The Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index, a PYMNTS and Digital River collaboration, examines the websites of 137 retail merchants across six industries for a first-hand account of how quickly and easily international eCommerce shoppers can make cross-border purchases and how their purchasing experiences compare to those of domestic consumers shopping on the same sites.

OCTOBER 2021

CROSS-BORDER

MERCHANT OPTIMIZATION

INDEX

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index

INTRODUCTION

01

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New Zealand-based collagen retailer Rose & Co. announced in August that it would be expanding into China, where 38 percent of all beauty and personal care sales occur online.

The Khloé Kardashian-endorsed brand would be following in the footsteps of other niche beauty brands, including United States-based Supergoop and Drunk Elephant, which also recently have gained traction in the Chinese eCommerce market.

International expansions like these are growing more common — and more critical to success — as consumers search for new, exciting cross-border shopping experiences online. The $562-billion global cross-border eCommerce market is on track to reach $4.2 trillion by 2027, presenting a massive opportunity for retailers around the globe to reach new customers abroad.

The trouble is that many cross-border merchants do not have the online payments and checkout capabilities they need to capitalize on this opportunity. PYMNTS' latest research shows that cross-border eCommerce checkouts are an average of 11 percent more friction-laden than domestic checkouts, often because merchants do not offer features needed to streamline their shopping experience for international customers.

International merchants also often must grapple with higher taxes and duties — costs they pass on to their customers. Cross-border transactions also cost an average of 17 percent more than domestic transactions, with U.S. merchants charging cross-border customers 43 percent more than what they charge domestic customers for the same products. The high price tag of cross-border commerce can deter would-be buyers and cut into merchants' bottom lines.

These are just a few of the many key findings in The Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index, a PYMNTS and Digital River collaboration. We examined the websites of 137 retail merchants across six industries for a first-hand account of how quickly and easily international eCommerce shoppers can make cross-border purchases and how their purchasing experiences compare to those of domestic consumers shopping on the same sites. We then assigned each merchant a Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index Score on a scale of 0 to 100: The higher the score, the more likely cross-border shoppers are to complete their checkouts.

The eCommerce merchants in our study hail from six nations: China, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the U.S. Our comprehensive, cross-country analysis identifies which key features eCommerce merchants must provide to maximize their cross-border conversion.

This is what we learned.

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CROSS-BORDER eCOMMERCE TRANSACTIONS ARE 11 PERCENT MORE FRICTION-FILLED FOR CONSUMERS THAN DOMESTIC TRANSACTIONS.

eCommerce merchants are less likely to provide feedback options, rewards programs and other features that inspire trust in international shoppers. Nine percent fewer merchants provide guarantee or refund policies for cross-border shoppers than for domestic shoppers, for example. Also, 30 percent fewer merchants offer rewards for cross-border transactions than for domestic transactions.

There are signs that the gap between cross-border and domestic commerce is shrinking, however. eCommerce merchants have been adding new features to improve overall shopping experiences. Sixty-one percent more merchants now offer free shipping for cross-border purchases than they did in 2016, for example, and 18 percent more now allow their cross-border customers to leave product ratings and reviews. Their average index score, therefore, has increased 9 percent since 2016 when it clocked in at 49.4.

eCOMMERCE MERCHANTS CHARGE ON AVERAGE 17 PERCENT MORE FOR CROSS-BORDER PURCHASES THAN DOMESTIC ONES.

Cross-border eCommerce purchases can come with hefty price tags. Our research shows that the average cross-border purchase costs 17 percent more than the average domestic purchase due to extra shipping fees, taxes and duties. The average merchant charges double to ship products across borders.

Cross-border shipping fees, taxes and duties are especially high on Japanese eCommerce sites. Japanese merchants charge four times as much for shipping on cross-border purchases as they do on domestic purchases, and the taxes and duties on cross-border purchases from Japanese merchants are three times higher than they are for domestic purchases.

U.S. MERCHANTS OVERALL OFFER THE BEST CROSS-BORDER PURCHASING EXPERIENCE OF ANY NATION, BUT ALSO THE MOST EXPENSIVE, WITH U.S. MERCHANT SITES CHARGING AS MUCH AS 43 PERCENT MORE FOR CROSS-BORDER TRANSACTIONS.

The overall cross-border checkout experience is the smoothest for U.S. merchants. They offer more features that can help online shoppers navigate their sites more easily. Eighty-nine percent of U.S. merchants provide site help lookup options and 91 percent allow cross-border customers to leave product ratings and reviews for their purchases. Ninety-six percent also offer "shipping-address-same-as-billing" fields in their checkout pages, and 98 percent allow cross-border shoppers to checkout via a buy button. These two features can reduce the number of clicks required of consumers to complete transactions, making the checkout process faster. U.S. merchants earn a much higher average index score, as a result: 64 out of 100.

This frictionless cross-border shopping experience comes at a price. Cross-border purchases from U.S. merchants are more expensive than those in any other nation except Mexico. U.S. merchants' customers pay 43 percent more for cross-border purchases than for domestic transactions, on average.

