Usability Evaluation of AliExpress Web Application

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Product:

AliExpress Website (www.aliexpress.com)

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Introduction

Product Selection

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) involves studying the design of computing technologies and the ways that humans interact with them. Through HCI research, we can better understand the needs and pain-points of users and design interfaces that are compatible with their tendencies and capabilities and accommodating to their limitations.

One of the many benefits that come with technological advancements is the ability to buy products online and have them delivered to us. Since this is an activity that involves significant interaction with a computing technology, we decided to evaluate AliExpress, a Chinese online retail service which is a subsidiary of Alibaba Group of companies.

Product Description

AliExpress is an e-commerce portal that enables businesses or individuals to sell their products directly to consumers. Initially, AliExpress started as a business to business buying and selling platform. They later expanded it to business to consumer, consumer to consumer platform along with payment services. AliExpress provides a platform that allows Chinese business to directly sell to anyone around the world. Products bought from AliExpress take around 20 to 60 days to deliver. Products bought through AliExpress involve import duty as the products are delivered directly from China. One of the major concerns for AliExpress is fraudulent sellers, hence it is crucial for a buyer to determine that the seller and their products are legitimate.

AliExpress allows a person to buy from a wide range of product categories from women's clothing to sports equipment. Users can track their orders, request refunds, obtain discounts, use coupons. It also has additional features like adding products to Wishlist, rating products, etc.

Interface Evaluation

We have evaluated AliExpress interface for product search, product ordering and user profile management.

Searching for Product

There are three paths to search for a product - through the search bar, the landing page or the product list page.

Search Bar

A user can search for a product by typing product-related keywords in the search bar, located near the top middle position on every page of the website. The search bar has good affordance because it is intuitive for the user. Moreover, the Search Bar is present on all pages of the website. Hence when the user wants to search he can quickly find the search bar at the top of the page. This feature has very **good usability** as it is intuitive and fast to access.

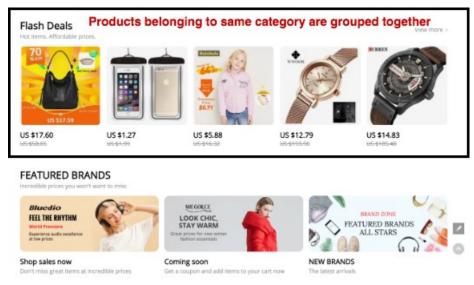




Figure 1 AliExpress Search Bar

Landing Page

The landing page of AliExpress has multiple sections (Figure 2), each displaying a category of products possessing some common characteristics, such as Flash Deals (products under discount) and Featured Brands (Products belonging to Popular Brands) or Products belonging to a common category. These individual products are **similar** because they have a common characteristic and are **grouped together.** Hence the landing page of AliExpress makes use of the Gestalt principles of proximity and similarity.



The landing page also has a list of categories on the left sidebar (Figure 3). Hovering over these categories displays a list of subcategories which are grouped together according their to common characteristic. example, For category of cellphones and accessories is

Figure 2 AliExpress Landing Page Sections

divided into multiple sub-categories like Mobile Phones, Mobile Phone Parts, Cases and Covers and Mobile Phone Accessories. This is another example of Gestalt principles, where the different categories on the list display proximity and the items within each category display similarity.

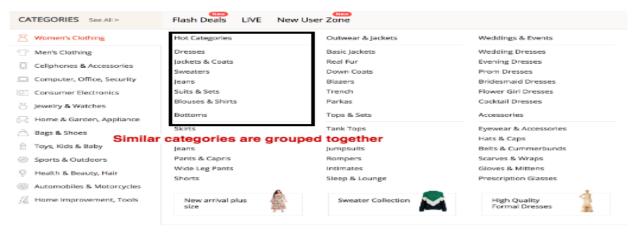


Figure 3 AliExpress Categories on Landing Page

Product List

Searching through either the search bar, the tiles on the landing page or the drop-down menu on the search bar displays a list of products (Figure 4). The products are listed from top to bottom according to relevance of the keywords searched or categories selected. The natural tendency of humans for scanning is from top to bottom hence this design is very **intuitive.**

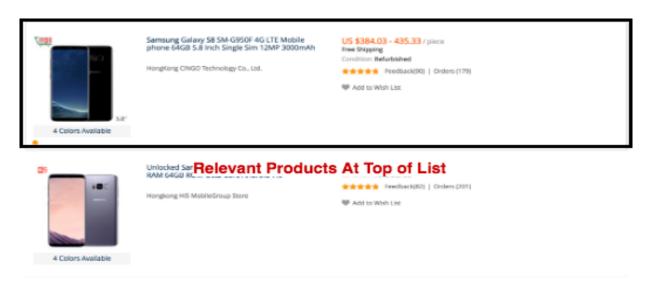
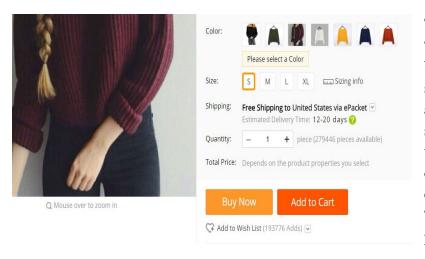


Figure 4 Product List Page has most relevant products from top to bottom.

