than instore and (b) online luxury consumers tend to be from emerging markets but most luxury firms are from Europe and the USA. This research used Internet Retailer's² list of top-performing luxury websites³ (Luxury E-commerce Report 2018) selling apparel and accessories (e.g., Net A Porter, Prada) and a randomly selected comparison group of non-ranked single-brand similar luxury websites (e.g., Balmain, Tod's) identified by Kim and Kim (2017) and Global Powers of Luxury Goods (2017).

¹ Website information or other service-related features that facilitate the online shopping process or make it easier.

² See <https://www.digitalcommerce360.com/internet-retailer-magazine/> for information about Internet Retailer.

³ The world's top 93 (single-brand, multi-brand, and service-only) online luxury retailers ranked by sales in 2017.

It is imperative for luxury brands, mostly from Europe and the USA, to provide e-service attributes that serve international emerging market luxury consumers who are mostly from outside Europe and the USA. This research aims to assess the gap between services offered on luxury websites and those needed by international luxury consumers. The focus is on services that facilitate international shopping since market growth is due to international consumers (not from Europe and the USA). The research purposes were to: (a) describe the state of the art in international customer service attributes of top performing luxury websites selling apparel and accessories (hereafter, fashion) and (b) compare performance in terms of international customer service attributes of top performing retail luxury websites to a random group of similar retail luxury websites to help determine why the top performing luxury websites are out-performing other luxury websites.

Literature review

Luxury definition

Many definitions of luxury exist but share a common core of criteria: (a) a very qualitative hedonistic experience, (b) offered at a price that far exceeds what the functional value would command, (c) tied to heritage, unique know-how and culture, (d) available in restricted and controlled distribution, (e) offered with personalized accompanying services, and (f) representing a social marker, where the purchaser feels special with a sense of privilege (Kapferer and Bastien 2012). Thus luxury is highly desirable and focuses on providing sensory and pleasurable experiences (Global personal luxury goods 2015). Ultimately, luxury is based on consumers' perceptions, is determined by personal and interpersonal motives, and is strongly influenced by culture (Vigneron and Johnson 2004). Luxury items represent the human desire to aspire to a superior lifestyle, such as wealth and social status (Bhaduri and Stanforth 2016).

Luxury websites

Researchers have studied luxury websites using survey research and also via content analyses of websites. Luxury consumers have been surveyed about luxury companies' websites (e.g., Kim et al. 2015; Kim and Kim 2017; Shen et al. 2016). Kim et al. (2015) surveyed consumers and found that website design not only influenced attitudes towards the brand, but also had a positive impact on revisit intent. Shen et al. (2016) conducted a survey and found that luxury website design significantly affected customer-based brand equity and evoked a strong sense of luxury. The authors concluded that for luxury brands, a sense of luxury is a specific online experience that affects online customers' evaluations of a luxury brand.

Kim and Kim (2017) surveyed online luxury consumers about the importance of e-service quality dimensions (e.g., detailed information on shipping and handling, entertainment) and e-satisfaction with the websites. They focused on e-service attributes as proxies to assess e-service quality of luxury brands and divided respondents into high and low income groups. For low income consumers, attributes such as detailed shipping and return information affected e-satisfaction. For high income consumers overall e-satisfaction was related to convenience and ease of locating items. Thus, website

attributes are important to online luxury consumers and affect brand attitudes, revisit intent, evaluations, e-service perceptions, and e-satisfaction.

These results are consistent with research that surveyed more general online shoppers which found that information-related website attributes are positively related to satisfaction with and loyalty toward the retail website. Faqih (2016) found that on-time delivery, accuracy, and return ease increased satisfaction and loyalty. Ha and Stoel (2012) found that information available on websites was very important to apparel purchasers and led to higher satisfaction and loyalty. Relevant detailed accurate information on a website has also been found to affect satisfaction and loyalty in an emerging market context (Ganguly et al. 2011). Also, when consumers can exchange information with a website higher satisfaction and loyalty results (Reddy and Chalam 2013). Thus, site information is related to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Researchers have also content analyzed luxury websites and assessed the amount and kinds of information available on them (e.g., Díaz et al. 2016; Hansen and Bjørn-Andersen 2013; Kim and Kim 2016). Hansen and Bjørn-Andersen (2013) analyzed the content of 15 luxury websites over a six-year period to determine how the brands communicated to shoppers and found variability in information provided. In 2006, 73% of the sites posted contact information, in 2010 only 47% gave *contact details* or *about us* information, and by 2012 87% gave contact information. Shopping assistance also varied; 80% claimed it was available in 2010, yet in a test Gucci took over two weeks to respond. By 2012 only Burberry offered a chat function. Thus, some basic information was lacking for shoppers on these sites.