U.S. MERCHANTS HAVE THE SMOOTHEST OVERALL PURCHASING EXPERIENCE IN PART BECAUSE THEY OFFER MORE LOCALIZED PAYMENT OPTIONS. THEY OFFER EIGHT PERCENT MORE PAYMENT METHODS AND SUPPORT 71 PERCENT MORE CURRENCIES THAN AVERAGE.

Providing international customers with the payment methods they are most familiar with is a key part of delivering the type of cross-border commerce experiences they expect. The 30 merchants with the highest index scores in our study offer more payment methods and support more currencies than average. This is partially why U.S. merchants earn a higher average index score than those in any other nation. U.S. merchants accept an average of 7.3 payment methods and support 19 currencies for cross-border transactions. This compares to 6.8 payment methods accepted and 11 currencies supported by the average merchant in our survey.

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND CROSS-BORDER PURCHASING EXPERIENCES OCCURS AMONG GERMAN MERCHANTS.

Making cross-border purchases from German eCommerce merchants often is a longer and more friction-laden experience than it is for German citizens making domestic transactions. German merchants are 75 percent less likely to offer IP recognition features for cross-border purchases than domestic purchases. This means their sites do not automatically display the native languages of their international shoppers, making the sites more difficult to navigate. They also are 65 percent less likely to offer country-specific address fields and 44 percent less likely to display items' inventory statuses than with domestic transactions. This is why German merchants have one of the most significant discrepancies between cross-border and domestic index scores: 50 versus 63.1.

Chinese merchants are the opposite. Their cross-border and domestic checkout feature offerings are almost identical, and so are their cross-border and domestic index scores. Chinese merchants earn an average cross-border index score of 63.3, compared to 63.1 for domestic transactions.

U.S. and Chinese merchants have the smoothest overall cross-border purchasing experience of those in any nation we studied.

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Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index

SHOPPING ACROSS BORDERS

02

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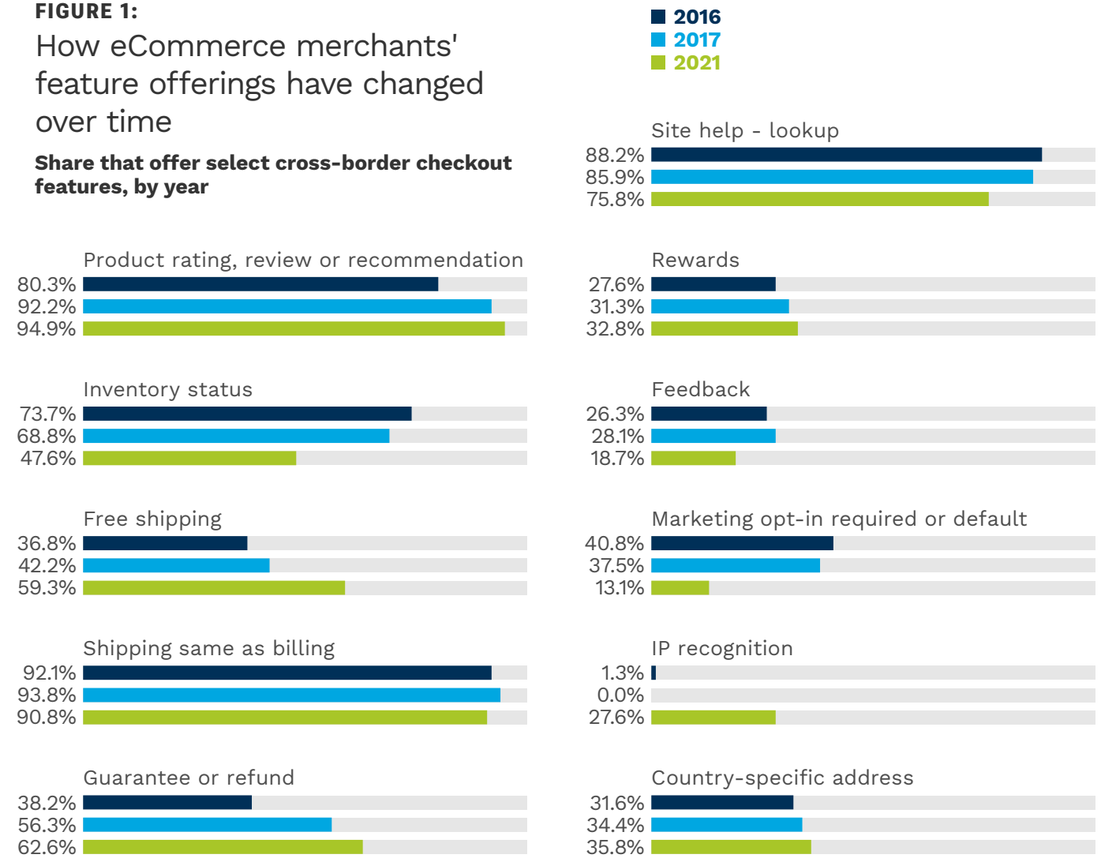
Cross-border eCommerce shopping is becoming easier. Ecommerce merchants have kept up efforts to improve their cross-border checkout experiences by adding more checkout features to their sites. Merchants are now 18 percent more likely to offer product rating and review options than in 2016, with 95 percent now allowing customers to rate and review their cross-border purchases. Merchants also are 64 percent more likely to have guarantee or refund policies than in 2016.