Purchasing Product

The product description page provides information about the product such as the size, colour, reviews and ratings. Once the user has selected a product they would like to buy, they can click on the "Buy Now" button on the product description page. If a user wants to buy multiple products, they can click on the "Add to Cart" button and proceed with shopping. They can also add the product to their Wish List by clicking on the heart icon, for future reference.



There is good **affordance** of the "Buy Now" and "Add to Cart" buttons. However, the "Please select a Color" option that appears when the user hasn't selected a color is not very visible. Unless the color and size of the product are selected, clicking on the "Buy Now" or "Add to Cart" option does not proceed to the next page.

Figure 5 The product description page has large, easily discoverable call-to-action buttons.

Clicking on "Add to Cart" button opens a pop-up modal window that gives the option to "View Shopping Cart" or "Continue Shopping". The pop-up window is a good way to catch the user's attention and provide **feedback** that the product has been added to the cart. The only way to close this window is through the 'x' on the top right corner of the screen. Clicking on the background page doesn't close the pop-up even though "Continue Shopping" takes you to that same page.

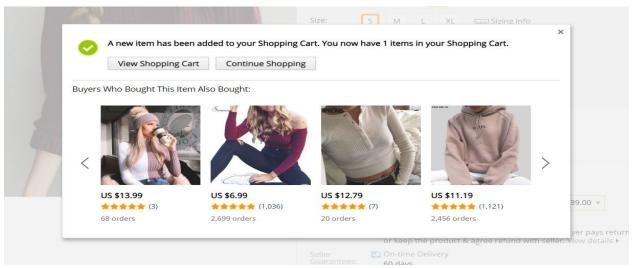


Figure 6 Pop-up window that provides feedback to user about shopping cart.

Clicking on "View Shopping Cart" takes a user to the "Your Shopping Cart" page. A user can also access this page by clicking on the Cart icon on the main menu bar at the top of the page. The shopping cart page makes good use of white space with the most use of color for call-to-action buttons such as "Buy All". This ensures that important information that is necessary for task flow is **easily detectable**.

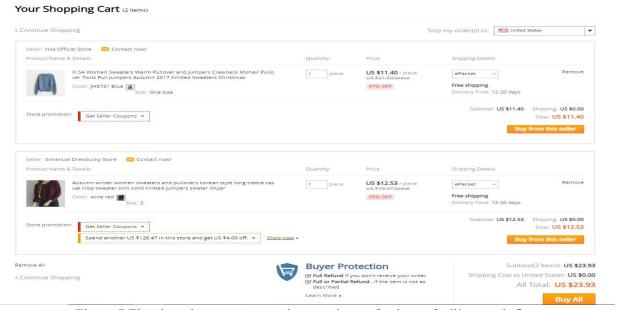


Figure 7 The shopping cart page makes good use of color to facilitate task flow.

When a user is ready to check-out, they can click on the "Buy All" button at the bottom of the "Your Shopping Cart" page or the "Buy Now" button on the product description page. This takes a user to "Review your Order" and to enter shipping address. There is **consistency** between the naming of the labels as they all are using title case. However, the field for Apartment does not have a label. The progress bar at the top of the screen indicates that there are three steps and highlighting of the "Review your Order" in orange informs the user what step they are on. However, reviewing the order is not the same as entering shipping information so there is an inconsistency between the title of the step and the actual step.



Figure 8 Highlighted bar shows user's current step. Field of Apartment is missing a label.

After the address is confirmed, a user is given the option to review and confirm an order and provide payment details. A11 this information is collected on one page and the "Review your Order" remains highlighted. There is a "Confirm & Pay" button at the bottom of this page which seems like the final step, but neither "Done" nor "Payment" step is highlighted. This can cause confusion as the user does not know which step they are on and they might place an order when they are

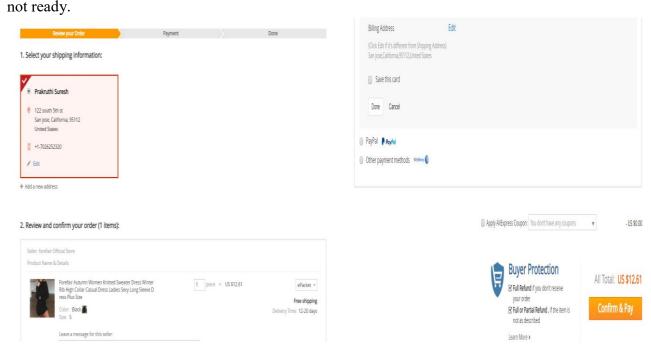


Figure 9. Top of page shows inconsistency between highlighted step and the "Confirm & Pay" button at the bottom of the page.

