

Summer 6-15-2016

UNVEILING THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL COMMERCE FEATURES – AN INTEGRATED RESEARCH MODEL

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Recommended Citation

Friedrich, Thomas; Overhage, Sven; and Schlauderer, Sebastian, "UNVEILING THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL COMMERCE FEATURES – AN INTEGRATED RESEARCH MODEL" (2016). *Research-in-Progress Papers*. 65.
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UNVEILING THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL COMMERCE FEATURES – AN INTEGRATED RESEARCH MODEL

Research in Progress

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Abstract

Social commerce, the application of social media to support e-commerce transactions, is becoming a lucrative means for e-commerce companies to increase their sales volumes. To achieve this goal, companies today can extend their e-commerce websites with a wide range of diverse social commerce features. Hence, knowledge is required how the integration of certain social commerce features stimulates consumers to adopt social commerce websites and which features might deliver the highest benefits in a particular scenario. However, current literature provides little insight about how concrete social commerce features influence the consumers' willingness to adopt social commerce websites. To contribute to the closure of this research gap, we propose a research model that allows evaluating the impacts of social commerce features on the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites in a systematic, comparable manner. Therefore, the research model integrates several adoption factors, taking into account utilitarian, hedonic, relational, and social determinants. We also describe how the hypotheses contained in our research model can be evaluated in an experimental setting. In so doing, we expect our research to contribute to achieving a better understanding of how certain social commerce features can improve the design of social commerce websites.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Social Media, Website Features, Consumer Adoption Behavior.

1 Introduction

Social commerce initiatives are becoming an increasingly lucrative means for e-commerce companies to increase their sales volumes by delivering customers a more interactive shopping experience (Zhou et al., 2013). Through the integration of social media into e-commerce platforms, social commerce enables consumers to actively participate, interact, and communicate during the online buying process (Wang and Zhang, 2012). Actively involving consumers into the buying process can deliver various benefits (Turban et al., 2010). To increase the confidence in the offered products and/or their sellers, consumers can, for instance, be stimulated to exchange product-related information or to get advice from trusted peers (Curty and Zhang, 2011). Depending on the aspired benefits, there exists a wide range of social commerce features – i.e. social media applications – that can be integrated into an e-commerce website, among them rating and review tools, share and like buttons, social wish lists, social login buttons, activity feeds, and many others (Curty and Zhang, 2013, Huang et al., 2012). Scientific findings indicate that the features of a website in general can have a significant effect on the consumers' perception of factors such as usefulness, enjoyment, social presence, or trust (Hassanein and Head, 2007,

Karimov et al., 2011, Parboteeah et al., 2009). It is hence important to understand how the integration of social commerce features into an e-commerce website influences the consumers' adoption behavior and which features deliver the highest benefits in a particular scenario (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013a).

Despite existing calls to explore the impacts of social commerce features more systematically (Huang et al., 2012, Turban et al., 2010), scientific findings are still sporadic and often inconclusive. Research on social commerce rather appears to be focused on the theoretical foundations and its historical evolution (Wang and Zhang, 2012, Zhou et al., 2013). In addition, several studies have investigated which factors might affect the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites (Chen et al., 2014, Hsiao et al., 2010, Kwahk and Ge, 2012, Liang et al., 2011, Shen, 2012). While various factors, such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, perceived enjoyment, trust, commitment, satisfaction, social presence, social support, or social influence, were identified to be potentially relevant, the relationship between the social commerce features integrated into a website and the perception of these factors has not been investigated systematically yet. Hence, it remains unclear to what extent the presence of social commerce features might affect the consumers' perception of such factors. To address this research gap, we develop a research model that allows evaluating how specific social commerce features influence the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites. In particular, we study the following research questions: *How do social commerce features affect the perception of factors that influence the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites? How can the impacts of social commerce features systematically be evaluated?* To achieve this goal, the developed research model takes into account and integrates several adoption factors that we systematically derived from literature. The research model serves as a conceptual framework to study the impacts of certain social commerce features on the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites in a systematic, i.e. differentiated and comparable manner.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: in section 2, we define basic terms and discuss related approaches. In section 3, we develop our research model and hypotheses. In section 4, we propose an approach to evaluate the impacts of social commerce features based on the presented research model. In section 5, we discuss the limitations and expected implications of our work.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Social Commerce and Social Commerce Features

With its characteristic combination of economic, social, and technological aspects, social commerce has drawn attention from different research disciplines such as information systems, marketing, or sociology (Zhou et al., 2013). As a consequence, current literature provides a variety of social commerce definitions (a collection of definitions can be found in Wang and Zhang, 2012). In this study, we follow the definition of Liang and Turban (2011) who define social commerce as a "subset of e-commerce that involves using social media to assist in e-commerce transactions and activities".

