CS6115 Report

A critical assessment of the usability, accessibility, and proposed re-design of ***AliExpress***

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Overview: This report centres on the analytical assessment of *AliExpress*, an e-commerce platform, with a specific emphasis on its usability and accessibility. It aims to identify the issues identified during this analysis and propose potential solutions to enhance the design and overall functionality of the website. It also explores the nature of *AliExpress*, its intended audience, and its strategies for meeting the needs of its target markets. The assessment is exclusively based on Jakob Nielson's 10 heuristics, with a particular emphasis on 4 specific guidelines that *AliExpress* employs most effectively. Additionally, there is a discussion regarding the website's accessibility, the challenges linked to it, and potential solutions in order to overcome them. Additionally, an improved website design has been proposed to address the concerns raised during the evaluation of the website in relation to Jakob Nielson's law. Additionally, references and figures can be accessed and viewed in their respective categories.

Introduction: *AliExpress* (also known as $\mathbf{w}Mi$ in Chinese) is an e-commerce platform headquartered in China and under the ownership of the Alibaba Group. Established in 2010, it comprises small enterprises in China and other international locations, including Singapore, that provide products to global online purchasers. The e-commerce website in question is the most frequently accessed in Russia and ranked as the 10th most popular website in Brazil. It enables small enterprises to engage in global sales to a diverse customer base. *AliExpress* has been compared to eBay due to its independent sellers who utilise the platform to present products to buyers. [1]

AliExpress was initially established as a platform facilitating business-to-business transactions. Over time, its scope has broadened which includes various sectors such as business-to-consumer, consumer-to-consumer, cloud computing, and payment services. As of 2016, *AliExpress* operated websites in multiple languages including English, Spanish, Dutch, French, Italian, German, Polish, Turkish, Portuguese, Indonesian, and Russian. Any e-commerce stores that employ a dropship business model frequently use *AliExpress*.

AliExpress accepts sellers from both corporate entities and individual sellers. It distinguishes itself from Amazon by functioning solely as an e-commerce platform, without engaging in direct sales to consumers. While the majority of retailers operated by *AliExpress* are of Chinese origin, it primarily caters to international import buyers and does not engage in sales to customers within mainland China. The website provides a widely recognised affiliate marketing initiative in which partners receive a commission based on sales for directing visitors to the website.

Satisfying Target Audiences: *AliExpress*'s target demographic consists of cost-conscious individuals who utilise the retail store as a showroom and subsequently make online purchases. They exhibit minimal concern for branding and delivery time. *AliExpress* is strategically focusing on the younger demographic by leveraging video influencers and social media platforms, employing a novel approach known as "shoppertainment" to enhance online consumption. Individuals are drawn to digital content and engage in online interactions, while sellers observe a

rise in sales while simultaneously establishing a connection with their customers. *AliExpress Connect*, a platform for brand promotion by influencers, was introduced by the company through various social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and others. **[2]**

Concerning **AliExpress**'s marketing strategy and how it entices its target audience, a crucial and highly sought-after aspect is the provision of low-cost products. On the **AliExpress** website, users can access a diverse range of products at a highly competitive price, particularly in comparison to the prices offered by other online or physical retailers. Additionally, it possesses a comprehensive assortment of merchandise. Multiple iterations of products provided by various distributors are available to purchase. Furthermore, every product can possess distinct pricing, shipping schedules, or other specific particulars that can be customised to suit the user's requirements. Customers highly appreciate having multiple choices available to them in order to select the product that provides them with the highest level of assurance.

The website of **AliExpress** demonstrates adaptability to the specific country in which it operates. It is evident that numerous online enterprises exclusively operate in the English language, operating under the assumption that English is universally spoken and comprehensible. This phenomenon results in a drawback as it restricts the accessibility of the intended demographic. This is the reason why **AliExpress** also modifies its pricing based on the currency of the respective country in which it conducts its operations. In this manner, one can observe the pricing in various currencies as well as the delivery durations of the products. **[3]**

Jakob Nielson's 10 Heuristics: As part of the analytical evaluation in order to test **AliExpress**'s interface, I decided to stick with Jakob Nielson's 10 heuristics.

1. *Visibility of System Status* – The design should always keep users informed about what is going on by providing appropriate feedback within a reasonable timeframe. When users are aware of the current system status, they can learn from previous interactions and plan their next steps accordingly. Predictable interactions build trust in both the product and the brand. **[4]**

2. *Match Between the System and the Real World* – The design should be understandable to the users. The user should be able to comprehend icons, information, knowledge, and other elements in a manner that is easily approachable. **[5]**

3. *User Control and Freedom* – Users frequently make mistakes. Users should have the option to return or undo if they make a mistake. Exits allow users to maintain control of the system and avoid becoming stuck and frustrated.

4. *Consistency and Standards* – Users should not be burdened with the uncertainty of whether various words, situations, or actions possess identical meanings. E-commerce businesses should adhere to platform and industry conventions. Jakob's Law suggests that individuals allocate the majority of their time to utilising digital products that are not their own. The expectations of users are shaped by their experiences with other products. Failure to maintain consistency can lead to an increase in users' cognitive load as they are compelled to acquire new knowledge.