Managing User Profile

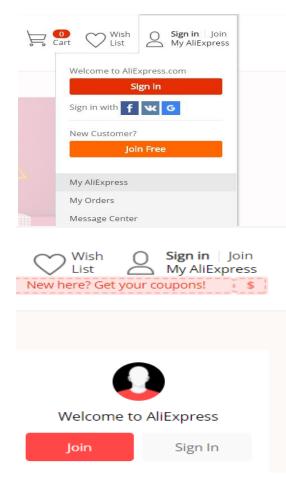


Figure 10 Sign in and Join options are highlighted on hover and when clicking on both the dropdown appears.

User Profile creation option is available on the rightmost corner of the menu bar with the title "Sign in" or "Join". The option gets highlighted when hovering on it. On clicking the title, a dropdown slides down. A novice user will be easily confused with the behavior on looking at it without any information and it is always easy to **recognize rather than recall** about the working of login operation.

The information provided on the title and the menu items also seems to give redundant information. On the title, it shows "My AliExpress" which indicates the profile related grouping of information and in the drop-down sidebar again it shows My AliExpress. Repetition of information increases confusion among the users.

Also, the "Sign In" label is repeated multiple times on the single page forcing the user to Sign in first to the website. **According to the Content Organization Principle**, each item must be distinct from one another to be distinguished clearly from other items. Once we sign in, we get an option to visit our profile and view our orders and other settings of the account.

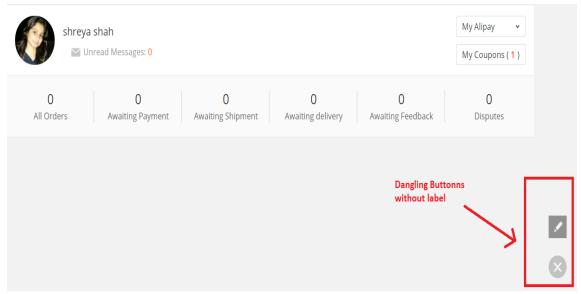


Figure 11 Dangling buttons all over the page without labels

Once you land on the My AliExpress page, it provides users with options for managing their profile. However, there is one dangling button on that page (as shown in Figure 11). The icon has bad affordance as a user cannot **recognize** the icon and its position being away from any content prevents users from **recognizing** the purpose of the button.

Clicking that icon opens a page that asks for user feedback on improving AliExpress. Hence mapping of the position of the icon with the page is very irrelevant.

It also asks the user to rate that page itself. There is no sense in rating that page as the user is interested in that website, not the feedback page. There is a design issue here in which they have given radio buttons to rate the page (Figure 12), whereas using stars which most of the users are familiar with, would be a better choice.



Figure 12 Rating page with Radio Button

The Account Settings page (Figure 13) looks good with limited number of options and does not overwhelm the user. However, each tab opens a new webpage which is very inconvenient for users as changing tabs disturbs user concentration and loses focus.

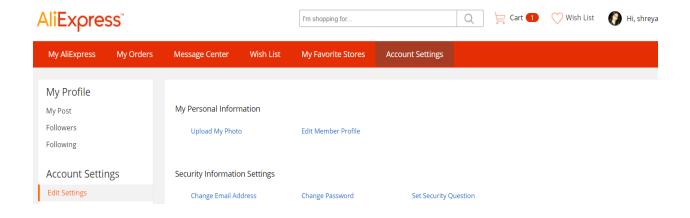


Figure 13 Simple Listing of task on Account Settings Page

Clicking on Edit Member Profile opens a new tab with profile information (Figure 13).

Edit Member Profile



Figure 14 Inconsistent Interface of Edit Member not aligned with Website Interface

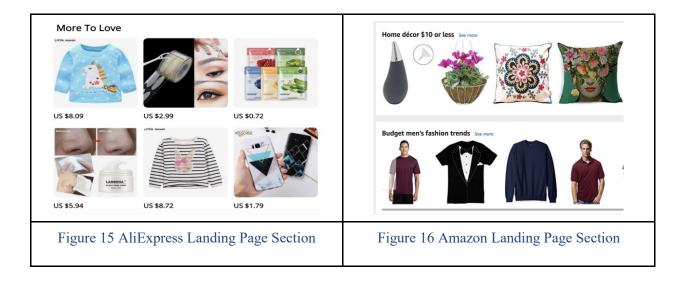
One of the most important features in any web application is consistency. The forms, navigation and menus need to stay consistent throughout the website which is missing on this page.