Commonly, technical website features are considered as a key enabler and driver of social commerce (Curty and Zhang, 2011, Curty and Zhang, 2013, Huang and Benyoucef, 2013b, Huang et al., 2012). In line with the literature, we refer to these features using the term *social commerce features*. A social commerce feature is a software artifact that is integrated into a website and provides a specific social media functionality to promote interactions and exchanges among consumers (Curty and Zhang, 2013). On the basis of an extensive analysis of social commerce websites, Curty and Zhang (2013) differentiate between four types of social commerce features: (1) Features that attract other consumers and promote branding (e.g., activity feeds, ask friends buttons, share and like buttons); (2) features that allow consumers to create an identity and establish communities (e.g., blog pages, discussion forums, social login buttons, social user profiles); (3) features that promote the creation of user-generated content (e.g., rating and review tools, social product recommendation tools, social wish lists); (4) features, that promote collective actions and group participation (e.g., co-browsing/co-shopping tools, live chats, group buying tools). With our research, we aim to explore the potential impacts of these different features on the adoption of social commerce websites.

2.2 Consumers' Adoption of Social Commerce Websites

In the e-commerce and social commerce literature, the consumers' adoption behavior is a common measure for the effectiveness of commercial websites (Gefen and Straub, 2000, Liang and Turban, 2011, Pavlou and Fygenon, 2006). To examine the consumers' adoption behavior, theories such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), or the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) are often used as lenses for analysis. In the social commerce literature, much effort is spent to adapt these theories to take into consideration the specific characteristics of social commerce. In so doing, a wide range of different factors has been identified that influence the consumers' willingness to adopt social commerce websites. On the basis of a structured literature review (Friedrich, 2015), we compiled a list of factors which have been frequently (at least three times) examined and which have been confirmed to have a significant influence on the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites. These factors are *perceived usefulness*, *perceived ease of use*, *perceived enjoyment*, *trust*, *commitment*, *satisfaction*, *social presence*, *social support*, and *social influence*. For each factor, there moreover exist indications that it can be impacted by the use of social commerce features. For instance, we found evidence that rating and review tools can have a positive influence on the perceived usefulness and the social presence of a commercial website (Kumar and Benbasat, 2006). We also found indications that like buttons and blog pages can increase the consumers' trust in a commercial website (Brenngman and Karimov, 2012). Yet, it remains unclear how these features might influence other factors such as enjoyment, commitment, social support, or social influence. Results from a few studies indicate that, in general, social commerce features can also positively influence such factors (Hajli, 2012, Hajli et al., 2014, Ickler et al., 2009, Kim and Srivastava, 2007, Rad and Benyoucef, 2010, Wang and Hajli, 2014, Zhang et al., 2014). However, since these studies either do not provide empirical evidence or combine several features into one abstract construct, it is unclear which features have an influence on certain factors. As a result, it is neither possible to compare the specific effects of social commerce features nor to give advice, which features should be integrated into a website to increase the perception of a certain factor.