Sixty-three percent of merchants guarantee they will refund cross-border purchases if customers are not satisfied with them. These features can inspire trust in cross-border shoppers and make them more likely to complete their online purchases.

Merchants also have added more interface personalization features to their checkouts since 2016. These features include IP recognition technology and country-specific address

FIGURE 1:
How eCommerce merchants' feature offerings have changed over time

Share that offer select cross-border checkout features, by year



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fields. They then automatically adjust users' online checkout experiences to match their geographic location by translating site copy into users' native languages and displaying prices in local currencies. Twenty-one times as many merchants use IP recognition technology as they did in 2016, and 13 percent more provide country-specific address fields at checkout.

In addition to providing more interface personalization features, merchants also are doubling down on payments localization by supporting more of the payment methods and currencies popular in the nations where they do business. The average international eCommerce merchant now accepts 6.8 different payment methods and supports 11 different currencies, on average. In 2016, by contrast, they offered an average of 5.7 different payment methods and supported an average of 6.1 currencies. This shows that merchants understand that it is essential to provide international customers with their most familiar payments experiences.

eCommerce merchants' continued efforts to improve their cross-border checkout experiences are paying off. eCommerce merchants earned an average cross-border index score of 53.8 in 2021 — up 9 percent from 49.4 in 2016.

FIGURE 2:
How eCommerce merchants' cross-border index scores have changed since 2016

2a: Average number of payment methods accepted for cross-border transactions, by year



2b: Average number of currencies supported for cross-border transactions, by year



2c: Average cross-border index score for all studied merchants, by year



Source: PYMNTS.com | Digital River
Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index

Adding checkout and payment features such as these has helped eCommerce merchants improve their overall cross-border checkout experiences, but typically they still offer far fewer features for cross-border transactions than for domestic transactions. In fact, the most important features for providing the personalized purchasing experiences that cross-border customers expect — IP recognition technology and country-specific address fields — often are the features that international merchants lack. Thirty-six percent fewer merchants use IP recognition technology to streamline cross-border purchases than domestic purchases, and 50 percent fewer provide country-specific address fields for cross-border than domestic checkouts.



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Merchants are falling short on providing the interface personalization features that cross-border shoppers want most.

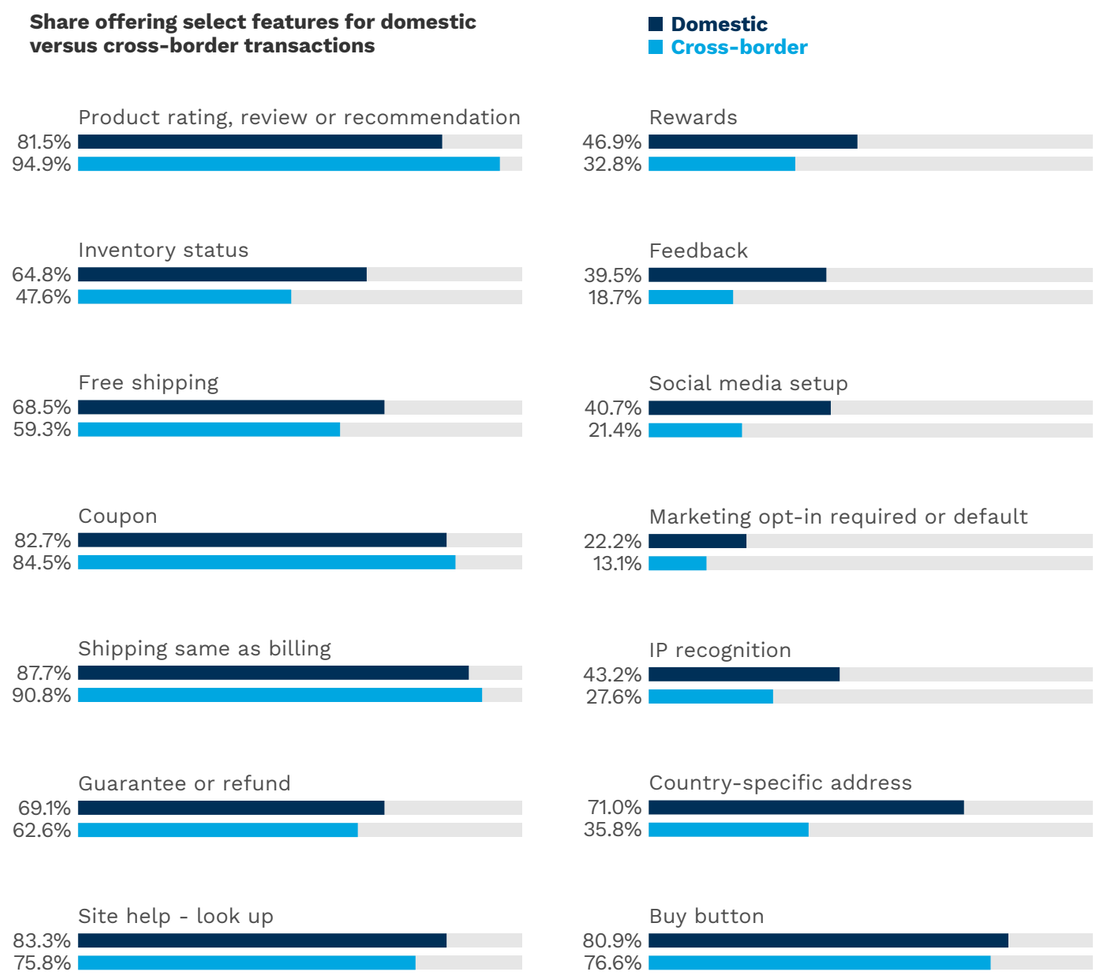
Merchants still are far less likely to offer trust-boosting features for cross-border transactions, despite many having added them during the last five years. Thirty percent fewer merchants allow cross-border customers to earn rewards, and 53 percent fewer allow cross-border customers to provide feedback compared to domestic customers.