5. *Error Prevention* – Although well-crafted error messages hold significant value, the most optimal designs meticulously avert issues before they arise. One possible approach is to either eliminate conditions that are prone to errors, or to verify their presence and provide users with a confirmation option prior to committing to the action.

6. *Recognition Rather than Recall* – Users possess a limited capacity for short-term memory. It's essential to reduce the amount of memory needed by ensuring that elements are clearly visible. Interfaces that facilitate recognition have the potential to decrease the cognitive load imposed on users.

7. *Flexibility and Efficiency of Use* – It is beneficial for users to be able to complete an action in multiple ways. Concealed shortcuts may speed up the interaction for competent users, enabling the design to accommodate both inexperienced and experienced users. Flexible processes can be implemented through various approaches, allowing individuals to select the most suitable method for their needs.

8. *Aesthetic and Minimalist Design* – Interfaces shouldn't be cluttered with extraneous or irrelevant data. Each additional unit of information in an interface competes with the relevant units of information, reducing their relative visibility. In particular, minimalist information is crucial for small screens like those found in smartwatches. The amount and presentation of information on a screen should be carefully considered when designing a website.

9. *Help Users Recognise, Diagnose and Recover from Errors* – Error messages should be presented in a way that is understandable to the user. Avoid using technical terms or coding in error messages. It is critical that error messages correctly identify the problem and propose a solution.

10. *Help and Documentation* – It is ideal if the system does not require any further explanation. However, documentation may be required to help users understand how to complete their tasks. The content of the help and documentation should be simple to search for and task-specific. It should be concise and list specific steps to be taken.

AliExpress's Heuristics:

Flexibility and Efficiency of use – *AliExpress* adheres to Jakob Nielson's 10 heuristics by prioritising flexibility and efficiency as one of its key components. On the homepage, users are presented with various categories to choose from instead of searching aimlessly for what they're looking for. The user is provided with a wide range of options, including welcome deals, bestsellers, weekly deals, as well as free shipping, to choose from. Additionally, the **'All Categories'** section includes several subcategories that offer users a convenient way of accessing desired products at comparatively affordable prices. [*Figure 1*]
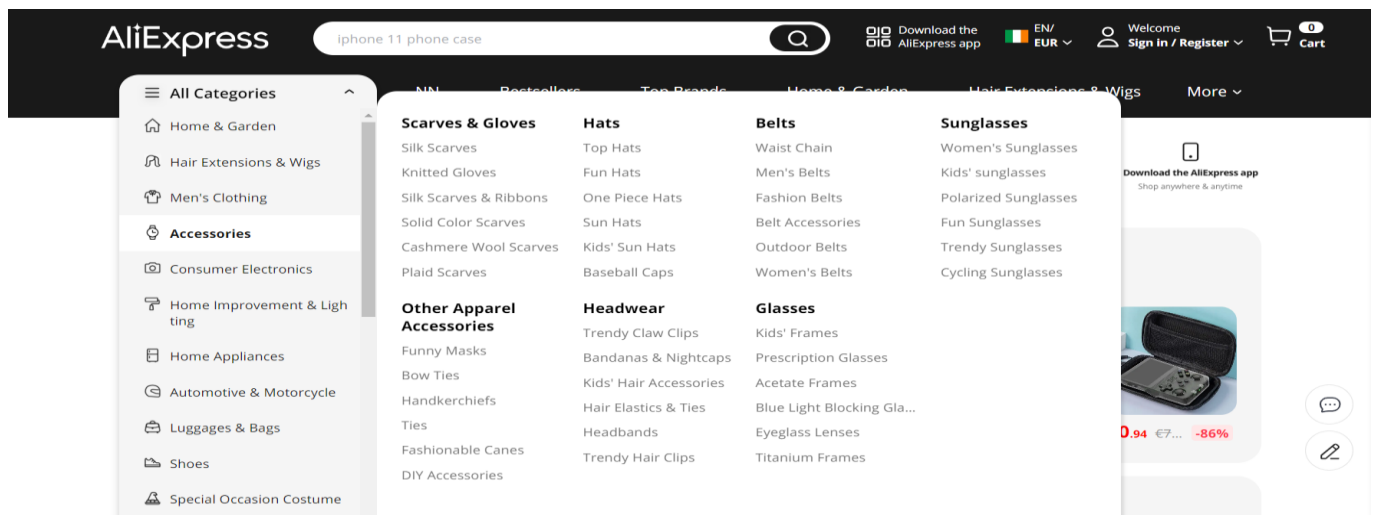
Figure 1