2.3 Stimulus-Organism-Response Paradigm

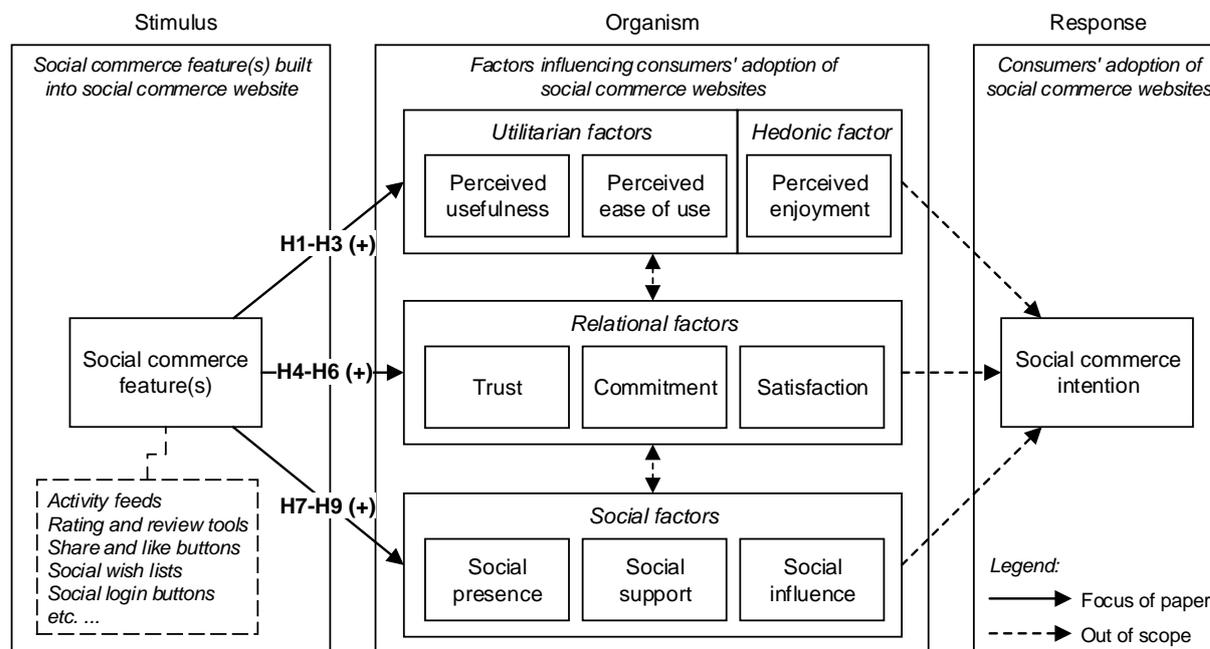
To conceptualize the impacts of social commerce features, we use the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm. Originating from environmental psychology, the S-O-R paradigm suggests that certain signals in the environment, so-called stimuli, affect the internal (affective and cognitive) states of an individual, which in turn influence the individual's responses (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In the e-commerce domain, several studies have adopted the S-O-R paradigm to examine how features of commercial websites (e.g. product descriptions, pictures, navigation aids) influence the consumers' adoption behavior (Chang and Chen, 2008, Eroglu et al., 2001, Eroglu et al., 2003, Floh and Madlberger, 2013, Parboteeah et al., 2009). In these studies, various factors have been suggested to measure the affective and cognitive states, such as perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, trust, or risk. In the social commerce domain, Brenngman and Karimov (2012) have used the S-O-R paradigm to examine how like buttons and blog pages can increase the consumers' trust in a commercial website, which increases the consumers' buying intention. Zhang et al. (2014) have used the S-O-R paradigm to examine how feature characteristics (e.g. perceived interactivity, perceived personalization, perceived sociability) influence the consumers' social commerce intention through the factors social support, social presence, and flow. As the findings of the above-mentioned studies demonstrate, the S-O-R paradigm is a well-suited framework for explaining how certain stimuli – in our context the social commerce features of a website – affect the factors that influence the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites. By establishing a causal relationship between signals, states, and responses, the S-O-R paradigm provides a structured manner to examine the effects of social commerce features in a systematic way. In comparison, the TAM, which focuses on the adoption of a specific technology, does not cover factors to measure the effects of external stimuli. However, both theories should not be regarded as conflicting alternatives. Rather, the S-O-R paradigm can be considered as an overarching theory in which certain aspects (i.e. the organism and/or the response) can be represented by elements of other established theories, such as

the TAM (Parboteeah et al., 2009, Zhang et al., 2014). Against this background, we use the S-O-R paradigm to establish a theoretically grounded link between the social commerce features of a website and the factors that influence the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites.