Kim and Kim (2016) content analyzed e-service attributes available on luxury brands' retail websites. Results showed that shipping and delivery related attributes were available on less than one-third of the websites. Information regarding security, sizing, and measurement were rarely available. They concluded that many e-service attributes which are important for purchasing luxury online were seldom available.

Díaz et al. (2016) content analyzed luxury brands' websites; one focus was website informativeness, the extent to which the websites provided practical help and information. Only about one-third of the websites were very informative. This lack of information on luxury websites is consistent with results from Hansen and Bjørn-Andersen (2013) and Kim and Kim (2016). Since many luxury sites are lacking information needed by online shoppers and since such information is related to satisfaction and loyalty, it is possible that information differences on luxury sites could be related to performance differences.

Luxury brands and the Internet Dilemma

The term "the Internet Dilemma" (Baker et al. 2018) was coined to describe the challenge luxury brands face seeking to maintain brand image, sustain personal links with customers, and retain an exclusive aura while providing products and services to online customers (Kapferer and Bastien 2012). For example, only in spring 2018, did luxury conglomerates LVMH, Kering, and Richmond start to emphasize their digital strategies (BOF Team 2018). After seeing the steady growth and promising potential of their online businesses, they aimed to provide a seamless shopping experience between online and offline shopping. Some luxury firms have recognized the potential for increased

revenues online (Geerts 2013) and responded to consumers' desire for convenient interactions in each phase of decision-making (Hennigs et al. 2015).

A growing number of consumers has responded positively to online luxury shopping, yet over 40% of luxury companies do not sell luxury goods online (Blackden 2016). This figure is consistent with Díaz et al.'s (2016) content analysis of luxury websites which found that almost half did not sell luxury goods online, using them for communication. About 20% of luxury retail websites were underperforming e-commerce websites and only 30% were high quality and up-to-date. Results of these studies show that 40% or more of luxury companies are not selling online, thus, those companies are missing out on the potential growth of online luxury sales. Hence, there is clearly room for improvement for luxury websites to tap into sales growth.

Consumers who purchase luxury online have different attitudes and intent than those who purchase luxury instore (Liu et al. 2013). Liu et al. (2013) surveyed adults and found that as compared to instore consumers, online consumers placed more value on online product availability, were more price-conscious, and exhibited more online trust than instore consumers. However, instore consumers were more risk averse and valued personal instore service and instore interactions more than online consumers. The authors suggest that to gain market share luxury e-tailers (a) should pay more attention to online luxury customers and (b) could attract more customers from the instore segment by building online trust.

Luxury fashion websites' E-service

Researchers have studied relationships among website attributes and consumer outcomes such as e-service perceptions, e-loyalty, and e-satisfaction. Türk et al. (2012) surveyed Hugo Boss customers in Germany who had purchased merchandise in 2009. The researchers found that efficiency, fulfillment, design, information, contact and responsiveness had positive effects on service quality perceptions, with efficiency as the most important factor explaining perceived service quality. They concluded that a high standard of e-service quality was vital for luxury brands' success.

Kim and Kim (2016) also surveyed U.S. luxury shoppers to evaluate perceptions and importance of e-service attributes based on actual purchase experience. Results found that website attributes (e.g., order instructions, multiple payment methods, detailed shipping/handling information, information on return processing, order tracking information, and company contact information) were rated high in importance and were positively related to e-loyalty. Kim and Kim (2016) and Türk et al. (2012) both found that perceptions of e-service attributes on luxury retail websites affected important consumer outcomes (e.g., e-service quality and e-loyalty).

Consumer decision process model

The current research focuses on information because it is important in the decision-making process. The Consumer Decision Process Model (Engel et al. 1986) is a classic model of decision-making which highlights the importance of information to decision-making, such as purchasing. The model proposes five stages in the decision-making process: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. The current research focused on the second stage, information

search. During information search shoppers seek information to guide decision-making. For example, once consumers become aware of a need (for a luxury apparel product) at stage one, they seek information to satisfy that need at stage two. They might search online for a particular luxury apparel product, read product reviews, or read customer service information on the websites. Perceived risk is important and is directly related to information search, since consumers seek more information when risk is high as compared to low (Mitchell and Boustani 1994).