Visibility of System Status – Another important heuristic that **AliExpress** follows is the visibility of system status, which involves providing the user with information about their current location. After a user selects a category or subcategory they are interested in, the title of that category is displayed in the search bar. This key heuristic facilitates effective communication with the user, preventing disorientation within the website. This component will assist the user in determining the specific product page they are currently viewing. [*Figure 2*]
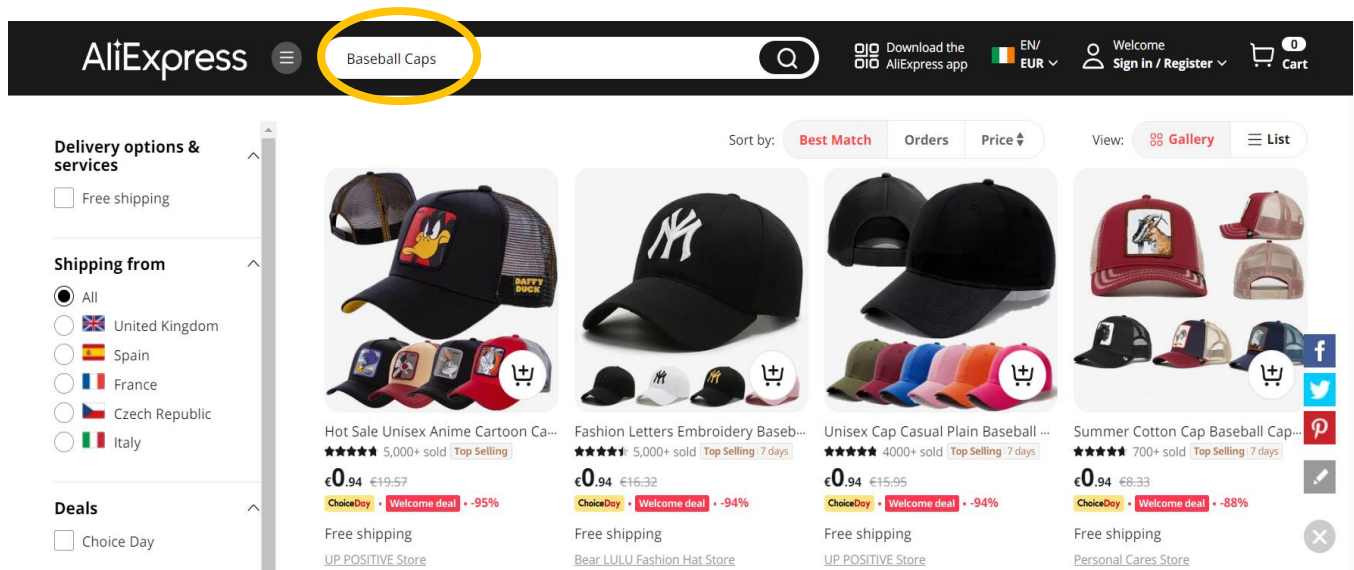
Figure 2

Match Between the System and the Real World – **AliExpress** exhibits another significant heuristic in its ability to connect the system with the real world. When you first visit **AliExpress**, one can easily determine the significance of each of its icons. For instance, in *Figure 3*, the icons linked to the text and their corresponding meanings within the navigation bar establish an understandable atmosphere for the user, thereby enhancing the accessibility and user-friendliness of **AliExpress**. Even individuals lacking literacy skills can easily identify the search bar is indeed a search bar due to the addition of a magnifying glass icon, which symbolises the widely recognised search functionality. [6]
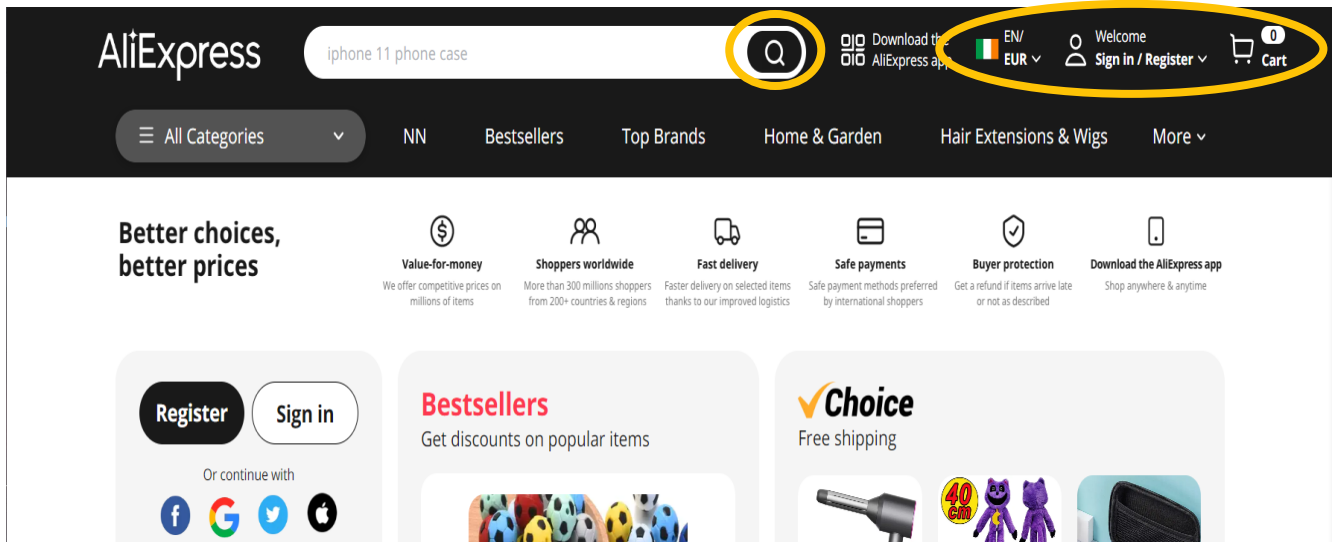
Figure 3