3 Research Model Development

Based on the S-O-R paradigm, we propose a research model that integrates several potential adoption factors into a coherent framework. It allows examining the effects of social commerce features on the adoption of social commerce websites. In our research model, the stimulus is represented by one or more social commerce features of a website. It is hence possible to study the stimulus of individual social commerce features as well as social commerce feature combinations. The latter might be relevant to test indications that social commerce features might be more effective if they are used in combination (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013a). The affective and cognitive states are represented by a set of factors that we identified during a survey of the social commerce literature (cf. section 2). We use these factors for the following reasons: first, they are justified by well-established theories, which have been identified as relevant in the context of social commerce. Second, all factors have been frequently (i.e. at least three or more times) confirmed to influence the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites. Third, literature provides indications that social commerce features can have an impact on these factors.

As shown in Figure 1, our research model integrates several perspectives on social commerce. To visualize these perspectives, we thematically grouped the factors as utilitarian, hedonic, relational, and social factors. We derived the categories from literature, which argues that most factors concerning an individual's adoption of IT artifacts (in our case, a social commerce website) can be grouped along these categories (Al-Natour and Benbasat, 2009, Al-Natour et al., 2011). However, other categories (e.g., affective and cognitive factors) could be used as well. To represent the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites, we use the construct *social commerce intention* as outcome variable, i.e. the individual's response (Liang et al., 2011). Besides, we integrated several variables to control individual characteristics of the consumers such as age, gender, nationality, education, social media experience, online shopping frequency, or shopper type.



Control variables: age, gender, nationality, education, social media experience, online shopping frequency, shopper type

Figure 1. Research model to investigate the impacts of social commerce features

In the following, we explain the different perspectives of our research model in detail and develop abstract hypotheses to support the evaluation of social commerce features in a comparable manner. As our research model provides a generally applicable conceptual framework that is not tailored to specific social commerce features, the provided hypotheses will have to be concretized for each feature that is under evaluation. Note that our framework moreover focuses on the potential impacts of social commerce features on the depicted utilitarian, hedonic, relational, and social factors. Information on the relationships between the factors (and the outcome variable) can be found in literature (Friedrich, 2015).

3.1 Impacts on Utilitarian and Hedonic Factors

Social commerce combines utilitarian with hedonic aspects (Wang and Zhang, 2012). From the utilitarian perspective, social commerce is supposed to be goal-oriented, rational, effective, and efficient. From the hedonic perspective, social commerce is considered to imply fun, play, enjoyment, and experience. We consider the utilitarian perspective by means of the factors *perceived usefulness* and *perceived ease of use*, which stem from the TAM (Davis, 1989). Several studies indicate that both factors also have a positive influence on the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites (Hajli, 2012, Li et al., 2014, Noh et al., 2013, Shen, 2012). While the effect of individual social commerce features has not been treated in these studies, additional research suggests that social commerce features can indeed determine the usefulness and ease of use of a social commercial website. Rating and review tools, for instance, allow consumers to evaluate products more effectively (Kumar and Benbasat, 2006). In a similar way, social product recommendation tools can guide consumers to products that best suit their needs (Kumar and Benbasat, 2006). Social login buttons, which enable consumers to log in with their social network account, can ease the registration process (Gafni and Nissim, 2014). Generally, we hence propose:

H1: Social commerce features increase the perceived usefulness of a social commerce website.

H2: Social commerce features increase the perceived ease of use of a social commerce website.

The hedonic perspective is represented by means of the factor *perceived enjoyment*. Generally, enjoyment is an intrinsic motivator that stimulates people to do something (Deci and Ryan, 1985, Ryan and Deci, 2000). In the literature on technology adoption, perceived enjoyment is described as the extent to which the activity of using a system is perceived to be enjoyable (Davis et al., 1992). Perceived enjoyment also has been identified as an important factor to influence the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites (Sharma and Crossler, 2014, Shen, 2012, Shin, 2013). While research on the effects of certain social commerce features on perceived enjoyment is missing, Grange and Benbasat (2010) show that social commerce features can have utilitarian as well as hedonic characteristics. Examples for hedonic characteristics are finding ideas for shopping, exploring favorite products of friends, communicating with others, or finding out bargains. Since social commerce features like rating and review tools, share and like buttons, or social wish lists are designed to support such characteristics, we hypothesize:

H3: Social commerce features increase the perceived enjoyment of a social commerce website.

