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The diffusion of the internet has great influence on the buying behaviour of people and produces a plurality of business models and opportunities especially for SMEs. But it is often difficult for users of an online shop to judge the quality of products properly. Often, the layout and usability of eCommerce websites influences the perception of good product quality. A user-friendly interface enables users to familiarize with a website immediately. Furthermore, it increases the willingness to buy and to visit the website again. In this research, we analyze the state-of-the-art of usability in online shops through an analysis of the usability of 140 “trusted shops”, a German insurance label for SME eCommerce shops. The aim is on the one hand to investigate the state-of-the-art and on the other hand to derive concrete design recommendations.

We decided to select an expert-based analysis approach as we wanted to analyze eCommerce shops in large numbers. For the collection of a comprehensive list of examination criteria, a two-step way was chosen. By taking into account both the existing literature in the domain as well as the actual requirements from practice the resulting criteria catalogue is grounded in established ways of website design research and does at the same time not miss out on features prevalent in practice. First, we decided to take an inductive, exploratory approach by arranging expert interviews in order to gain some insight into criteria that are necessary for good usability of eCommerce stores run by SMEs. An analysis of previous studies was the background for the arrangement of expert interviews with four shop operators and developers. Second, complimentary and additional criteria were derived from literature. A consolidation of both methods led to a list of 60 criteria for the analysis of eCommerce usability. Based on the criteria catalogue we empirically analyzed how far “trusted shops” put knowledge about usability into practice. “Trusted Shops” is by its own account a leading seal of approval in Europe with a money-back guarantee for consumers. The aim of seals of approval is the establishment of consumer trust towards relatively unknown eCommerce operators. The research criteria were divided into the four thematic areas shopping, searching, registering and buying. They were formulated in an easy understandable way. Researchers were able to answer most of the questions with a simple yes or no. Examination criteria addressed questions in the areas of the main page, navigation, search, product detail page, shopping cart and order process.

It turned out that most eCommerce offerings from SMEs have a variety of deficiencies. For example, the evaluation of the results concerning standardized hyperlinks turned out to be worse than expected. 75 % of all shop use wide variations from the standard, such as underlined links in blue and visited hyperlinks in purple. Nearly 20% of all analyzed shops use elements that look like an advertisement, even though they are areas of information. Furthermore, product detail descriptions are very short or incomplete at 28.6 % of the shops. It can be very helpful to add the product to the shopping cart and return to the product site without effort. But only 47.5% of shops allow an easy return with just one click.

In total we found that most of the shops have great room for improvement. However, we also found some consensus among eCommerce offerings. For example, there are approx. nine products presented on the home page. 85% of all websites place their logo on the upper left corner. As a first study in this research area, our study is limited to small to medium-sized eCommerce shops. A comparison between large shops and the analyzed ones would additionally be revealing. Furthermore, the study is limited to European shops (especially German shops).

![Scheme of the most commonly used layout for online shops](image)

**Fig 1:** Scheme of the most commonly used layout for online shops