*Aesthetic and Minimalist Design – **AliExpress** has gained significant recognition for its visually appealing and minimalist design. The products are presented in a manner designed to attract the attention of the user. The harmonious combination of black and white colours on the website enhances its visual appeal and prevents **AliExpress** from appearing too mundane. The products page, which is an independent page that presents the specific details of the product selected by the user, is designed to be easily comprehensible. It includes essential details of the product such as the price, the description, reviews, as well as delivery options. These features are highly valued by users when engaging with any e-commerce website. [*Figure 4*]*
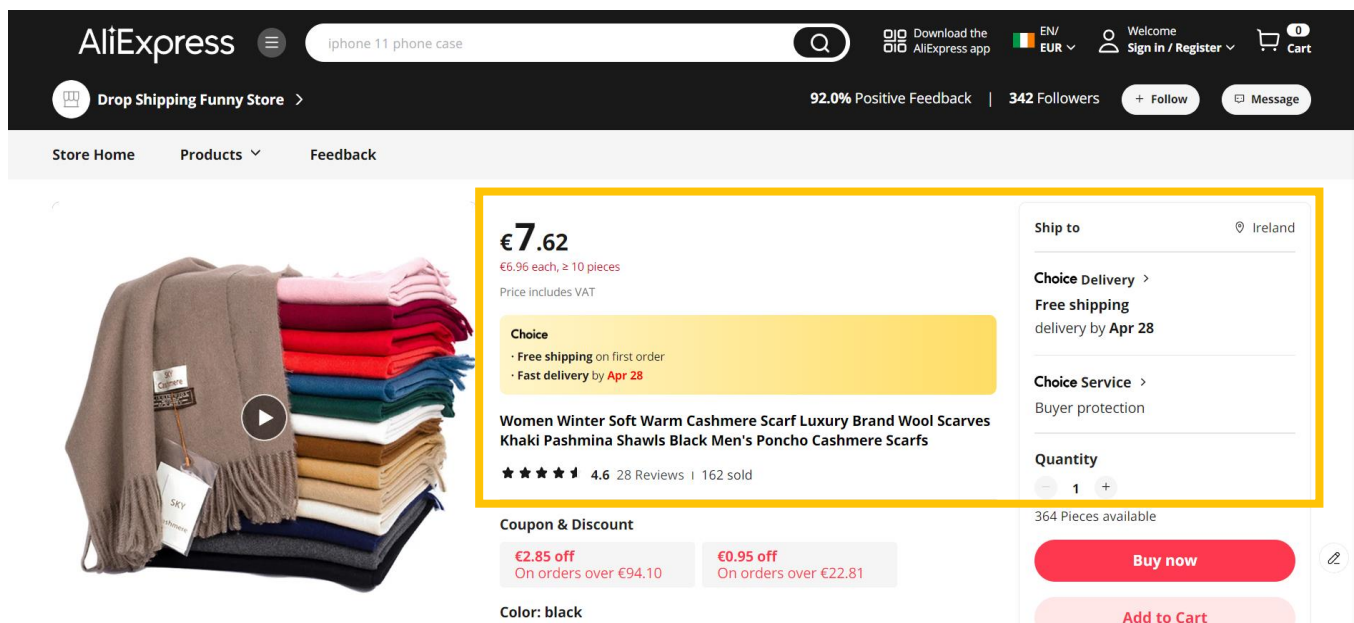

Figure 4

AliExpress Issues: Although **_AliExpress_** does not appear to have many issues at first glance, as you delve deeper into it, you will notice that some key functionalities or useful documentation appear to be missing.