Apparel is a risky online purchase due to inability to touch or try on the garment and because on-screen color may be inaccurate. In fact, research shows that nonstore apparel shopping is risky for TV shopping (Kim and Lennon 2000) and online shopping (Kim and Lennon 2010) and risk is negatively related to information available and positively related to purchase intent. Kim and Lennon (2010) found that website product and customer service information both affect online apparel purchase intent. Hence, perceived risk is low and purchase intent is high when much information is available. The current study focused on information in the form of e-service attributes of fashion luxury websites that facilitate international online shopping.

To add to the research on luxury retail websites, a content analysis of international customer service attributes was conducted of top-performing luxury websites selling fashion and a random comparison group of non-ranked single-brand similar luxury websites. The aim was to determine if a relationship exists between luxury website performance and international customer service attributes on the websites. In other words, do top-performing luxury retail websites provide international customer service attributes not provided by other luxury websites? Two research questions guided the research. RQ1: What is the state of the art in top performing luxury retail websites in terms of international customer service attributes? RQ2: How do the top performing luxury retail websites compare to a random group of similar luxury retail websites in terms of international customer service attributes?

Method

The *Luxury e-Commerce Report* was purchased from Internet Retailer's official website; the report ranked the world's top 93 (single-brand, multi-brand, and service-only) online luxury retailers by e-commerce revenue in 2017 based on research compiled by Forrester Research and Internet Retailer staff. According to the report, these 93 leaders account for 96% of the global luxury e-commerce market. The subset of these retailers that sold apparel and/or accessories ($N=46$) was content analyzed; this group was chosen since 60% of online luxury sales are for apparel and accessories according to the report. Since online luxury apparel sales have grown nearly five times faster than instore luxury apparel sales (D'Arpizio et al. 2019), service expectations for online luxury are also expected to grow (Luxury e-commerce 2018). As most luxury sales growth is expected from emerging market online consumers (11 growth drivers 2019; Global powers 2017), customer service attributes related to international purchasing were analyzed.

Two trained coders visited all ranked single-brand PC-based luxury websites ($N=46$) from the Internet Retailer list and developed a custom coding sheet containing variables to assess customer service attributes deemed important for international shoppers. Five websites were coded together and coders established standards and procedures

for coding the remaining websites individually. As the coding proceeded, new variables were added after discussion (e.g., insurance and call back service). This coding required objective observations. Information was coded either as available/unavailable (e.g., order tracking, size comparison information) or as frequencies (e.g., # of social media platforms, total # of different contact methods); thus, coding was not subjective. However, initial inter-coder agreement varied from 80 to 52%. After refining the step by step procedures to code the websites, inter-coder agreement varied from 93 to 76%. To eliminate data entry errors, both coders recoded and then met to check for agreement (Flake et al. 2017), identify errors in coding if any, and correct the errors.⁴

Multi-brand company websites (e.g., LVMH and Hudson Bay) were excluded since performance ranking information was unavailable for the subsidiary brands in the brand portfolio. Service attributes coded could be objectively observed and were adapted from Kim and Kim (2016) and Türk et al. (2012) who assessed online luxury service quality. See Table 1 for coded variables and descriptions.

As a comparison group, 45 additional single-brand luxury fashion websites were randomly selected from Kim and Kim's (2017) list and from Global Powers of Luxury Goods (2017). None of the additional 45 websites were contained in or belonged to any multi-brand company ranked in the Internet Retailer report; however, one of the randomly selected comparison websites did not sell online; hence it was not included in the final sample of 90 because it did not sell products online. Thus, the sample consisted of PC-based websites (46 top-performing luxury fashion retail websites and 44 randomly selected luxury fashion retail websites), for a total of 90 luxury fashion websites. The types of luxury brands investigated in the study include premium luxury brands (e.g. Hermes, Giorgio Armani), upmarket luxury brands (e.g. Versace, Jimmy Choo, Prada), and masstige luxury brands (e.g. Michael Kors, Tory Burch, Kate Spade).

Results and discussion

Merchant demographic information

All merchant demographic information can be found in Table 2.⁵ Although comparison group merchants were randomly selected, inspection of Table 2 shows differences in merchant type. Comparison sites were all consumer/brand manufacturers, while top performing sites were more evenly distributed among the merchant types. Top performing sites were headquartered mostly in the USA and Europe, while comparison sites were headquartered mostly in Europe.