Comparative Study

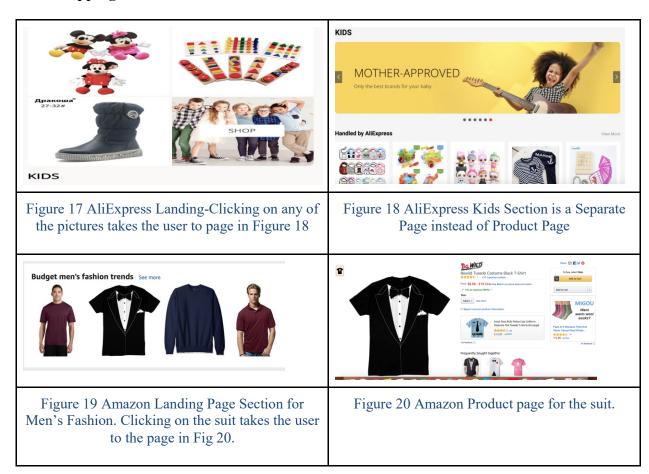
We chose to compare the interface of AliExpress with that of Amazon which is one of the leading e-commerce websites.

Searching for Product

On Amazon, there is a diverse list of product categories (Figure 16) on the Home Page, along with Today's deals and personalized recommendations. AliExpress lacks this diversity in product categories on the Home/Landing page. Moreover, the product Categories like 'More to Love' and 'Inspiration' don't make much sense as to what kinds of products they represent (Figure 15). This is a bit unintuitive for AliExpress users as these categories are not clear about what they represent and render the Landing Page **redundant**.

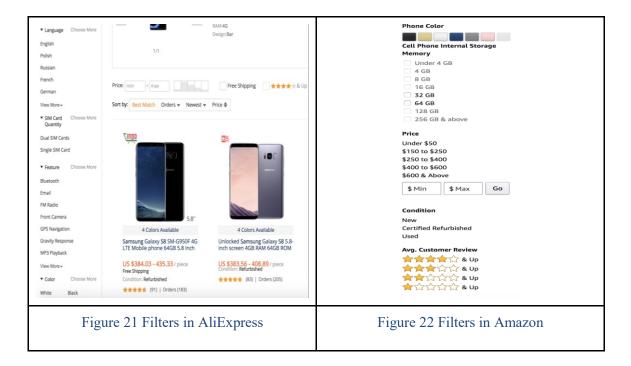


On Amazon, sections like today's deals or discounts display products. Clicking on those product images takes users directly to the product page (Figures 15 and 16). Amazon also has a hyperlink on top of those sections that takes users to a page containing all discounted products. AliExpress has sections like hot deals etc. which display products on discounts but clicking on the product image does not take user to the product's page but to a separate page displaying all discounted products (Figures 17 and 18). This provides **poor feedforward** because users expect to be taken to the product description page when they click on the product image. Moreover, this is an example of **bad mapping.**



Amazon has filters for the product page on the left sidebar (Figure 22). Whereas AliExpress has filters on both the left sidebar and the top bar (Figure 21). The filters in AliExpress have **better grouping** and serve different purposes than those on Amazon because the top bar filters are general whereas the sidebar filters are specific to the type of product searched.

Amazon and AliExpress both provide filters with similar functionality but AliExpress UI for those filters and their implementation is mediocre. AliExpress has a price range filter with a histogram displaying the percentage of people that bought the products in a price range. But the price range is not relevant to the products displayed. Moreover, the ratings filter in Amazon start from 1 star and above to 4 stars and above (Figure 22), whereas in AliExpress it's just 4 stars and above (Figure 21). Hence filters in AliExpress have **poor usability.**



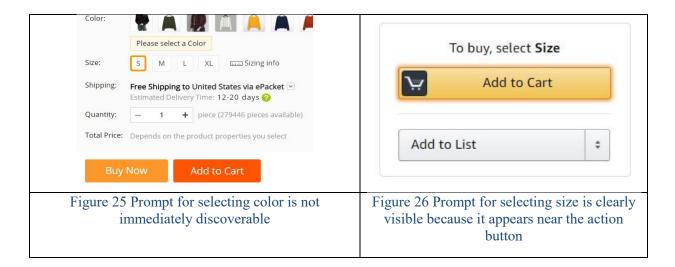
The Back to Top link is missing in AliExpress which forces the user to scroll all the way to the top making it an inefficient process. In Amazon this link is present and is an example of **good usability.**

Purchasing Product

Like the AliExpress website (Figure 23), the Amazon website's product description page also has similar action buttons (Figure 24) - "Buy now with 1-click", "Add to Cart" and "Add to List". The "Buy now with 1-click" has the same function as "Buy Now" on AliExpress. It takes the user to the enter payment information and places order.



