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Examining the Product and Service-Centric Website Features and Functions Offered by European Fashion Retailers Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

Richard Heiens
University of South Carolina Beaufort, richardh@uscb.edu

Ravi Narayanaswamy
University of South Carolina Aiken

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Richard A. Heiens
University of South Carolina Beaufort

Ravi Narayanaswamy
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ABSTRACT

Considering the significant pressures faced by fashion-oriented e-commerce retailers in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand what modifications, if any, these retailers may have made to their online retail stores, and the impact that these changes may have had on their effectiveness during this time frame. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine the various product-centric and service-centric features and functions found on the websites of European fashion retailers both before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also examined the conversion rates, the average ticket values and customer demographics for the retailers in both time frames. The findings reveal that the proportion of retailers offering the live chat function almost doubled from 2019 to 2020 while the proportion of retailers offering content in multiple languages increased by 50 percent. No other significant differences in the propensity of the retailers to offer other product or service-centric features or functions were observed. Also, while no significant difference was found in either average ticket value or the demographic composition of customers, the results do show a significant increase in conversion rates from 2019 to 2020.

Keywords: *Fashion, E-commerce, Product-centric features, Service-centric features, Conversion rates, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

By its very nature, the fashion industry has always been characterized by rapid and ever-evolving change. Yet, even for an industry that that has learned to live with the revolving doors of fashion, revolutionary changes are happening in the area of fashion retailing. In fact, recent years have been some of the most difficult in the industry's history, especially for traditional bricks-and-mortar retailers. As the industry has experienced the mass closures of a large number of retail stores, the term "retail apocalypse" has been aptly coined to reflect these dramatic changes (Childs et al., 2020). The primary impetus for the bricks-and-mortar retail apocalypse has been the steady growth of online retailing. For example, in 2019 approximately 19 percent of retail sales in the United Kingdom were generated online, with an increase of 700 million British pounds in online retail sales from December 2019 to January 2020 alone (Coppola, 2021).

Further intensifying the trend towards online retailing has been the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the coronavirus did much to turn Europe's emerging retail apocalypse into a full-fledged nightmare for bricks-and-mortar retailers as government-imposed lockdowns effectively shut down stores across the region (Hipwell and Sidders, 2020). Even without mandatory lockdowns, 90 percent of consumers in one study reported that they changed their shopping habits as a result of COVID-19, with many either turning to e-commerce or forgoing discretionary shopping trips altogether (Stewart and Stewart, 2021). Not surprisingly, fashion retailers as a whole have struggled. According to government statistics, clothing sales throughout the U.K. fell by a whopping 21.5% in 2020 (Khaliq, 2021). Therefore, faced with unprecedented challenges and a rapidly evolving consumer market, fashion retailers are increasingly forced to either initiate or emphasize the e-commerce sales channel.

Historically, fashion retailers have typically been adept at initiating changes and modifications to their store environments in response to external pressures. Many retailers understand that subtle adjustments to a variety of visual and aural stimuli can be used to revitalize or alter the store atmosphere and that these adjustments can have significant and positive impacts on consumer responses (Parsons, 2011). For example, faced with heightened competitive pressure and an increased focus on value, many fast fashion retailers have successfully manipulated the perception of scarcity through the deliberate management of "store messiness" and human crowding (Coskun, Gupta, and Burnaz, 2020). Similarly, the various functions and qualities of the online store environment can be expected to influence consumer buying decisions. Yet, very little research has been conducted on the impact of these possible manipulations for fashion-oriented retail websites. Considering the significant pressures faced by fashion-oriented retailers in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand what modifications, if any, these retailers may have made to the product and service-oriented features of their online stores, and the impact that these changes may have had on their effectiveness during this time frame.

In light of these research objectives, the current study applies actual sales and marketing data from the largest online fashion retailers in the European market to examine the product-centric and service-centric features and functions found on their websites both before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, we examine the impact of those strategic modifications on conversion rates, an important and widely emphasized performance metric for online retailers.

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Retailers have long understood that the retailing mix includes a combination of physical products and intangible services (Rosenbloom, 1976). Similarly, recent studies on e-commerce retailing have tended to categorize website features into either product or service-related cues (Lee, Ha, and Johnson, 2019). For fashion retailers, product-related decisions, including the display and merchandising choices for physical products, have historically been the strategic priority (Rajaram, 2001). Extending this emphasis to the online environment leads to a focus on order procurement. The order procurement stage starts from the beginning of the transaction to the point of purchase decision, and it is highly dependent on product-mix decisions. More specifically, the order procurement process "involves activities to facilitate information search, product evaluation, decision-making, and purchasing" (Wan, Huang, and Dong, 2016, p. 64).