3.2 Impacts on Relational Factors

To generate a business value from the consumers' social interactions, social commerce depends on the development and maintenance of social relationships (Liang et al., 2011). We investigate this relational perspective of social commerce by using the factors *trust*, *commitment*, and *satisfaction* in our model which are considered as important variables in relationship marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). According to the findings of our literature review, trust can have a significant positive influence on the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites (Chen et al., 2014, Chow and Shi, 2014, Hajli, 2012, Hajli, 2014, Teh and Ahmed, 2012). However, providing a clear definition of trust is difficult as different conceptualizations exist (Gefen et al., 2003, Pavlou, 2003). A general interpretation of trust refers to Mayer et al. (1995), who define trust as willingness to be vulnerable to others based on beliefs in ability, benevolence, and integrity. While trust according to this definition exists between two parties, research has confirmed that consumers can also establish trust in a commercial website (Hsiao et al., 2010,

McKnight et al., 2002, van der Heijden et al., 2003, Wakefield et al., 2004). We use the latter interpretation of trust as we focus on the adoption of websites. So far, few studies have explored the influence of social commerce features on trust. Brengman and Karimov (2012) found that like buttons and blog pages can increase the consumers' trust in a commercial website. Hajli et al. (2014) demonstrate that social word-of-mouth, which can be generated by features such as social product recommendation tools, discussion forums, or rating and review tools, can increase trust, too. In general, we hence propose:

H4: Social commerce features increase the consumers' trust in a social commerce website.

Like trust, commitment is considered as a crucial factor that drives the persistence of social relationships (Li et al., 2006). Rooted in relationship marketing, commitment reflects "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (Morgan and Shelby, 1994). Prior research on social commerce also has emphasized the role of commitment for the consumers' adoption of social commerce websites (Chen et al., 2014, Liang et al., 2011, Wang and Hajli, 2014). According to Kim et al. (2008), companies who are using online communities for value creation can increase the commitment of the community by providing means to communicate and collaborate. Since social commerce features such as discussion forums, or social product recommendation tools support similar goals, we basically assume:

H5: Social commerce features increase the consumers' commitment to a social commerce website.

The third factor that we use to determine the strength of a relationship is satisfaction. In the marketing literature, satisfaction has been described as a customer's overall emotional evaluation of the experiences with a certain product/service provider (Gustafsson et al., 2005). Several studies have confirmed that satisfaction also has a strong positive influence on consumers' adoption of social commerce websites (Jang et al., 2013, Yen, 2013). While empirical investigations of the impacts of concrete social commerce features on satisfaction are missing, researchers argue that improvements in the quality of a commercial website will increase consumers' satisfaction (DeLone and McLean, 2003, DeLone and McLean, 2004, Liang et al., 2011). Since social commerce features are designed to deliver a higher quality by means of a more interactive shopping experience (Curty and Zhang, 2013), we suppose:

H6: Social commerce features increase the consumers' satisfaction with a social commerce website.

3.3 Impacts on Social Factors

To establish social connections, social commerce is touching on various social aspects (Zhou et al., 2013) that we decided to represent by the factors *social presence*, *social support*, and *social influence*. Derived from social psychology (Short et al., 1976), the concept of social presence has been used in the e-commerce literature to explore the human warmth and sociability of a commercial website. In general, social presence can be defined as the degree to which a medium permits users to experience others as psychologically present (Fulk et al., 1987). Research on social commerce has demonstrated that higher levels of social presence have a positive influence on the consumers' social commerce intention (Lu and Fan, 2014, Shen, 2012). Moreover, initial evidence is available that social commerce features such as rating and review tools, which help establishing social connections between consumers, can indeed influence social presence (Kumar and Benbasat, 2006). We take over this argumentation and propose:

H7: Social commerce features increase the social presence of a social commerce website.

Another value that consumers can gain from social commerce is social support (Liang et al., 2011). Social support is considered as an individual's perceptions of being cared for, being responded to, and being helped by people in the individual's network (Cobb, 1976, Lakey and Cohen, 2000). Researchers have found that social support can have a significant positive influence on consumers' social commerce intention (Li et al., 2014, Liang et al., 2011, Shin, 2013). Moreover, Wang and Hajli (2014) as well as Hajli and Sims (2015) provide initial evidence that social commerce features such as rating and review tools, discussion forums, and social product recommendation tools, can positively influence the social support provided by a social commerce website. Building on these indications, we hypothesize:

H8: Social commerce features increase the social support provided through a social commerce website.