On AliExpress, when color and size is not selected, a "Please select a Color" option appears but it isn't immediately discoverable (Figure 25). However, on Amazon, the message appears right above the "Add to Cart" button and is clearly visible (Figure 26). Since these two pieces of information (missing color and buy action) are needed to complete the process, according to **Proximity-Compatibility Principle** they should be placed close to each other.

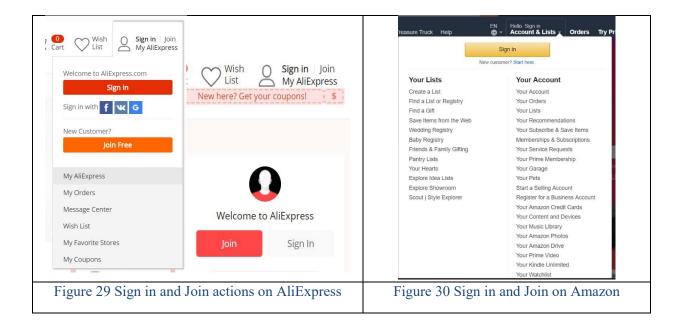


While AliExpress has poor feedforward, as it isn't clear which step the user is on while completing shipping and payment information (Figure 27), on Amazon it is made clear at the top of the page that the user is at the final "Place Order" step (Figure 28).

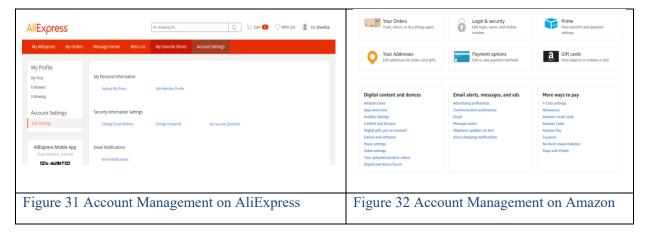


Managing User Profile

In Amazon, hovering over "Hello, Sign In" on landing page displays clear option to "Sign in" for existing users and "Start here" for new users (Figure 30). However, on AliExpress, clicking on "Sign in" and "Join" opens the same page again prompting the user to select an option which is redundant and requires an extra click. Also "Sign in "and "Join" appear in two places on the home page which might be confusing to users (Figure 29).



On Amazon, to manage and update profile the user must select "Your Account" by hovering over user name. This takes user to a page with multiple features. There is no intuitive labelling for the section to indicate account management. This may seem confusing and inefficient for users who are not very familiar with the interface. However, on AliExpress users can navigate to "My AliExpress" page by clicking on the welcome message and then selecting "My AliExpress" option. Labelling is clear and intuitive as it indicates "Account Settings".



User Profiling

AliExpress being one of the most used retail platforms internationally has a vast customer base from different countries, cultures and background. For this evaluation, we have considered two personas. The first persona is of Ashley Armstrong (Figure 33) who is a frequent online shopper and knowledgeable about fashion. She uses e-commerce websites frequently to browse and purchase the latest trends in clothing. The second persona is of Robert Alexander (Figure 34) who prefers shopping in-store over online and chooses the latter only when he is busy and needs something quickly.

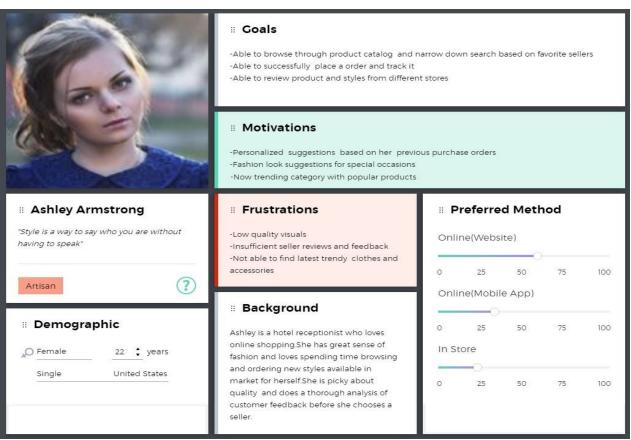


Figure 33 User Persona 1 for this evaluation.