State of the art in top performing luxury websites

To address RQ1 (What is the state of the art in the top performing luxury retail websites in terms of international customer service attributes?), descriptive analyses were performed. The top performing luxury websites were mainly consumer brand manufacturers (34.8%), web-only merchants (30.4%), and retail chains (26.1%). See Table 2 for all frequencies and percentages of top performing sites. These firms were headquartered

⁴ See Flake et al. (2017) for research in which coders cross-checked coding of objective observations in the context of measurement validity.

⁵ A list of all luxury merchants and the type of luxury merchandise sold is available from the first author.

Table 1 Description of coded variables

Coded variable	Category	Description
Option of shipping destination at entrance	Navigation	When entering a website shoppers can check if a needed destination is eligible for shipping for the order (available). Otherwise shoppers only learn this at checkout (unavailable)
Link to official partner website		A local partner website is linked if countries lack direct sale
Link to alternative country sites		Country code top-level domain changes according to shipping destination is available (e.g., fr/.cn)
Number of language options		Total number of different language options
Ease of navigation	Sizing	Number of customer service links from the homepage
Size comparison		Size comparison information is available
Measurement conversion		Measurement conversion information is available
Number of payment methods	Payment	Total number of payment methods offered
Change in currency options		Price displayed in different currencies is available
Number of shipping destinations	Shipping and return	Total number of possible shipping destinations offered
Shipping destinations paired with flag icon		Shipping destination countries indicated by name with a national flag/ensign icon next to the names is available
Language paired with shipping destination		Upon selecting the shipping destination, the language of the website changes to language of the shipping destination
International delivery policy		International delivery policy information is available
International returns and exchanges		International return and exchange information is available
Return label included		Return labels are included with orders and this information is available
International taxes and duty policy		International tax and duty policy information is available
Order tracking		Order tracking information is available
Specified postal service		Particular delivery services used by the website (e.g., UPS/Fedex/DHL) is available
Insurance		Information about insuring the order is available
Contact us	Contact	Contact us feature is available
Number of contact methods		Total number of different contact methods
Number of phone contacts		Total number of phone numbers that are posted
Call back service		Receive a call from the company after submitting one's phone number service is available
Twenty-four/seven service		24/7 customer service is available
Live chat service		Live chat with a customer service representative is available
Number of social media platforms		Total number of different social media platforms
Store locator		Store locator feature is available

Table 2 Merchant descriptive frequencies and percent

	Top performing sites	Comparison sites	Total sample
Merchant type			
Web only	14 (30.4%)	0 (0%)	14 (15.6%)
Retail chain	12 (26.1%)	0 (0%)	12 (13.3%)
Consumer/brand manufacturer	16 (34.8%)	44 (100%)	60 (66.7%)
Catalog/call center	4 (8.7%)	0 (0%)	4 (4.4%)
Company headquarters			
Europe	15 (32.6%)	37 (84.1%)	52 (57.8%)
North America (not USA)	2 (4.3%)	5 (11.4%)	7 (7.8%)
USA	22 (47.8%)	1 (2.3%)	23 (25.6%)
South America	2 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.2%)
Asia	3 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.3%)
Oceania	2 (4.3%)	1 (2.3%)	3 (3.3%)
Category of merchandise sold on the website			
Men only	1 (2.2%)	4 (9.1%)	5 (5.5%)
Women only	10 (21.7%)	7 (15.9%)	17 (18.9%)
Men and women	17 (37.0%)	18 (40.9%)	35 (38.9%)
Women and children	1 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.1%)
Men, women, and children	17 (37.0%)	15 (34.1%)	32 (35.6%)

mostly in the USA (47.8%) and Europe (32.6%), with other company headquarters in Asia, South America, North America (not USA), and Oceania. Seventeen (37.0%) top-performing websites sold men's and women's merchandise, 17 others (37.0%) sold men's, women's, and children's merchandise, and 10 (21.7%) of the sites sold only women's merchandise (see Table 2). One (2.2%) top-performing website sold only men's merchandise and another one (2.2%) sold women's and children's merchandise.

The sites had several customer service attributes that make it easy to purchase across national borders. These websites averaged over 99 shipping destinations and over six payment methods. All top performing websites provided at least two contact methods and at least two contact phone numbers. Top performing sites also excelled at providing order tracking information (97.8%), a Contact Us button or tab (97.8%), international delivery policy information (82.6%), and international return and exchange information (71.7%).