Although **_AliExpress_** does not appear to have many issues at first glance, as you delve deeper into it, you will notice that some key functionalities or useful documentation appear to be missing. For example, **_AliExpress_** occasionally encounters difficulties in maintaining a consistent and standardised approach. I was unable to figure out the meaning of the term '**NN**' in the navigation bar on **_AliExpress_**'s homepage, is it perhaps meant to resemble '**N**ew **N**ovices'? '**N**ew **N**ovelties'? This situation creates a sense of uncertainty for the user, requiring their independent exploration to determine the true meaning, rather than providing a concise explanation or alternative terminology to accelerate the process. Despite being redirected to a different page upon clicking on it, one still remains curious about the real meaning of the term '**NN**'. [*Figures 5 and 6*]
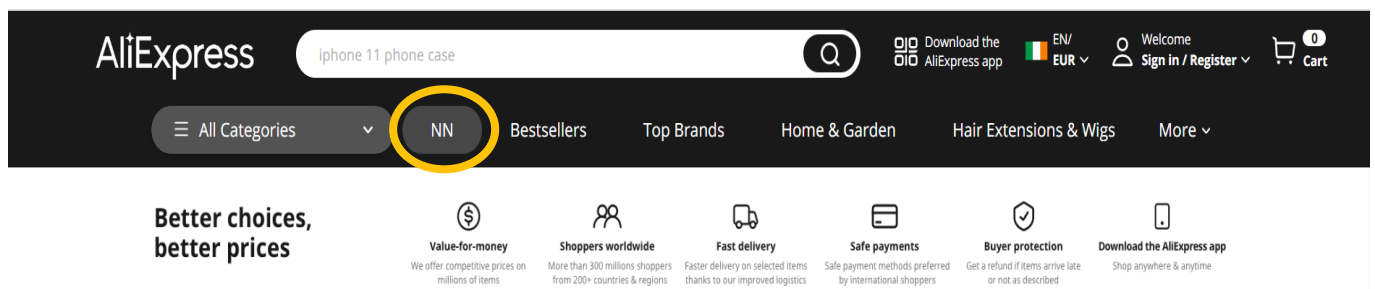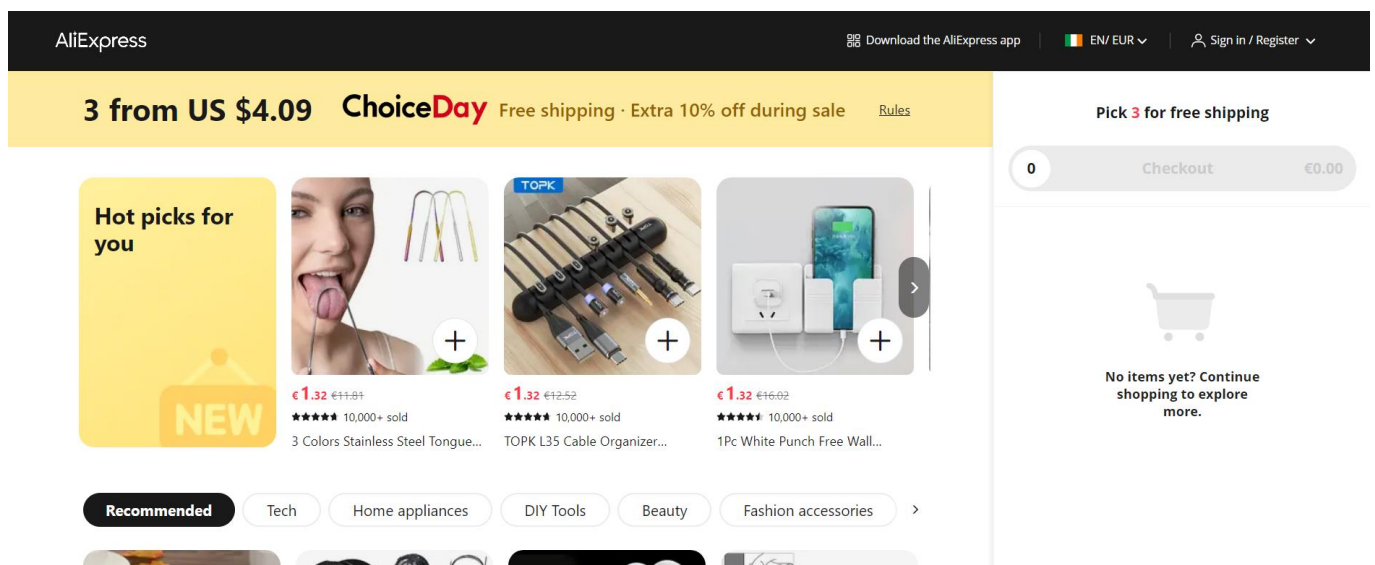

Figure 5

Figure 6

Despite the provision of a Help Center given by **_AliExpress_** (accessible through the '**Sign In/Register**' icon within the navigation bar) which enables users to search for answers or find pre-existing inquiries in the '**Frequently Asked Questions**' section, individuals lacking expertise with computers may encounter difficulties in navigating back to **_AliExpress_**'s homepage. [*Figure 7*] The Help Center page appears to be completely separate from the original homepage due to its different colour scheme, averting from the original black and white theme. In order to facilitate