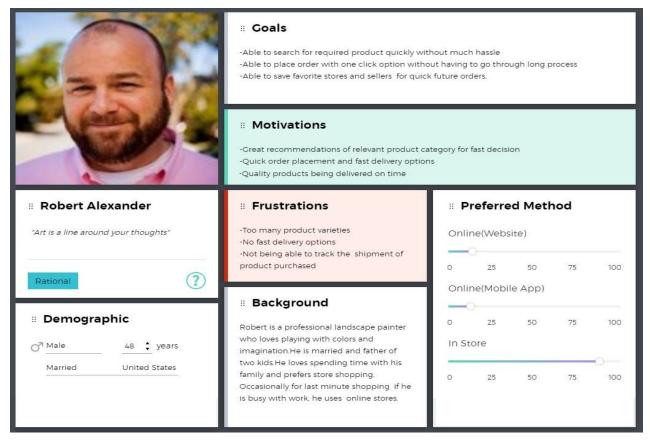


Figure 34 User Persona 2 for this evaluation.

Usability Metrics for Product Evaluation

This website was evaluated based on the following usability metrics. The usability metrics are divided into quantitative metrics that give us numerical data as well as qualitative metrics that give us non-numerical data. Both types of metrics are vital in forming a comprehensive evaluation of the app.

Quantitative Metrics

- Task time
- Satisfaction rates
- Perceived usefulness rates

Qualitative Metrics:

- Nielsen's 10 heuristics for user interface design (Nielsen, 1994)
 - Aesthetic and minimalist design
 - Help and documentation
 - o Flexibility and efficiency of use
 - o Recognition rather than recall
 - Consistency and standards
 - User control and freedom
 - Match between system and the real world
 - Visibility of system status
 - Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors
- Usability goal
 - o Effectiveness, Efficiency, Satisfaction
- Expectations
- Frustration

Tools and Techniques

- 1) Think aloud technique: audio recording, timing iPhone
- 2) Interview: audio recording iPhone audio recording tool
- 3) Screenshotting Snipping Tool
- 4) User profiling Uxpressia

Usability Evaluation based on our Usability Metrics

To evaluate the interface with our usability metrics, a first impression interview, a user test, and a survey were conducted.

1. First Impression Interview

10 participants (4 males, and 6 females, ages ranging from 23 to 32 years old) were approached for the AliExpress Application first impression interview. Two open-ended questions regarding user expectation were asked to participants before they viewed the landing page of the application.

Questions:

What do you expect from the AliExpress web application, which is basically a shopping website?

Which features would you like to see on this website?

Outcome:

Questions	Answers
Expectation (What do you expect from AliExpress Application ?)	 Simple Website design with a smooth-running interface. Simple navigation to reach to a product. What are some great deals section? Good Quality of product image to bring the authenticity of the product. Rate and Review Feature (A must have) Easy Ordering
Searching for a product as feature participant wish to have	10/10
Wishlist as a featured participant wish to have	7/10
Email Notification of offers as feature participants wish to have	8/10
Easy Ordering (One click Buy) as feature participants wish to have	10/10
Suggestions/Recommendations based on a previous purchase as feature participants wish to have	9/10

Table 1 Outcome of First Impression Interview

2. User Testing using Think Aloud Technique

A user testing of the AliExpress website was conducted in which 5 participants were asked to perform two tasks and speak their thoughts out loud while doing the tasks. One task involved doing a specific search for wireless headphones with certain characteristics such as price. The other task was a free search where participants were asked to go through the process of buying a gift for their friend.

Outcome:

Description	Participants' Responses
Task Time	Range: 3 to 10 minutes Average: 6 minutes
Participants did not notice prompt to pick color or size of the product	2/5
Participants complained about menus and filters	2/5
Participants complained about product titles	2/5
Complaints participants had:	 Related keyword feature under the search bar did not show related products "Ship from?" only has China as the option, but it still requires users to answer it. Too many menus and filters on the landing page. There are two sets of filters. One set on the left sidebar and another set on the top of the page. This makes it hard to find a particular filter.

Table 2 Outcome of the user testing

3. Post-test Survey

The participants were administered a survey after completing the usability exercise. Questions asked ranged from their shopping behavior to likes and dislikes about the AliExpress interface. Only one of the participants had previous experience with using AliExpress. Four out of the five participants preferred to shop online over physical stores.

The average participant satisfaction rating and the average usefulness rating were both 7, however there were some complaints regarding the interface. Common complaints were about there being too much information on the website, including the product titles being extremely long. Another

issue was with participants not being able to discover the prompt to select color and size of the product. One participant was not able to complete the first task due to being unable to add product to cart without selecting product color.