Shipping information, payment options, international return and exchange information, order tracking, and contact information are attributes found by Kim and Kim (2016) to be important to online luxury consumers that were largely available on these top websites. See Table 3 for descriptive and inferential statistics for the top performing sites, the comparison group of sites, and the entire sample.

Some information such as size comparison information (provided by 71.7%) and measurement conversion information (provided by 41.3%) were often missing from top performing websites. Such information can be easily posted by merchants and is quite helpful to shoppers. Both types of information simplify size selection. Other information useful to shoppers and easy to provide by the websites is information about international taxes and duties; this was provided by 58.7% of these sites. Top performing websites need to improve provision of these types of information.

Table 3 Descriptive and inferential results

Coded variable	Top performers	Comparison group	Entire sample	Inferential statistics
Shipping destination at entrance	$f = 25$ (54.3%)	$f = 32$ (72.7%)	$f = 57$ (63.3%)	ns
Number of shipping destinations	$M = 99.28$	$M = 64.98$	$M = 82.61$	$F(1,88) = 4.345, p < .04$
Shipping destination with flag icon	$f = 15$ (32.6%)	$f = 7$ (18.9%)	$f = 22$ (24.4%)	$\chi^2(1) = 3.396, p < .04$
Link to alternative country sites	$f = 12$ (26.1%)	$f = 20$ (45.4%)	$f = 32$ (35.6%)	$\chi^2(1) = 3.682, p < .05$
Language paired with shipping destination	$f = 15$ (32.6%)	$f = 32$ (72.7%)	$f = 47$ (52.2%)	$\chi^2(1) = 14.507, p < .0001$
Number of language options	$M = 1.02$	$M = .66$	$M = .84$	ns
Size comparison	$f = 33$ (71.7%)	$f = 40$ (90.9%)	$f = 73$ (81.1%)	$\chi^2(1) = 5.394, p < .02$
Measurement conversion	$f = 19$ (43.1%)	$f = 13$ (29.5%)	$f = 32$ (35.5%)	ns
Number of payment methods	$M = 6.09$	$M = 4.86$	$M = 5.49$	$F(1, 88) = 6.906, p < .010$
Change in currency options	$f = 29$ (63.0%)	$f = 40$ (90.0%)	$f = 69$ (76.7%)	$\chi^2(1) = 9.762, p < .002$
International delivery policy	$f = 38$ (82.6%)	$f = 15$ (34.1%)	$f = 53$ (58.9%)	$\chi^2(1) = 21.866, p < .0001$
International returns and exchanges	$f = 33$ (71.7%)	$f = 12$ (27.3%)	$f = 45$ (50%)	$\chi^2(1) = 17.787, p < .0001$
Return label included	$f = 31$ (67.4%)	$f = 33$ (75%)	$f = 64$ (71.1%)	ns
International taxes and duty policy	$f = 27$ (58.7%)	$f = 11$ (25%)	$f = 38$ (42.2%)	$\chi^2(1) = 10.467, p < .001$
Order tracking	$f = 45$ (97.8%)	$f = 39$ (88.6%)	$f = 84$ (93.3%)	ns
Specified delivery service	$f = 29$ (63.0%)	$f = 38$ (86.4%)	$f = 67$ (74.4%)	$\chi^2(1) = 6.429, p < .01$
Insurance	$f = 4$ (8.7%)	$f = 7$ (15.9%)	$f = 11$ (12.2%)	ns
Contact us	$f = 45$ (97.8%)	$f = 43$ (97.7%)	$f = 88$ (97.8%)	ns
Number of contact methods	$M = 2.41$	$M = 2.00$	$M = 2.21$	$F(1, 88) = 5.708, p < .019$
Number of phone contacts	$M = 2.46$	$M = 1.07$	$M = 1.78$	ns
Call back service	$f = 1$ (2.2%)	2 (4.5%)	$f = 3$ (3.3%)	ns
Twenty four seven service	$f = 8$ (17.4%)	$f = 4$ (9.1%)	$f = 12$ (13.3%)	ns
Live chat service	$f = 19$ (41.3%)	$f = 9$ (20.4%)	$f = 28$ (20.4%)	$\chi^2(1) = 4.561, p < .03$
Number of social media platforms	$M = 4.54$	$M = 4.64$	$M = 4.59$	ns
Store locator	$f = 33$ (71.7%)	$f = 39$ (88.6%)	$f = 72$ (80.0%)	$\chi^2(1) = 4.013, p < .04$
Customer service links from the homepage	$M = 8.04$	$M = 7.45$	$M = 7.76$	ns

Helpful to international shoppers but needing improvement on these sites are the options to display (a) the price in various currencies (63% availability), (b) information about possible shipping destinations prior to checkout (54% availability), and (c) the language of the selected destination instead of the language of the site (32.6% availability). For example, for nearly half the sites (46%), shoppers only learn at checkout if the needed destination is eligible for shipping. Making shoppers wait until checkout to learn this information is likely to be quite frustrating; this situation is analogous to Kim and Lennon's (2011) research on online stockouts, which found that learning a preferred item is out of stock at checkout causes significantly more negative emotion than learning the item is out of stock prior to checkout.

