Review

Social Commerce in Europe: A Literature Review and Implications for Researchers, Practitioners, and Policymakers

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has altered consumer behavior, making social commerce a viable alternative throughout the world. Europe is trailing the US and China in adopting this technology, but the prognosis is encouraging. Our goal is to contribute to this process by offering a literature review on social commerce in Europe for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. We analyzed 4,764 articles published during the 2015–2023 period on the topic of social commerce in Europe utilizing the PRISMA flow diagram. After scrutinizing this large body of literature with various instruments including artificial intelligence (AI), we identified a final list of 45 articles that are most pertinent to our research questions. The emerging themes were that social media is shaping behavior and triggering buying intentions, that trust is paramount in buying impulses and behavior, and that success in social commerce is predicated upon relationships and engagement.

Keywords: social commerce; Europe; literature review; social media commerce; livestream

1. Introduction

The technological innovations over the past four decades have had a significant impact on the world. The rise of globalization has eliminated trade barriers and fostered a knowledge economy [1], with technology transforming many aspects of human life, especially our social interactions. Social media platforms, in particular, have gained increased attention due to their nature and inner workings [2]. Our paper focuses on social commerce, the blending of online social activity with commercial undertakings such as sales, marketing, distribution, and advertising. While social commerce holds potential for theoreticians, practitioners, and policymakers alike [3–5], it also poses substantial risks such as data privacy, fake news, and manipulation [6]. Nevertheless, its benefits such as social interactions and sales possibilities, benefiting the gig and sharing economies, hold potential for all societal actors [7–10]. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology and the shift towards online interactions, including social commerce [11–13]. This has been particularly evident in countries such as the US and China, which have been at the forefront of technological innovation [14]. However, the European Union (EU) has lagged behind due to its fragmented administrative and political framework and its more conservative social and business culture [15,16]. Furthermore, the pandemic has widened the digital divide between EU regions, with some parts struggling to keep up with the pace of technological change [16]. This highlights the need for researchers, policymakers, and businesses to ensure all can benefit from social commerce and other technological advancements.

The research questions we propose in this article are (1) what is the state of social commerce research in the EU as compared to the United States (US) and China? (2) What do academic publications debate about social commerce in the EU? (3) What implications and topics of discussion may be relevant for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers?
from Europe based on the findings of this literature review? We believe that by providing a literature review on social commerce with its implications for Europe, further research and debate may be encouraged among European researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

This paper is not going to strictly compare research on social commerce in Europe based on the three categories mentioned, nor will it compare it directly between highly recognized economic regions and countries; rather, it is going to provide insights into the recurrent themes identified in other academic studies addressing the topic of social commerce as their main theme.

Our article is structured as follows: In Section 2, we will provide a brief literature review on the state of social commerce research globally. We will also describe our methodology, the PRISMA flow diagram, a research instrument used to analyze a large body of literature. In Section 3, we will present our research findings and the emerging themes from the current literature. In Section 4, we will suggest a few possible implications and topics of discussion for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. In Section 5, the final section, we offer our conclusions and limitations and recommend future research topics.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Literature Review

Considering the recency of theoretical research on social commerce, the general definition is still evolving with different utilizations in various research areas [17]. According to Dong and Wang [18], social commerce is the use of social media or social networks to facilitate the user’s participation in product development and information sharing or in shopping online [19]. Technologies such as livestreaming, DanMu interaction, group buying, and community commerce, along with the transformation of consumer behavior driven by the COVID-19 lockdown, are revolutionizing the field of social commerce [11,20–22], as Figure 1 is illustrating.

#### Figure 1. Percentage of online consumers buying from social networks in 2022; Source: [23].
Initially, social commerce was considered a subset of e-commerce; however, it came to be viewed as a combination of e-commerce and e-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) [24]. The first area of social commerce research focuses on consumer behavior. Godinho [25] addressed the time pressure on decision making, Sun [26] focused on social sharing, and Hus [27] explored how vloggers influence the online and offline interactions of their followers. The second area of social commerce research has concentrated on buying behavior or intention. There were the nudge factors that determine buying behavior [28–30]. Then, there are also studies on consumer perceptions [31,32], psychological instruments [33], and the creation of engagement, trust, and risk reduction [34].

Research on online buying behavior can be organized in the following areas: (1) impulse buying, which analyzes impulsive intentions and behaviors and identifies factors that generate trust, loyalty, and motivation [35–37]; (2) livestreaming, which analyzes shopping behavior within the context of livestreaming [20,21,38]; (3) community commerce, which analyzes relationships among community members and how they influence purchasing behaviors [39,40]; (4) social sharing, which analyzes sharing behaviors in livestreaming and social media platforms [21,41,42]; and (5) Danmu culture, which analyzes floating comments in videos and livestreaming [43–45]. The research tends to focus on factors, perceptions, and behaviors.