The only three features merchants are more likely to provide for cross-border purchases over domestic purchases are product ratings and recommendations, coupons and shipping-address-same-as-billing address fields at checkout.

The result of this so-called "feature offering" gap is that the average eCommerce merchant's cross-border index score is far lower than its domestic index score: 53.8 versus 60, respectively. In other words, the average merchants' cross-border checkout experience is roughly 11 percent more friction-laden than its domestic checkout experience.

FIGURE 4:
How eCommerce merchants' cross-border checkouts compare to their domestic checkouts

Share offering select features for domestic versus cross-border transactions



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MORE THAN QUALITY:

THE COST OF TRANSACTING ACROSS BORDERS

03

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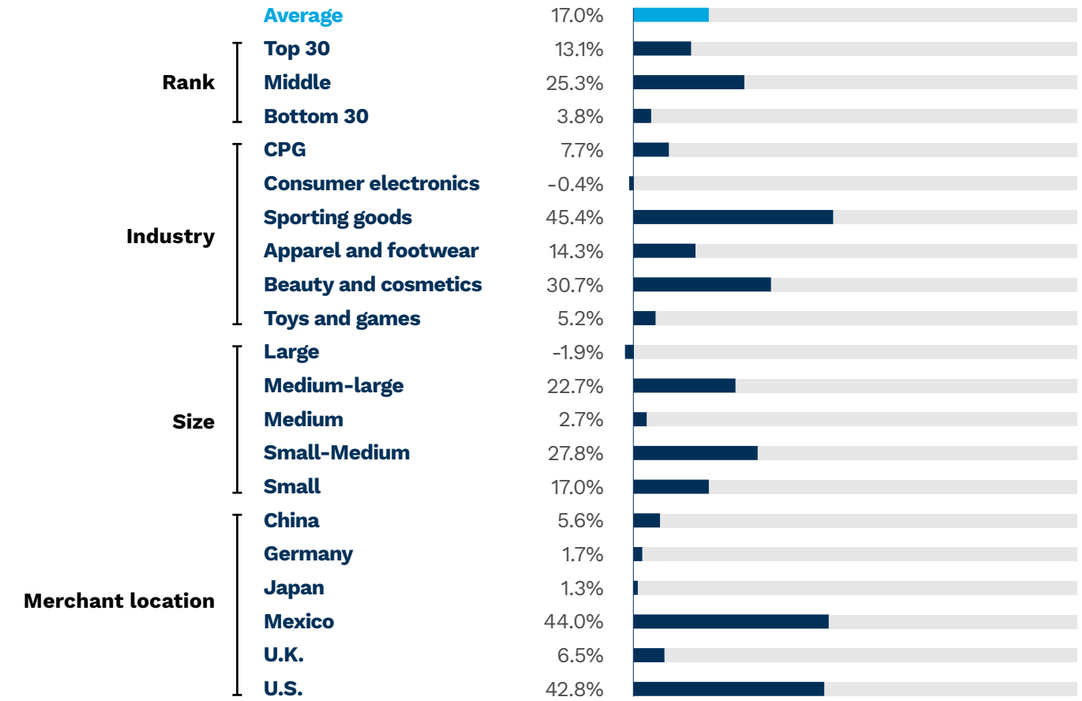
Cross-border eCommerce purchases cost more than domestic purchases. Merchants charge an average of 17 percent more for cross-border transactions than domestic transactions, though this varies depending on the size, industry and geographic location of the merchant.

Cross-border purchases made on U.S. eCommerce sites are among the highest compared to domestic purchases made on the same site, for example. U.S.-based merchants charge 43 percent more for cross-border transactions than domestic transactions. This is a far cry from merchants based in Germany and Japan, which charge 1.7 percent and 1.3 percent more for cross-border transactions than domestic transactions.

FIGURE 5:

How the cost of cross-border transactions compares to the cost of domestic transactions

Average proportional cost difference between cross-border and domestic purchases made on the same sites



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Middle performers — i.e., the 60 merchants in our study whose index scores are closest to the sample average — also charge far more for cross-border versus domestic purchases. Cross-border transactions made on middle-performing sites cost an average of 25 percent more than domestic transactions. The 30 merchants with the highest index scores charge 13 percent more for cross-border transactions than domestic transactions, while the 30 merchants with the lowest index scores charge just 3.8 percent more.