users in reclaiming their control and freedom, **AliExpress** should implement a 'Return to Homepage' button to optimise efficiency and foster a more understandable user experience.
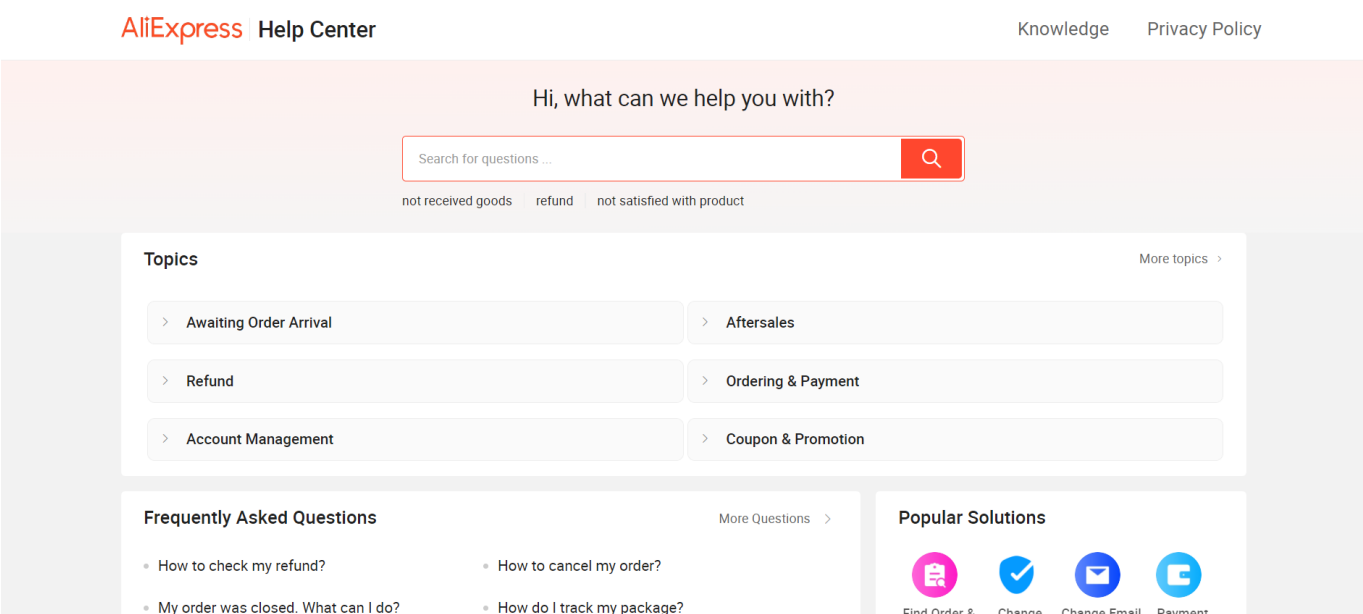
In the WebAIM WAVE tool, it is evident that **AliExpress** exhibits a significant amount of errors that impede its distinctive visual appeal and minimalist design. The WAVE WebAIM Tool identified 197 instances of contrast errors. **[7]** WAVE® is a collection of assessment instruments that assist authors in enhancing the accessibility of their web content for individuals with disabilities. WAVE has the capability to detect numerous errors related to accessibility and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Additionally, it aids in the assessment of web content by human users. Their guiding principle is to prioritise matters that they are aware have an effect on end users, enable human assessment, and provide education on web accessibility. **[8]** **AliExpress**'s reliance on a black and white minimalistic theme could benefit from incorporating vibrant colours in other areas, rather than solely relying on this colour scheme to try the appeal of their products. [*Figure 8*]
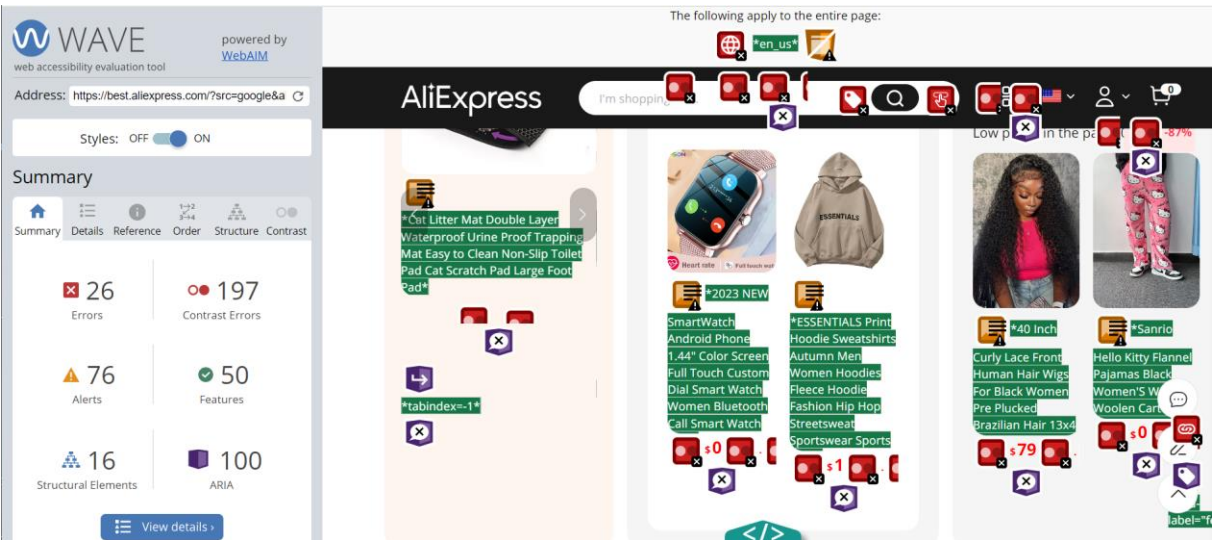