Consistent with Hansen and Bjørn-Andersen (2013) customer services largely lacking on top performing sites include live chat (41.3% availability), 24/7 service (17.4% availability), and call back service (2.2% availability). These services are critical for international shoppers in different time zones who need information or help with an order. Since most analyzed websites were from Europe and the USA and since emerging market consumers are driving online luxury growth, it seems imperative to provide these customer service attributes on luxury websites.

Also largely lacking was insurance availability (8.7%). Very few websites offered the option of purchasing insurance, yet merchants interested in attracting international shoppers may wish to provide an insurance option. The availability of insurance could increase trust among a brand's instore shoppers (e.g., Liu et al. 2013) and for those purchasing from another country. Although top performing luxury retail websites are providing important customer service information that facilitates online purchasing, improvement is needed. Some suggestions for improvement would be easy to implement, inexpensive, and simply involve posting specific types of information (e.g., measurement conversion information). Other suggestions for improvement might require hiring more staff (e.g., 24/7 service) or expensive software implementation (provision of shipping destination prior to checkout), but all would be useful to international shoppers and may be expected by luxury consumers.

Even when information was available, it often was hard to find. Some websites had important information hidden or vaguely described which is unlikely to increase confidence in purchasing. Net-A-Porter.com, ranked No. 1 in The World's Top 93 Luxury Retailers in the apparel and accessories category, is a good example of a website that provides important easy to find information. In that website explicit information on international deliveries, returns and exchanges, insurance, taxes and duties, and companies used for delivery by the merchant is linked to the "Delivery" button on the bottom of the homepage. When users select a shipping destination, the website software estimates delivery time and cost, return policy, tax policy, delivery company information, and insurance information.

Comparison of top performing luxury websites to the comparison group

To address RQ2 (How do the top performing luxury retail websites compare to a random group of similar luxury retail websites in international customer service attributes?), data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics: Chi-square Goodness of Fit tests for nominal data and ANOVA for ordinal data. See Table 3 for all statistics.

When top performing luxury sites exceed performance of comparison sites

Top performing luxury websites exceeded the comparison sites in providing eight customer service attributes. ANOVA revealed a main effect for group on number of shipping destinations available, $F(1,88) = 4.345$, $p < 0.04$; top performing sites ($M = 99.28$) had more shipping destinations than comparison sites ($M = 64.98$). ANOVA also revealed a main effect for group on number of payment methods available, $F(1, 88) = 6.906$, $p < 0.010$; top performing sites ($M = 6.09$) had more payment methods than comparison sites ($M = 4.86$). Both detailed shipping information and information about payment methods are important to online luxury shoppers (Kim and Kim 2016). Finally, ANOVA

revealed a main effect for group on number of contact methods, $F(1, 88)=5.708$, $p<0.019$; top performing sites ($M=2.41$) provided more contact methods than comparison sites ($M=2.00$). Online shopper confidence is partly based on channels of interaction (Bauer et al. 2006; Zeithaml et al. 2002), which is facilitated by multiple contact methods. Also, Bauer et al. (2006) found that website responsiveness, assessed partly by availability of alternate communication channels, affected service quality and satisfaction judgments. Furthermore, a survey of 18,430 global online shoppers from 51 different countries found that 51% of respondents trust companies that are easy to contact (The truth about online consumers 2017). Based these studies' results, it is reasonable to expect that having more contact methods may increase international online shoppers' confidence, service quality judgments, satisfaction, and trust.