This difference in pricing often is the result of cross-border shipping, taxes and duty costs. Middle performers charge more for shipping fees, taxes and duties than the rest, for example. Shipping fees for cross-border purchases made on middle-performing sites are more than twice as high as those for domestic purchases made on the same sites.

Shipping costs, taxes and duties cannot always explain the price differences between cross-border and domestic purchases, however. Certain products simply cost more than others. This helps explain why Japanese merchants charge virtually the same price for cross-border and domestic transactions, despite charging far more for shipping, taxes and duties on cross-border purchases.

Japanese eCommerce sites charge more for shipping fees, taxes and duties on cross-border purchases compared to domestic purchases than merchants in any other nation. Shipping fees for cross-border purchases from Japanese merchants are nearly four times higher than the fees for domestic purchases on the same sites, and the taxes and duties on cross-border purchases from Japanese merchants are three times higher than with domestic purchases on the same sites.

Even so, it still costs 1.3 percent more to buy cross-border than to buy domestic from Japanese merchants, in part because the products themselves are more affordable. The same products cost 6 percent less when buying cross-border than buying domestic on Japanese eCommerce sites.

The situation is more complicated for U.S. merchants, which sell more expensive products, charge more for shipping and charge less for taxes and duties on cross-border purchases than domestic purchases.

The products cross-border shoppers buy from U.S. merchants are an average of 10 percent more expensive than the same products purchased by domestic shoppers. The average U.S. merchant also charges considerably more for cross-border shipping than merchants in other nations. Shipping costs on cross-border purchases made from U.S. merchants are 128 percent higher than shipping costs on domestic purchases.

These two factors help drive the high cost of cross-border transactions on U.S. sites, which again charge 43 percent more for cross-border purchases than for domestic purchases. Cross-border purchases from U.S.-based merchants would be even more expensive if the taxes and duties on cross-border transactions were not 50 percent lower with domestic transactions.

FIGURE 6:
What eCommerce merchants charge for shipping, taxes and duties on cross-border versus domestic purchases

		6a: Average percentage price difference between products listed for cross-border and domestic purchases on the same sites	**6b:** Average percentage difference in shipping charges between cross-border and domestic purchases on the same sites	**6c:** Average percentage difference in taxes and duties between cross-border and domestic purchases on the same sites
		5a	**5b**	**5c**
	Average	**2.3%**	**118.4%**	**-32.8%**
Rank	**Top 30**	-1.1%	72.7%	-28.7%
	Middle	4.3%	150.6%	-17.1%
	Bottom 30	1.6%	104.8%	-78.2%
Industry	**CPG**	-1.2%	87.4%	139.5%
	Consumer electronics	-5.2%	0.3%	-20.7%
	Sporting goods	17.0%	170.8%	-78.9%
	Apparel and footwear	-4.7%	125.9%	-78.9%
	Beauty and cosmetics	7.8%	165.3%	-9.7%
	Toys and games	2.4%	105.3%	-95.9%
Size	**Large**	2.2%	-78.5%	-99.7%
	Medium-large	9.7%	-34.4%	1.8%
	Medium	-6.8%	226.1%	-58.3%
	Small-Medium	10.6%	215.8%	-97.0%
	Small	0.7%	78.1%	11.2%
Merchant location	**China**	-11.5%	204.7%	0.0%
	Germany	5.9%	66.0%	-65.5%
	Japan	-6.0%	395.3%	299.0%
	Mexico	3.5%	87.6%	-100.0%
	U.K.	5.7%	-4.2%	-66.5%
	U.S.	9.9%	128.3%	-49.6%

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Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index

THE LOCALIZATION FACTOR

04

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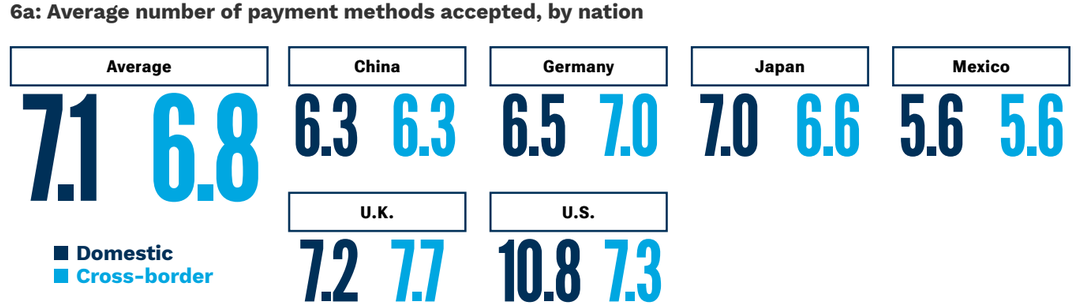
Merchants' payments offerings also play a significant role in enhancing shoppers' overall purchasing experiences. International shoppers may prefer paying using the methods with which they are most familiar, while consumers in different national markets each have unique preferences when making payments. It follows that the merchants with the highest index scores tend to offer the greatest variety in terms of payment methods accepted and currencies supported.