Participant Satisfaction Ratings:

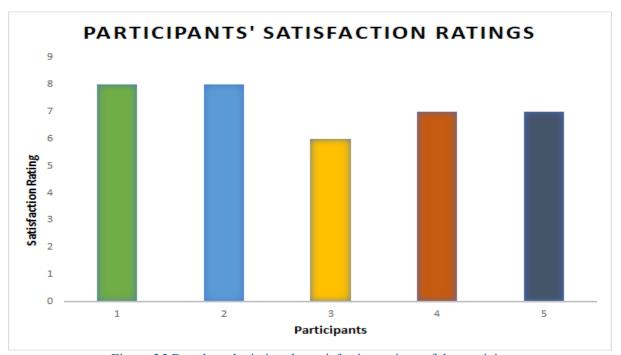


Figure 35 Bar chart depicting the satisfaction ratings of the participants

Participants' Usefulness Ratings:

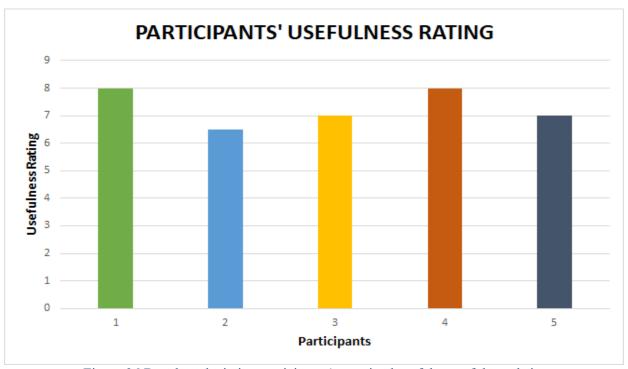


Figure 36 Bar chart depicting participants' perceived usefulness of the website

4. Heuristic Evaluation

Along with the above usability methods, we conducted a heuristic evaluation based on Nielsen's ten heuristics principles, with the team members as usability experts. We used a 4-point Likert scale and derived an average severity score for each heuristic violated based on individual expert scores. Based on the severity score chart from Severity Ratings for Usability Problems (Nielsen, 1995) we identified the following high severity violations:

- Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors
- Visibility of system status
- Flexibility and efficiency of use
- Error prevention
- Match between system and the real world

Complete evaluation chart is added in appendix section for reference.

Usability Enhancements

Based on real time user suggestions and expert evaluation by our team based on ratings we derived at following enhancement suggestions.

- In Product description page error messages like "Please select a Color" and "Buy" action button should be placed close to each other, so user can easily recognize and recover from error.
- System feedforward using progress bar should work consistently with user actions in payment confirmation page which avoids user confusion. The affordance of the bar should change at each step. The Review, Payment and Process Completion steps can be divided into three different pages.
- Grouping of menu items should stay consistent throughout the website to make user task fast and efficient.
- User Sign in forms should make mandatory fields explicit to avoid possible errors and save time.
- Icons used like that of edit in Home Page should match with their affordance to avoid user frustration and high error rate.
- Problem of system becoming unresponsive randomly should be fixed with proper technical analysis and bug fixing.
- Repetition of action items like multiple Sign in and Join options can be removed to avoid cluttering and confusion.

Conclusion

Through our usability methods we were able to obtain qualitative and quantitative data to uncover the main pain points that users had when using the website. Pain points were on multiple screens which is a major usability concern in the design of AliExpress Web Application. Pain points included not being able to add product to cart because of poor discoverability of error message, and lack of good feedforward in the review and payment page. There is too much noise on the homepage which is distracting to the users and what needs to be noticed goes unnoticed. Our hope is to provide recommendations to improve the interface usability.

Learnings from this Project

Prakruthi Suresh

- I learned how to apply the theories and principles we learned through coursework in this project. I learned to recognize violations against those principles in our product and how much impact it has on its usability.
- This was the first time that I conducted a usability test and used the Think Aloud technique. It helped me learn how to construct tasks to test certain usability principles.
- I learned to design survey questions that do not prime the users to answer in one way.
- Doing the user testing brought to my attention aspects of the task that I hadn't considered while planning it. I realized that it takes some practice to facilitate the test, make observations, takes notes and keep time, all at the same time. If possible, it might be a good idea to run a pilot participant (whose data isn't used) to test the soundness of the test.
- This project helped me to start thinking about every step of a process while using an online interface. While it is good to use color to attract a user's attention, sometimes too much color can prevent signal detection.

Shreya Shah

- Analyzing and evaluating the interface and studying various aspects of the UI design was something new to me. I also noticed that every user has different perspectives or ways to use the applications. So, designing an application requires a broader thinking of objects.
- Conducting the first impression testing really helped bring out user's expectation when they get first view of the application that weren't immediately obvious to me, or that I would have thought of myself.
- Also, interviewing users with a range of ages showed how different users can have slightly different goals and wants from an application. I learned that conducting user research is vital to performing a comprehensive analysis.
- This project helped to broader my range of thinking while designing any applications.
- I started thinking about each small color, text, and position changes in the applications as per the rules studied in the class.