“One of the most pervasive determinants of an individual’s behavior is the influence of those around him” (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). Accordingly, we included social influence as a factor in our research model. In the literature, social influence has been found to have a positive influence on consumers’ social commerce intention (Kwahk and Ge, 2012, Sharma and Crossler, 2014). While empirical studies on the impacts of certain social commerce features on social influence are missing, Kim and Srivastava (2007) argue how social commerce features might increase the social influence of a social commerce website. For instance, product reviews provided by customers can be considered as a social influence that can affect others to purchase a certain product. We take over these findings to propose:

H9: Social commerce features increase the social influence of a social commerce website.

4 Proposed Research Methodology

We will begin evaluating our research model with five social commerce features: *rating and review tools, share and like buttons, social wish lists, activity feeds, and social login buttons*. We decided to start with this sample for two reasons: First, all these features have been associated with social commerce (Curty and Zhang, 2013, Huang et al., 2012). Second, for each of the features, various software products are available, which can easily be integrated into a commercial website. In future, we plan to examine several additional features (and combinations). To investigate the impacts of the selected features, we will follow Brengman and Karimov (2012) who used an experiment-based online survey to explore the impact of like buttons and blog pages on consumers’ trust into the website. We will conduct a similar experiment that involves buying a product on a commercial website. Afterwards, we will ask for the perception of the various factors using an online survey. The experiment will be based on a between-subjects full-factorial design including one independent variable (“social commerce feature”) with six different levels (“rating and review tools”, “share and like buttons”, “social wish lists”, “activity feeds”, “social login buttons”, “no social commerce features”). The sixth level contains a control group that will use a version without social commerce features. A distinct group of subjects will represent each level.