Figure 8

Proposed Redesign of *AliExpress*: One potential solution for addressing the
challenge of users reclaiming control and autonomy on the Help Center page involves the
incorporation of a return to homepage button. I simply inserted an additional navigation button,
named 'Return to Homepage', into the navigation bar. Additionally, I modified the colours of the
Help Center page to match with the *AliExpress* theme and enhance the overall design. [*Figure 9*]
This will facilitate novice users to promptly and effortlessly navigate back to the homepage in the
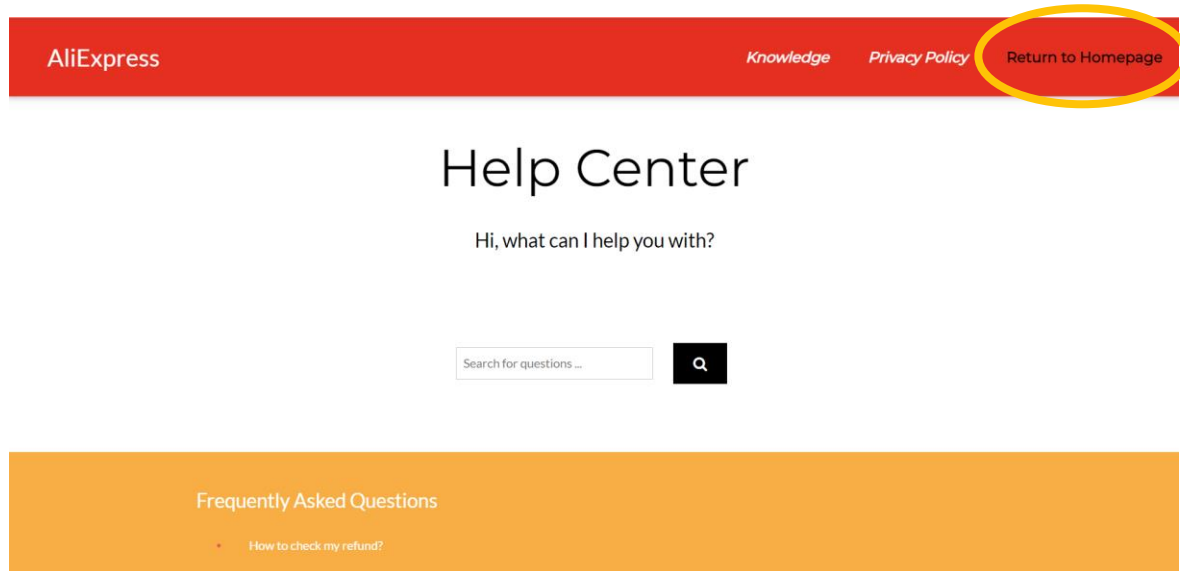event that they are uncertain about how to get back to the products they wish to look at.

Figure 9

Another feature that *AliExpress* could benefit from is the inclusion of a colour filter on the product
page. This is not primarily a problem, but rather a suggestion, as users will be more likely to
use *AliExpress* once they are provided with greater flexibility in terms of what they can view,
thereby enhancing the overall efficiency of the website. Instead of the user simply searching for the
colour product they want, a '**Colour**' combo box with the filter icon **[9]** should be placed between
the '**Best Match**' and '**Orders**' filters. I included an example of the prototype products page with the
new feature implemented through code, as well as a Canva template of how the feature should
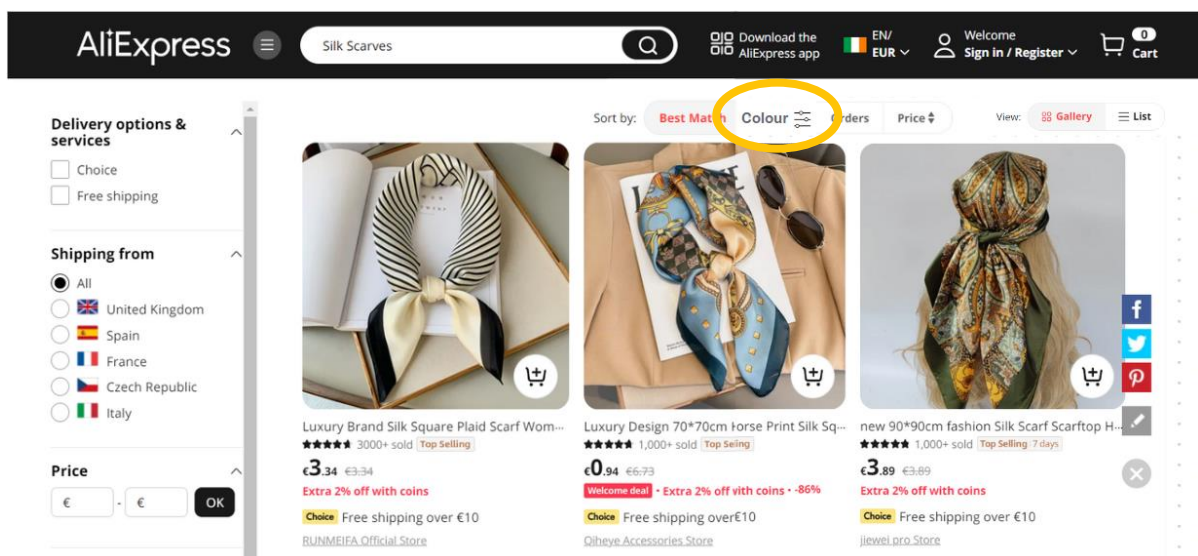look. [*Figure 10*] **[10]**