There are many types of information shoppers need when deciding to purchase from an international online merchant that are easy and inexpensive to provide, such as international policies for delivery, returns and exchanges, and taxes and duties. On these, the top performing websites were superior to the comparison sites. Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit tests were performed to determine if there were group differences on coded variables. For international delivery policies, 82.6% of top performing sites had these policies posted compared to only 34.1% of comparison sites, $\chi^2(1)=21.866$, $p<0.0001$. For international returns and exchanges, 71.7% of top performing sites posted these policies compared to 27.3% of comparison sites, $\chi^2(1)=17.787$, $p<0.0001$. For international taxes and duties, 58.7% of top performing sites had the policy information posted compared to 25.0% of comparison sites, $\chi^2(1)=10.467$, $p<0.001$.

In addition and importantly, 41.3% of top performing sites provided live chat service as compared to only 20.4% of the comparison sites, $\chi^2(1)=4.561$, $p<0.03$. As previously argued, more communication channels and contact methods are important to online shoppers (Bauer et al. 2006; Zeithaml et al. 2002). Another service was to pair shipping destinations with a national flag icon. Top performing sites paired shipping destinations with flag icons on 32.6% their sites compared to 18.9% on comparison sites, $\chi^2(1)=3.396$, $p<0.04$.

When comparison sites exceed performance of top performing sites

Comparison sites did exceed the top performing sites on six of the coded variables, as shown by results of Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit tests in Table 3. When international shoppers purchase from other countries' websites, it is very helpful if they can change the website language to the language of the shipping destination and display merchandise prices in different currencies. More comparison sites (70.4%) provided the option to change the website language to the language of the shipping destination compared to only 32.6% of top performing sites, $\chi^2(1)=14.507$, $p<0.0001$. Also, 90.9% of comparison sites gave an option to display merchandise price in different currencies as compared to only 63.0% of top performing sites, $\chi^2(1)=9.762$, $p<0.002$. This information is important to consumers. A PayPal survey found that providing native language customer support in this way was important when choosing to shop online internationally (Leberman 2015).

Store locator information is helpful to international shoppers; 88.6% of comparison sites had such information, compared to 75.0% of top performing sites, $\chi^2(1)=4.013$,

$p < 0.04$. Also useful are links from a website without direct sale to a local partner website that sells the desired items. For example, House of Fraser is a British luxury department store that also sells online. It does not sell directly in China, but its official partner there is Tmall.com and its retail website is carried by Tmall.com (see <http://www.houseoffraser.co.uk> and <http://www.houseoffraser.tmall.hk>). Analysis revealed that 45.4% of comparison sites provided links to local partners, as compared to only 26.1% of top performing sites, $\chi^2(1) = 3.682, p < 0.05$.

Two types of customer service information that are easy to provide are size comparison information and delivery service information. Analysis revealed that 90.9% of comparison sites provided size comparison information, compared to only 71.7% of the top performing sites, $\chi^2(1) = 5.394, p < 0.02$. Also 86.4% of comparison sites provided information about the particular delivery services used by the websites, as compared to only 63.0% of top performing sites, $\chi^2(1) = 6.429, p < 0.01$. Both types of information are simple for the merchants to post on their websites and size comparison information in particular is critical for international apparel shoppers.

Conclusions, implications, and vision

Conclusions

Luxury fashion retail websites were analyzed for customer service attributes that facilitate international shopping. The Internet Retailer top performing merchants offered some attributes identified by Kim and Kim's (2016) respondents as important to online luxury consumers. However, some customer service attributes (e.g., size comparison information, measurement conversion information, and information about international taxes and duties) were largely lacking across websites leaving room for improvement in providing customer service attributes that facilitate international online purchasing. Top performing luxury sites were compared to a randomly selected group of luxury fashion retail websites and each group had strengths and weaknesses. Although top performers made the Internet Retailer list and comparison sites did not, merchants performed at a suboptimal level in providing many customer service attributes, need improvement on others, and performed well on a few. These luxury fashion online retailers are at an early stage in providing important website service attributes.

Implications related to RQ1

Top performing sites were successful at providing several customer service attributes that facilitate international purchasing and communicating, such as plentiful shipping destinations, multiple payment methods, order tracking information, delivery information, and international return and exchange information. Top performing sites excelled at providing these kinds of information, which should be adopted by merchants hoping to increase international sales and may be why the top performers made the Internet Retailer list.

Implications based RQ2

There were many customer service differences between top performers and comparison sites that merchants in each group could learn from and implement. Since top performing websites exceeded comparison sites in providing payment, contact methods, and

live chat other luxury sites may wish to consider providing more of these options. Payment methods are important to online luxury shoppers (Kim and Kim 2016) and multiple contact methods give shoppers more confidence (Bauer et al. 2006; Zeithaml et al. 2002); these attributes may be expensive to provide but may help explain performance differences between the two groups of websites. Top performers were also distinguished from comparison sites by providing more shipping destinations and by pairing shipping destinations with flag icons. Clearly, the availability of more shipping destinations is an important service to provide for international online shoppers. Merchants should consider pairing their shipping destinations with flag icons on their sites to help international shoppers. Provision of this information may make it easier for international shoppers with different languages to find desired shipping destinations.