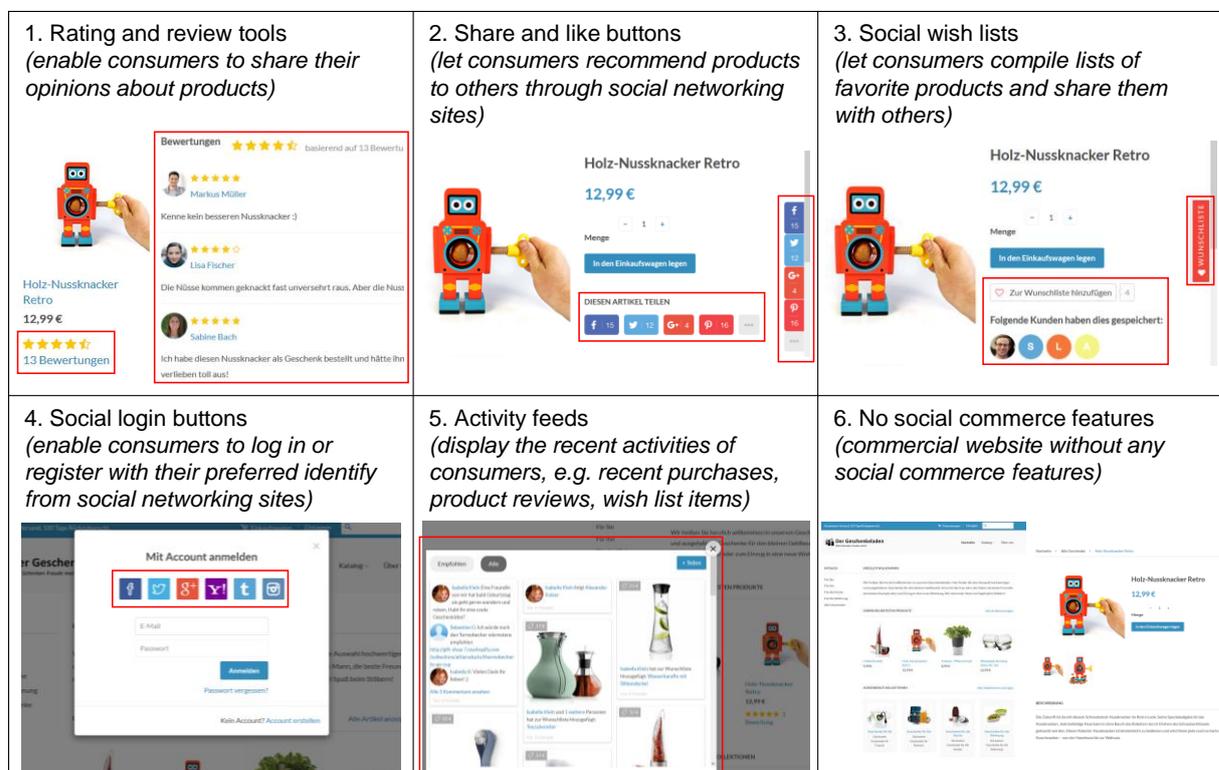


Figure 2. Social commerce features of the commercial website versions used in the experiment

Each group will be given access to a customized version of a website of a fictitious company that sells unbranded gift gadgets. Figure 2 shows prototypes of these versions that have been created in German language for pre-tests. Unbranded gift gadgets are used for two reasons: first, they involve social and emotional aspects and are associated with little monetary risk. Second, potential branding effects are avoided (Lowry et al., 2008). The website has been built on a modern e-commerce platform that supports the integration of social commerce features with an app store. Rating and review tools, share and like buttons, social wish lists, and activity feeds have been populated with content to make their appearance realistic. In this way, we deliver the participants a controlled but authentic online shopping experience. To collect data, we will send e-mail invitations to students from different universities. Moreover, we will post invitations on social networking sites and other online communities. As shopping task, participants will be asked to buy a gift for a friend. All participants will be given an identical amount of virtual money, which they can use to buy a gift of their choice. The experiment will be conducted online. It starts with an overview page, on which the setting and task are described. Next, the participants will be forwarded randomly to one of the six website versions to complete the shopping task. Finally, the participants will be asked to fulfill an online questionnaire that measures the constructs contained in our research model. All questionnaire items relating to dependent variables will be measured on seven-point Likert scales. The scale items will be adopted from literature. For instance, items to measure perceived ease of use and usefulness will be adopted from Pavlou (2003), trust items from Gefen et al. (2003), and social support items from Liang et al. (2011). To verify the manipulation of the independent variable, we use five yes/no questions in the form “Did you notice <social commerce feature> on this website?”. The data will be analyzed using techniques such as t-tests, variance and regression analyses. Consistency of the questionnaire items will be ensured by conducting reliability measures such as Cronbach’s alpha.

5 Expected Contributions and Conclusion

Although social commerce is driven by the use of social commerce features (Curty and Zhang, 2013), little research has investigated how such features influence the consumers’ willingness to adopt social commerce websites. In this paper, we have presented a research model that describes the impacts of social commerce features on the consumers’ adoption of social commerce websites and thereby takes into account several different perspectives. The proposed research model is based on the S-O-R paradigm and can be used as a conceptual framework to study the impact of individual social commerce features and combinations thereof. To our best knowledge, it is the first research model dedicated to systematically investigate the impacts of social commerce features.

The results of our research have implications for academia and practice. For academia, we provide an innovative research model concerning the impacts of social commerce features that integrates several potential adoption factors into a holistic perspective. With the research model, we provide a novel instrument to systematically investigate the impacts of social commerce features and to understand how certain features affect utilitarian, hedonic, relational, and social aspects of social commerce websites. Accordingly, we extend the current body of knowledge in the social commerce research domain, which is not yet able to explain the impacts of certain social commerce features. For practice, it is essential to know how the use of certain social commerce features can stimulate consumers to participate in social commerce initiatives. In this regard, we expect the results of our experiment to provide important information to support a goal-oriented selection and integration of such features and, accordingly, a more effective design of social commerce websites. As our research is still in an early stage, it is subject to several limitations. First, we deliberately chose to focus on adoption factors mentioned in the social commerce literature, as we want to investigate the impacts of features with respect to this domain. There may hence be additional factors discussed in the e-commerce literature that we did not take into account. We also did not discuss any inhibiting or risk factors yet. We plan to consider such factors after we have further consolidated and evaluated our research model. In future, we will also examine the effects of social commerce feature combinations, which might differ from the effects of their individual constituents. With the proposed research model, we hope to provide a starting point for such endeavors.

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