This is part of the reason why U.S. merchants earn higher index scores than those in other nations. International eCommerce merchants located in the U.S. accept an average of 7.3 payment methods for international purchases, while the average merchant accepts just 6.8 methods. U.S. merchants also support nearly twice as many currencies as the average. Cross-border shoppers on U.S. sites can expect to see items' prices displayed in an average of 19 currencies, compared to a sample average of just 11 currencies.

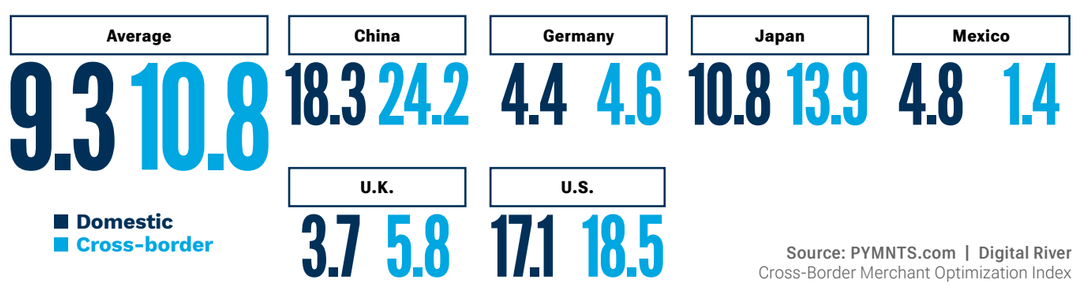
FIGURE 7:

How many payment methods and currencies merchants in different nations support

6a: Average number of payment methods accepted, by nation



6b: Average number of currencies supported, by nation



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Chinese merchants follow closely behind U.S. merchants, earning an average index score of 63.3. They, too, support far more currencies than merchants in other nations. The average international Chinese eCommerce merchant provides prices in 24 different currencies, in fact. This underscores the importance of localizing payments and prices to offer international customers a familiar purchasing and payments experience.

U.S. and Chinese merchants are not the only ones that offer more payment methods and currency offerings than average. Top performers consistently offer more such options, regardless of their geographic location. Top-performing merchants accept an average of 9.4 payment methods, while bottom performers accept just 5.8 methods.

Top performers also stand out in supporting an average of 25 different currencies for cross-border transactions. Bottom performers support just 4.4 currencies for cross-border transactions, by contrast.



FIGURE 8:
How many payment methods merchants with different index scores support

8a. Average number of payment methods accepted for domestic transactions, by performance



8b. Average number of payment methods accepted for cross-border transactions, by performance



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FIGURE 9:
How many currencies merchants with different index scores support

8a: Average number of currencies supported for domestic transactions, by performance



8b: Average number of currencies supported for cross-border transactions, by performance



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SCORES ACROSS BORDERS

05

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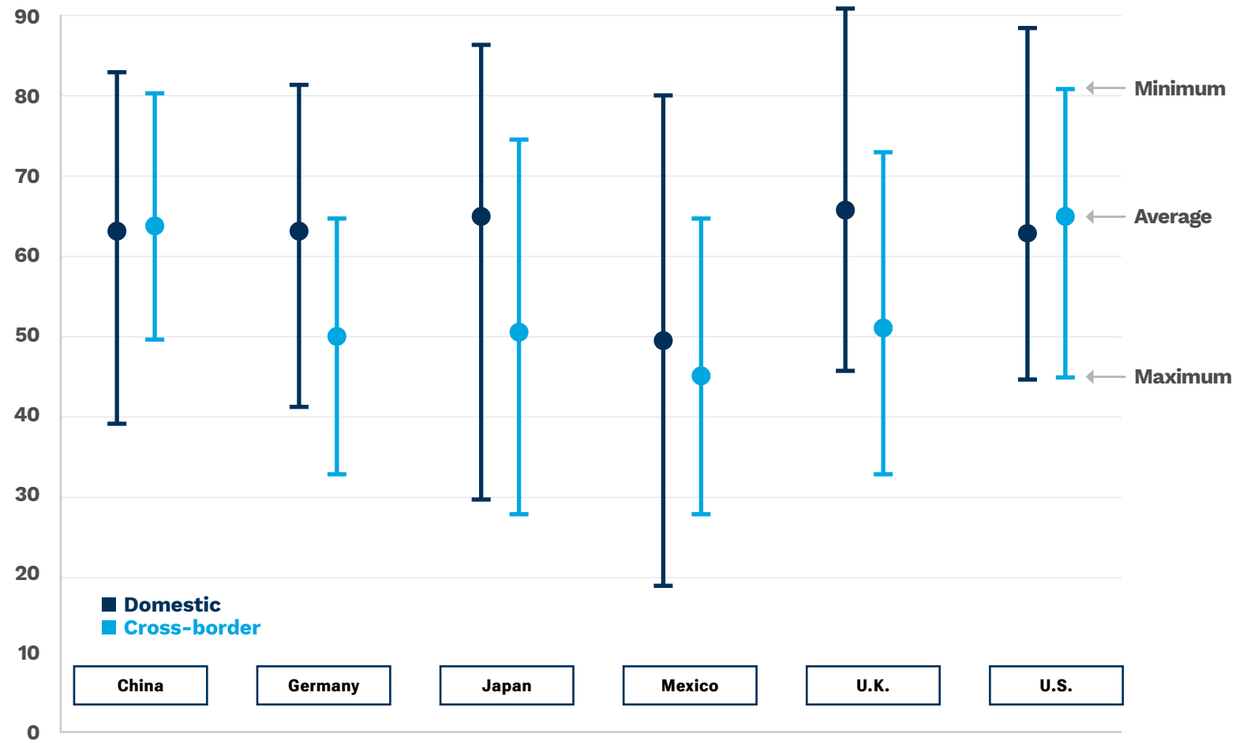
International and domestic eCommerce shoppers often have far different shopping experiences — even on the same sites. Few merchants charge the same prices and offer the same checkout features for cross-border and domestic transactions, meaning that the overall quality of cross-border and domestic checkout experiences can vary drastically.