Sheethal Halandur Nagaraja

- Conducting interface evaluation and comparison studies of user interface was a new experience for me. I learned how to apply theoretical concepts and principles which we learned in class to real time scenarios and analyses its impact on user experience.
- I learned about importance of user profiling for an application and creating personas helped me to understand better about different user's frustrations, pain points, expectations and goals.
- I learned that some pain points might not be evident initially but as we conduct different user surveys and performance analysis, problematic areas become more and more evident and their impact cannot be neglected.
- This experience helped me to understand importance of intuitive user interface design for better user experience.

Mohit Shah

- I learned about evaluating the user interfaces using the principles learnt throughout the course.
- I learned how to compare multiple products based on Human Computer Interaction principles learned in our course.
- Moreover, I learned how to identify hidden flaws and HCI patterns in user interfaces.
- This project gave me an insight in looking at applications in the perspective of usability, intuitiveness, affordances and other Human Computer Interaction principles.

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Appendix

System Flow Chart

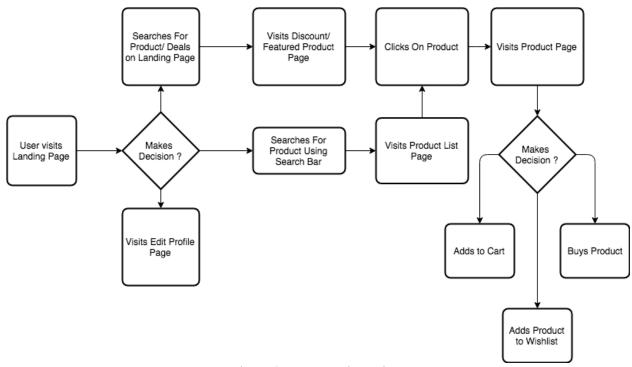


Figure 37 System Flow Chart

User Testing Facilitator Script

This is a brief study to understand the usability of an e-commerce website - AliExpress. I will be asking you to perform a series of tasks on this website. As you perform these tasks, please speak your thoughts out loud. I will be recording this session for future reference. Is that alright? Your data will only be used for the purposes of this study and will be presented as an aggregate. This is not a test of your intelligence. It's a test of the website. Please let me know if you have

any questions.

Think Aloud Technique Tasks:

- 1. Search for and add to cart a pair of wireless headphones under \$25. It needs to have a neckband, so it can be used while running.
- 2. You need to buy a gift for your friend's birthday. Go through the process of placing the order.

Post-test Survey:

Have you used this website before?

How often do you shop online?

What are the top three things you do on a shopping website?

Did you like anything about using this website?

Did you dislike anything about using this website?

How satisfied were you with the experience? From 1-10, 1 being not satisfied to 10 being extremely satisfied.

Will you use this website again?

Please rate how useful you find it? From 1-10, 1 being not useful to 10 being extremely useful. Is there anything you would like to change about this website?

Heuristic Evaluation detailed analysis:

The following 0 to 4 rating scale can be used to rate the severity of usability problems:

- 0 = I don't agree that this is a usability problem at all
- 1 = Cosmetic problem only: need not be fixed unless extra time is available on project
- 2 = Minor usability problem: fixing this should be given low priority
- 3 = Major usability problem: important to fix, so should be given high priority
- 4 = Usability catastrophe: imperative to fix this before the product can be released

Serial No.	Problem Description	Heuristic Principle	Average rating
1	Homepage and search option bottom tags display too many product recommendations with random grouping.	Aesthetic and minimalist design	1.5
2	Documentation is outdated in some places like adding store as a favorite. Help shows options to add which are not the same in the current version of the website.	Help and documentation	1.25
3	The application becomes unresponsive randomly on	Flexibility and efficiency of use	3.5

	certain clicks.		
4	There is no "Keep me signed in" option available and every time user must type the password for sign in.	Recognition rather than recall	1.75
5	Grouping of categories under main menu is not consistent across the home page and "See All" page.	Consistency and standards	2.25
6	Multiple Sign in and Join options in Home page.	Consistency and standards	2
7	Clicking on Sign or Join on top menu bar opens the same page again prompting to choose an action.	Consistency and standards	1.75
8	There is no Back to the Top button and user must scroll all the way back to the top.	User control and freedom	2.5
9	There is a button with edit symbol in the home page on clicking which opens report and rate page which is not intuitive to the user.	Match between system and the real world	3
10	Address confirmation, Order Review and Payment all are done in the same page which shows "Review your order" on the progress bar. System feedback is not consistent with user's actions.	Visibility of system status	3.75
11	Error messages such as "Please select a size" are not discoverable easily.	Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors	3.5
12	Address form and user sign up forms do not mention about mandatory field requirements and error messages are displayed only after user tries to save them.	Error prevention	3.5

Table 3 Heuristic Evaluation