Figure 10

While **AliExpress**'s home page design, characterised by a simplistic layout and a complementary black and white colour scheme, is deemed satisfactory, there is room for improvement in terms of incorporating additional colour and dimension into their web pages. In the prototype design of **AliExpress**, I enhanced the homepage by incorporating the colour scheme that is strongly linked with **AliExpress**. Additionally, I emphasised the '**Price**' display to attract the users' attention. In the prototype, I maintained the black and white colour scheme in the footer. However, when users hover over the clickable link, it transitions to a dark-mustard colour, thereby incorporating one of the primary colours of **AliExpress**. [*Figure 11*]
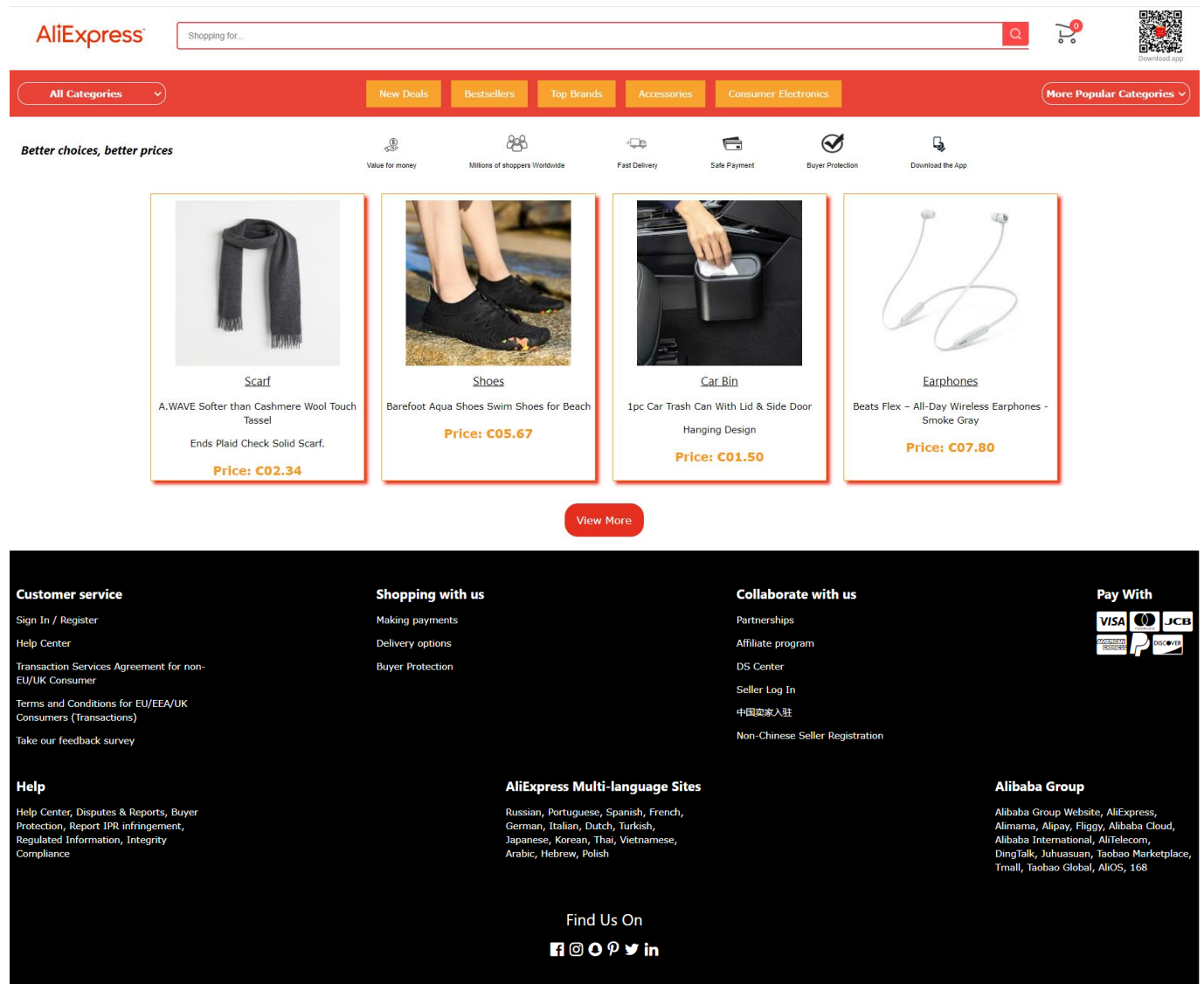

Figure 11

Conclusion: Although the proposed redesign of **AliExpress** includes new components that could be implemented as well as a new colour scheme to enhance its brands philosophy, it is undeniable that **AliExpress** already effectively meets the commercial needs of its users. **AliExpress** effectively caters to a diverse range of consumer preferences, including those looking for low-cost options, extravagant and unique items, or timely gifts for special occasions.

Figures:

References:

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ext=It%20featured%20a%20simple%20magnifying,was%20clean%20and%20instantly%20recognizable

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