The contrast between cross-border and domestic purchasing experiences is most significant among merchants located in Germany. German eCommerce merchants score an average of 63.1 on the domestic index but score just 50 on the cross-border index.

Chinese merchants are the opposite: Their scores are virtually the same for domestic and cross-border transactions. The average Chinese merchant scores 63.3 for cross-border transactions and 63.1 for domestic transactions.

German merchants are considerably less likely to offer interface personalization features such as IP recognition, country-specific addresses and inventory statuses for cross-border transactions than for domestic transactions. Seventy-five percent fewer German merchants use IP recognition technology to streamline cross-border

FIGURE 10:
How cross-border and domestic index scores vary among merchants in the same nations



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transactions than domestic transactions, and 65 percent fewer provide country-specific addresses at checkout.

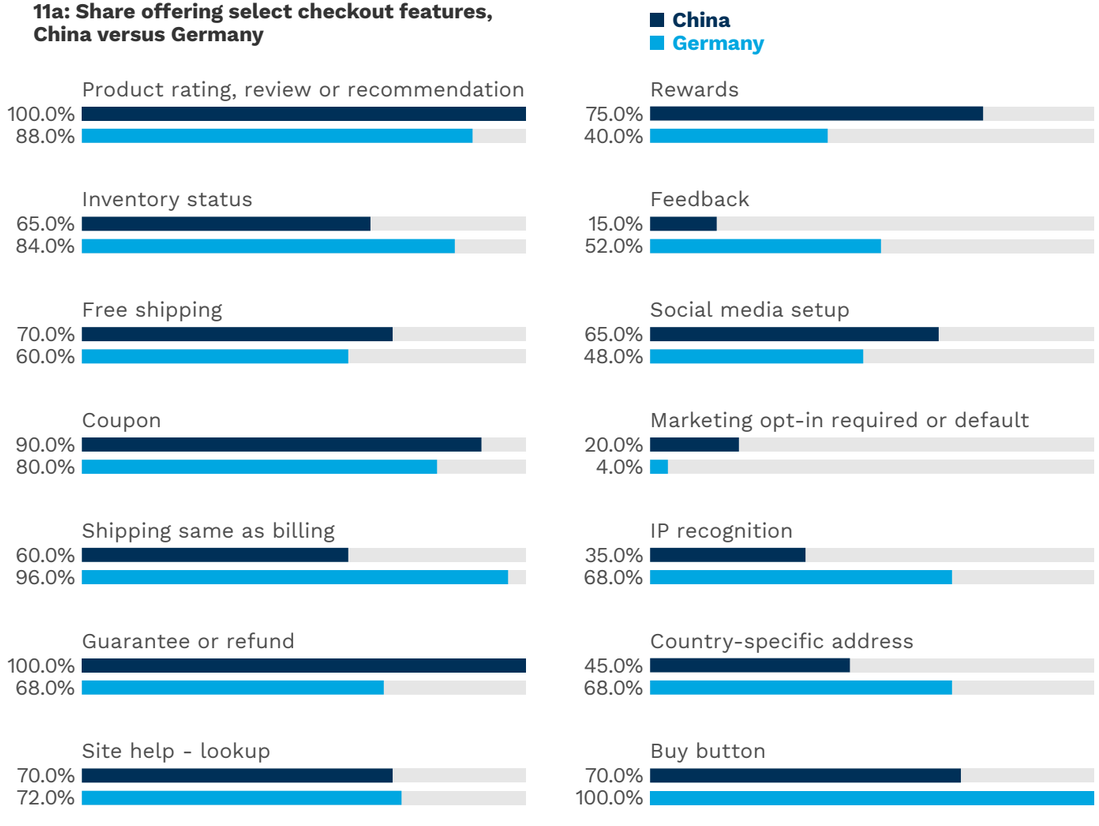
Trust-building features such as inventory status updates and the ability to provide feedback on purchases also are offered far less often for cross-border checkouts than for domestic checkouts on German eCommerce sites.

Chinese merchants offer virtually the same set of features for cross-border and domestic transactions, with IP recognition technology and shipping-same-as-billing fields at checkout being notable exceptions. Ninety-two percent more Chinese merchants use IP recognition technology to streamline cross-border checkouts than domestic checkouts, and 57 percent more use shipping-same-as-billing fields to shorten their cross-border checkouts than with completing domestic purchases.