Previous research has validated the significance of the order procurement process as a precursor to customer satisfaction (Tanner, 1996; Thirumalai and Sinha, 2011).

The dimensions of the order procurement process in the online experience can involve a variety of unique product-centric website elements. For example, Vertical Web Media, a syndicated research provider focusing on e-commerce, identifies several product-related website features and functions. These include preview search, interactive product match tools, product customization, and product sharing. Preview search enhances the product search experience by inserting preview pages. In the absence of direct product interactions, these tools may facilitate product inspection. Product match tools enhance the shopping experience by identifying similar products based on a combination of attributes. Although unable to physically hold two products in their hands for side-by-side comparison, these tools may serve as a virtual surrogate for the product inspection process. Product customization involves offering goods that have had their colors, elements, or features altered according to customer preferences, thereby enhancing the range of consumer choice. Finally, product sharing tools allow customers to link product information to their contacts, allowing for the referent influence that occurs on many traditional group shopping trips as well as the added enjoyment that shoppers gain from the company of others (Mora and González, 2016).

In addition to product-centric features and functions, e-commerce websites are increasingly offering a variety of service oriented elements. The theoretical framework provided by the service-dominant logic perspective emphasizes the vital role of an online retailer's customer service-based initiatives. The basic premise of the service-dominant logic perspective is that all economies and markets, even those for physical goods, are service-based. In this perspective, all physical goods merely serve as tangible devices for delivering intangible services (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Accordingly, the activities and outcomes, rather than the goods themselves, constitute the source of value. Ng and Vargo (2018) state that service-dominant logic can be regarded as a "metatheoretical narrative" applicable to a wide range of economic activity and at many levels of aggregation, including the e-commerce environment populated by online retailers and their customers. Recent findings by Ho et al. (2020) in the e-commerce environment support the service-dominant logic that service-driven customer engagement positively contributes to customer consumption in terms of both new customer acquisition and existing customer retention. Thus, it is essential to offer the optimal combination of the various elements "embedded within the many different layers of an online retailer's ecosystem" (Ho et al., 2020, p. 156).

Vertical Web Media tracks several service-centric website features and functions. These include live chat, content in multiple languages, customer-generated content, customers' ratings/reviews, and loyalty programs. For those customers accustomed to traditional salesperson assistance, live chats can be a desirable feature. Research by McLean et al. (2020) suggests that live chats with a customer service representative can positively influence customer attitudes and purchase intentions. Another feature that marketers may opt to provide is the transcoding of website content in multiple languages. Research suggests that marketers can reduce perceived risk and increase online customer satisfaction by offering a range of information in the language preferred by the user (Alcántra-Pilar, Del Barrio-Garcia, and Rodriguez-López, 2018). Customer-generated content often focuses on a customer's experiences with a company's products and services. These are conceptually different than customer ratings/reviews. Nevertheless, both can positively influence customer engagement (Yang, Ren, and Adomavicius, 2019). Finally, loyalty programs can be used to monitor and reward individual consumer spending. In fact, research indicates that these programs may actually help increase consumer spending, especially as consumers get closer to the redemption point, a phenomenon known as "points pressure" (Nastasoiu et al., 2021). As such, loyalty programs are an increasingly popular consumer incentive used by online retailers.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether the COVID-19 pandemic influenced European e-commerce fashion retailers to alter the availability of the aforementioned product-centric and service-centric features and functions. As shown below, the null hypotheses assert the independence of the variables under consideration. Conversely, each of alternative hypotheses suggest a difference in the tendency for European fashion-oriented online retailers to offer specific product-centric or service-centric features and functions on their websites in 2020 versus 2019, the year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

$H1_0$: There is no significant difference in the proportion of companies offering product-centric features and functions.

- **H1a:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering the preview search function.
- **H1b:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering product match tools.
- **H1c:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering product customization.
- **H1d:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering the product sharing function.

$H2_0$: There is no significant difference in the proportion of retailers offering service-centric features and functions.