Other attributes that may explain the superior performance of the top performing luxury sites include differences in provision of information about international policies for delivery, returns and exchanges, and taxes and duties (i.e., whether the information was posted or not). Such attributes are inexpensive and easy to provide, are critical for shoppers purchasing internationally, and should be explicit and easily found. Luxury merchandise is high in price, thus high in financial risk (Jacoby and Kaplan 1972). Provision of explicit delivery information on luxury sites could reduce perceived risk regarding delivery of such valuable purchases and increase purchase intent for them (Kim and Lennon 2000). Thus all luxury e-retailers are advised to post such information on their websites.

Implications based on overall performance of luxury sites

Implications for improving customer service attributes of online luxury fashion retailers are also offered with a focus on those that facilitate apparel shopping but need improvement on luxury sites. All should provide detailed sizing information and measurement conversion information. Sizing may be confusing when purchasing apparel with an unfamiliar sizing system, hence, measurement conversion information would be helpful. Research shows that apparel is a riskier purchase than other products (Jacoby and Kaplan 1972) and that amount of information available when making a decision is negatively related to perceived risk and positively related to purchase intent (Kim and Lennon 2000). Providing a complete sizing chart and measurement conversion information could reduce purchasing risk for online luxury apparel.

About half the sites provided exchange rate information so shoppers could calculate costs. Instead of having users make calculations, luxury brands could provide this service on their websites as they do in some stores to minimize the gap between the online and offline experience. For example, certain Louis Vuitton stores at popular tourist destinations provide price information in several currencies so customers know actual transaction costs. Providing this information may require expensive software and monitoring of exchange rates and company price policies, but is consistent with luxury brand image.

Finally, luxury retail websites should provide more customer contact methods; very few provided live chat, 24/7 service, or call back service. Yet, all provided phone numbers and email addresses. Websites offering live chat, call back service, and 24/7 service distinguished themselves and further integrated the online and offline shopping experience. It is vital for luxury firms to deliver customer service effectively online, since

e-service quality is positively related to consumers' e-satisfaction and e-loyalty (Kim and Kim 2017). Live chat is analogous to instore sales associate help. Providing free call back service eliminates initiation of phone contact by international customers and puts the company in a more proactive position of providing customer service to all customers. Provision of live chat, call back, and 24/7 service are potentially expensive since they require on duty staff in different world regions, but are consistent with luxury brand image and may be expected by consumers paying premium prices.

Vision

In the future luxury retail websites may wish to enhance the linguistic and currency flexibilities of their websites. A website that automatically pairs language to shipping destinations has a great advantage over those that offer one language for all destinations. Yet, that may not be flexible enough for global consumers, who may prefer to select a language independently from desired shipping destination when shopping on luxury websites. This would be especially convenient for consumers who shop when they travel, such as emerging market consumers who are more likely to consume luxury goods online and when travelling (Global powers 2017). Another suggestion is to provide language options in their native forms (e.g., French appears as *Français* instead of *French*; Spanish appears as *Español* instead of *Spanish*). Such information would be convenient to shoppers who only know one language.

Limitations and Future Research

Merchants in the two groups varied in demographics and these differences may relate to performance differences between them. For example, comparison sites more often had the option to change currency and were more often headquartered in Europe, where handling multiple currencies is more common than in the USA where most top performers were headquartered. A different group of comparison sites may have yielded different results.

Our suggestions for future research are: (a) content analysis of top performing websites in terms of product information, (b) longitudinal content analysis of luxury website attributes that evolve over time (e.g., Kim et al. 2018), (c) surveys of luxury consumers from emerging economies where growth is expected, with a focus on important website information, and (d) content analysis of mobile-based websites for available information.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Declarations

The dataset used in this article is available from the corresponding author (S. J. Lennon).

Authors' contributions

WM made substantial contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and drafting and revising the manuscript. SL made substantial contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and drafting and revising the manuscript. WL made substantial contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of data, and interpretation of data. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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Received: 27 November 2018 Accepted: 27 October 2019

Published online: 15 February 2020

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