FIGURE 11:

Checkout features offered by Chinese and German eCommerce merchants

11a: Share offering select checkout features, China versus Germany



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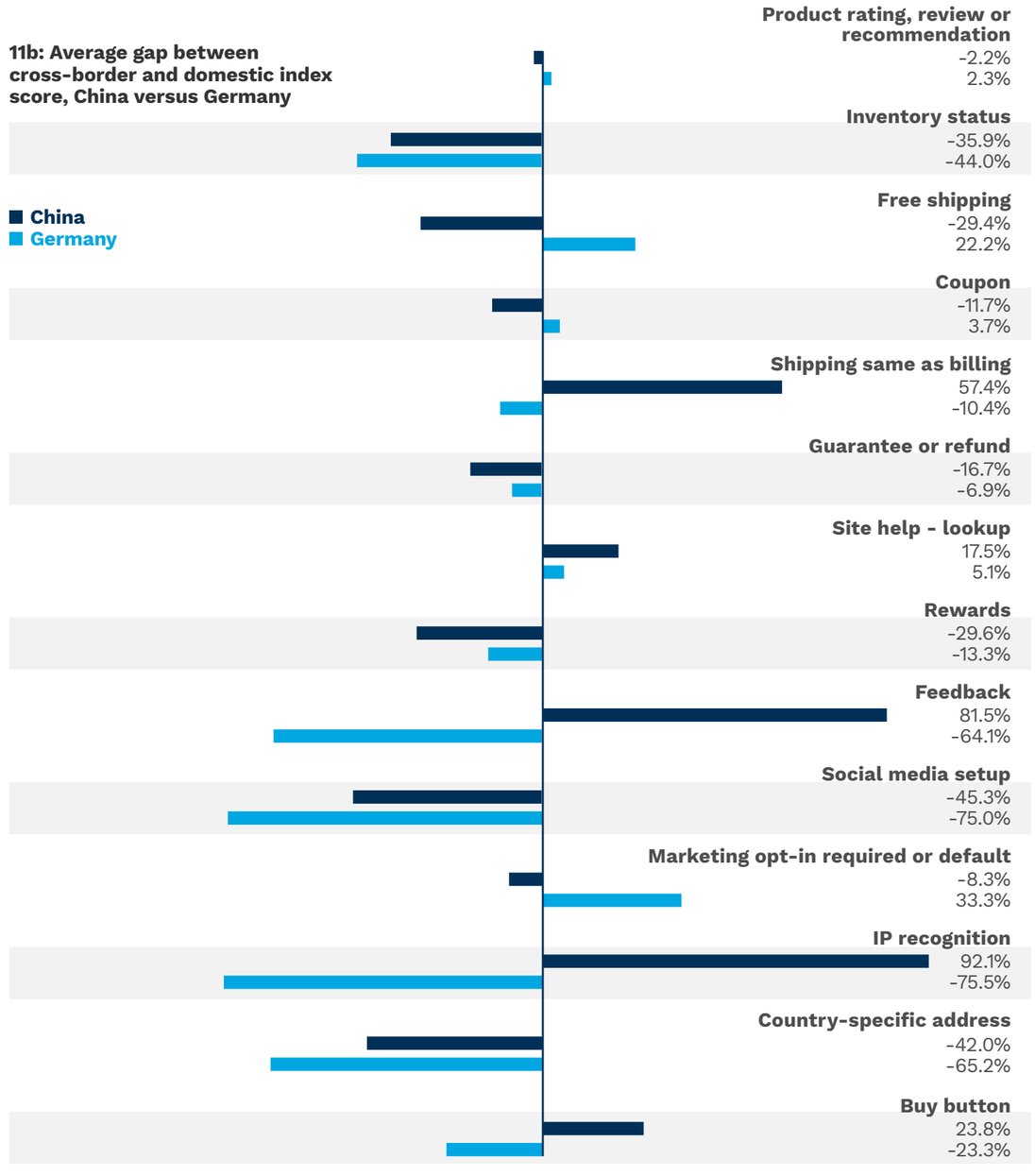
11b: Average gap between cross-border and domestic index score, China versus Germany



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CONCLUSION/ METHODOLOGY

06

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The cross-border eCommerce ecosystem is flourishing, presenting an unprecedented opportunity for businesses worldwide to reach new customers and expand their global reach. To fully seize this opportunity, merchants must provide these international customers with personalized, streamlined features to help them more easily navigate merchant sites and complete their purchases. In practice, this means doing more than providing the trust-boosting and cost-saving features, such as reviews and recommendations and free shipping options, that consumers often expect in a domestic setting. It also means using interface-personalization tools including IP recognition technology and country-specific address fields to help local shoppers in markets around the globe feel at home in their online shopping experience.

METHODOLOGY

The Cross-Border Merchant Optimization Index draws from an in-depth examination of the cross-border and domestic checkout features offered by 137 eCommerce retail merchants from six countries: China, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the U.K. and the U.S. Merchants also hailed from six verticals: apparel and footwear, beauty and cosmetics, sporting goods and fitness equipment, consumer packaged goods, toys and games and consumer electronics.

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CROSS-BORDER

MERCHANT OPTIMIZATION

INDEX

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