- **H2a:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering live chat.
- **H2b:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering content in multiple languages.
- **H2c:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers including customer-generated content.
- **H2d:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers including customer ratings/reviews.
- **H2e:** There is a difference in the proportion of retailers offering an online loyalty program.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The data for this study come from syndicated research provider, Vertical Web Media. This company maintains a proprietary database of the largest e-commerce companies around the globe as ranked by annual web sales, and prior academic research studies have validated the use of the database for analysis and hypothesis testing (e.g., Narayanaswamy and Heiens, 2022). For this study, we used the Top 500 E-commerce Retailers in Europe database. The database provides a total of 250 metrics for each e-commerce firm, which includes financial, operational, customer service, marketing, corporate information, executive profiles, website performance, and vendor information. The data collection process used by Vertical Web Media involves a systematic approach. First, online retailers are contacted directly with a request to report their data. Following this, the collected data are verified using external sources such as *comScore Inc.*, *Experian Marketing Services*, and *Foresee*. For each variable examined, the Vertical Web Media database reports either Yes or No for each of the retailers' websites. The total sample size included 132 European fashion retailers for the 2019 year and a similar number, 134, for the year 2020. The similarity in sample sizes helps negate any skewness in the data imposed by sample size considerations. A summary of the variables is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of 2019 & 2020 Product and Service-Centric Features and Functions

Features	2019		2020	
Product	YES	NO	YES	NO
Preview Search	57	75	65	69
Interactive Product Match Tools	5	127	10	124
Product Customization	11	121	9	125
Product Sharing	54	78	48	56
Service	YES	NO	YES	NO
Live Chat	31	101	61	73
Multiple languages	62	70	94	40
Customer-Generated Content	18	114	12	122
Customer Ratings/Reviews	64	68	56	78
Loyalty Program	30	102	36	98

As described in our research objectives, we also examined the conversion rates for the retailers in our sample in both 2019 and 2020. For online retailers, the conversion rate represents the percentage of users purchasing a product out of the total number of unique visitors entering a website, or the proportion of orders to website visitors (Gudigantala, Bicen, and Eom, 2016). Evidence indicates that the conversion rate for online retailers is typically in the 2 percent to 4 percent range (Heiens, Narayanaswamy, and Siegfried, 2021; McDowell, Wilson, and Kile Jr., 2016). Given the dramatically low conversion rates, even a modest increase could greatly enhance an online retailer's profitability. Table 2 reveals the mean conversion rates for 2019 and 2020 and the results of a t-test for the two independent samples. Although the conversion rates remain within the range of previous studies, the results reveal a significant increase from 2019 to 2020 for our sample.

Table 2. T-Test for Conversion Rate Comparison

Conversion rate (%)			Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	t	df.	p-value
2019	2020						
2.31	3.17	Equal variances not assumed	.860	.001	632.1	263.9	.000
132(N)	134(N)	Hartley test for equal variance: F = 1.002, Sig. = 0.4957					

In addition, the average ticket value (the dollar amount of the average purchase) served as a control variable. Controlling for the average ticket value enables us to examine the conversion rate changes without the possible confounding influence imposed by the cost of the products purchased. The results, provided in Table 3, show that the average dollar amount spent by customers in 2019 and 2020, although nominally different, was not significantly different and therefore cannot be used to explain the difference in conversion rates identified in Table 2.
We also examined the consumer demographic characteristics in both 2019 and 2020 to identify any significant shifts in customer profiles. This demographic summary is shown in Table 4. The demographic data indicate that the majority of shoppers in both years were in the 18- to 44-year-old age group while the smallest percentage of shoppers were ages 65+. Although shoppers skewed slightly younger in 2020, there were no pronounced differences in the age distribution of shoppers between the two years. Similarly, gender representation remained consistent for both 2019 and 2020.

Table 3. T-Test for Average Ticket Value

Average Ticket Value			Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	t	df	Sig.
2019 (USD)	2020 (USD)	Equal variances not assumed	18.911	48.962	.386	262.55	.700
186.639 (381.151)*	205.550 (416.850)	Hartley test for equal variance: F = 1.196, Sig. = 0.1517					

*Mean (Std. Dev.), N (2019) = 132, N (2020) = 134

Table 4. Customer Demographics

	2020	2019
Age (years)	Percent	Percent
18 - 24	20	20
25 – 34	31	27
35 – 44	21	20
45 – 54	14	14
55 – 64	9	11
65+	5	7
Gender		
Female	67	68
Male	33	32

The final step was to examine the variation of product and service-centric features and functions found on European fashion oriented websites between 2019 and 2020. The chi-square statistical approach was used to test our hypotheses. This approach is applicable to the dataset as the variables examined are independent of each other and the per cell count was equal to or greater than five observations. A detailed summary of the observed values, the expected values, and the corresponding X^2 (chi-square) value for each website feature or function is provided in Table 5. As seen in Table 5, the only significant differences observed were in the proportion of retailers offering live chat and content in multiple languages. Specifically, the proportion of retailers offering the live chat function almost doubled from 2019 to 2020 while the proportion of retailers offering content in multiple languages increased by 50 percent. No other significant differences in the propensity of the retailers to offer other product or service-centric features or functions were observed.

Table 5. Comparison of 2019 versus 2020

	2019		**2020**		**Chi-Sq.**	**p-value**	**Chi-Sq with Yates correction**	**p-value**
	YES	NO	YES	NO				
			Product Centric					
Preview Search	57(60.54) [.21]	75(71.46) [.18]	65(61.46) [.2]	69(72.54) [.17]	0.7596	0.383455	0.5602	0.454162
Predictive Type	109 (103.32) [.32]	23(28.78) [1.16]	99(104.78) [.32]	35(29.22) [1.14]	2.9487	0.085949	2.4607	0.116724
Interactive Product Match Tools	5(7.44) [0.8]	127(124.56) [.05]	10(7.56) [0.79]	124(124.56) [.05]	1.6876	0.19392	1.0676	0.301482
Product Customization	11(9.92) [0.12]	121(122.08) [.01]	9(10.08) [.11]	125(123.92) [.01]	0.25	0.617063	0.0716	0.789091
Product Sharing	54(57.05) [.16]	78(74.95) [0.12]	48(44.95) [.21]	56(59.05) [.16]	0.652	0.419389	0.4558	0.499584
			Service Centric					
Live Chat	31(45.65) [4.7]	101(86.35) [2.49]	61(46.35) [4.63]	73(87.65) [2.45]	14.2741	0.000158	13.3167	0.000263***

Multiple languages	62(77.41) [3.07]	70(54.59) [4.35]	94(78.59) [3.02]	40(55.41) [4.29]	14.7317	0.000124	13.7915	0.000202***
Customer-Generated Content	18(14.89) [.65]	114(117.11) [.08]	12(15.11) [.64]	122(118.89) [.08]	1.4562	0.227531	1.026	0.311105
Customer Ratings/ Reviews	64(59.55) [.33]	68(72.45) [.27]	56(60.45) [.33]	78(73.55) [.27]	1.2033	0.272664	0.9481	0.330192
Loyalty Program	30(32.75) [.23]	102(99.25) [.08]	36(33.25) [.23]	98(100.75) [.08]	0.6105	0.434618	0.4088	0.522593

Observed value (Expected value) [Chi-sq]
*** p-value significant at alpha .001 level

DISCUSSION

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, a wide variety of lockdowns and restrictions on human engagement were initiated in an effort to mitigate the spread of the contagion. As a result, many consumers were deprived of the social interactions that often accompany the purchase process in the physical world. These restrictions not only drove many retail customers to the virtual marketspace, but they also initiated a change in the value proposition offered to those customers as customer engagement has been demonstrated to be an important factor in the creation of customer value (An and Han, 2020; Kumar and Pansari, 2016). For example, in the area of fashion retailing, research verifies the significant impact that interactions between customers and salespeople can have on the purchase process as these interactions can help fulfill a wide range of customer needs and benefits (Kim and Kim, 2014). Even more importantly, social isolation is often associated with a wide range of adverse health consequences (Morris, 2020). Consequently, it is not surprising that consumers would seek to remedy this condition in any way possible, including through an increased emphasis on virtual engagement. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover that fashion retailers responded in kind. This is significant, as no other widespread website modifications were observed during this time frame.

In summary, our findings indicate that as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the product and service-centric strategies of the retailers studied remained consistent on most dimensions. However, the only observed deviation in either the product or service-centric strategies of the online fashion retailers studied was in their propensity to offer live chat and content in multiple languages. These changes were also accompanied by an improvement in conversion rates in 2020 as compared to 2019. However, there was no corresponding significant change in the average ticket value or in the demographic composition of the customer population to help explain this outcome. Although we cannot conclusively stipulate a causal link between those two service-centric features and conversion rates, the correlation is not only compelling, but it is also consistent with findings from consumer gratification studies.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard A. Heiens (Ph.D., Florida State University) serves as a Professor of Marketing at the University of South Carolina Beaufort. His research interests are in the areas of digital marketing, e-commerce, and marketing strategy. His research studies have appeared in many academic journals, including the *Strategic Management Journal*, the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, and the *Journal of Strategic Marketing*.

Ravi Narayanaswamy (Ph.D., Clemson University) serves as the Walter F. O'Connell Palmetto Professor of Management at the University of South Carolina Aiken. His research interests focus on information systems, social networking, and e-commerce. His research studies have appeared in many academic journals, including the *Journal of Management Information Systems*, the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, and the *Journal of Computer Information Systems*.