A number of social science theories have been adapted to the online environment to explain the behavior of online consumers and the factors that are shaping it. They are (1) the stimulus organism response theory, which focuses on the stimulus perceived by the consumers which generate behavior [38,42,46–49]; (2) the para-social theory, where consumers are influenced by their peers and especially celebrities or influencers [50–52]; (3) The latent state trait theory, where consumer behavior is determined by individual traits or particular characteristics of the environment [29,53]; (4) the social influence theory, which explains consumers attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors, as they are being shaped by interactions with other individuals or groups [47]; (5) the social capital theory, which describes how individuals are influenced by the opinions of others and how their behavior is shaped by their social networking environment [54]; (6) the social identity theory, which focuses on an individual’s identity, role, and online social interaction [55]; (7) the commodity theory, which focuses on the danger of products becoming undifferentiated and the imperative for products to be unique [56]; (8) the psychological reactance theory, which explains users’ reactions according to the online environment, especially its quest for exclusivity [56]; (9) the signaling theory, which focuses on the relationship between users and influencers to transfer information and generate purchasing behavior [50]; (10) the flow theory, which enables consumers to experience flow in computer-mediated contexts [50]; (11) the technology acceptance model theory, which focuses on the users’ acceptance, utilization, and adoption of new technology [20]; (12) the cognitive response theory, which states the importance of information to be perceived as credible to generate positive behavior [48]; and (13) the arousal theory, which outlines the various stimuli that determine the interest of a consumer [30].

2.2. Methodology

The methodology undertaken for our research was the PRISMA flow diagram method based on the research questions and key search terms. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is a set of guidelines developed for systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses. Historically, numerous literature review articles and meta-analyses failed to meet rigorous scientific criteria for reporting, hindering the evaluation of their accuracy. To address this issue, the QUOROM Statement was created in 1999, which focused on meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials [57]. The statement was updated in 2009 and renamed PRISMA to reflect advancements in systematic review methods [58]. This method is best utilized when analyzing a large body of published literature, such as peer-reviewed academic articles, to ensure transparent, complete, and accurate reporting [59]. In the present article, we utilized the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to
ensure transparent, complete, and accurate reporting of our integrative analysis review. Our aim is to provide readers with a clear, reliable, and comprehensive understanding of the evidence related to our research methods and topic.

To have a comprehensive and integrative literature review on social commerce in Europe, in April 2023, we conducted research on academic articles published in the English language during the 2015–2023 time period. We selected the following academic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, SSRN, Mendeley, Emerald, Springer, Science Direct, ERIC, JSTOR, Springer, and the first 10 pages from Google Scholar. Although not exhaustive, these are the best-known and most utilized academic databases comprising the most knowledge on our subject. The selected articles had to have “social commerce” in their title, abstract, or research question. The exclusion criteria for our study included books, conference papers, commercial reports, opinion articles, editorial papers, or multiple papers originating from the same study or database to ensure that codes or themes were not double-counted. We further excluded articles that did not entail “social commerce” as part of their research or context and articles that were focused on countries other than Europe. We did include papers that mentioned social commerce in Europe in combination with other nations or regions, such as China or the United States.

The process of establishing the inclusion and exclusion criteria, for offering validity to those criteria, was based on relevance and acceptability as described by Robey & Dalebout [60]. We structured our exclusion and inclusion criteria after having a brainstorming session with all of the authors to avoid biases while creating the search terms and research questions. While conducting the last stages of the research where exclusion was extremely important, we always addressed these questions: “Is the study relevant to the paper’s purpose?” and “is the study acceptable for the paper?” [61]. Those questions were first addressed to the criteria the authors created to collectively identify the main exclusion criteria in the last stages of the research. After that, we addressed the same questions to the paper we were reviewing while also incorporating the exclusion criteria that we developed. For validating the criteria of exclusion, we also focused on the main aspects a criterion should have, based on Meline [61]: “(a) study population, (b) nature of the intervention, (c) outcome variables, (d) time period, (e) cultural and linguistic range, and (f) methodological quality” [61]. The papers that did meet the exclusion criteria were removed so that we could properly follow the PRISMA method and attain a good number of papers for the results section.

Based on our research question, we utilize the following phrases in identifying and filtering the academic articles within the database websites: (1) gaps in the literature review on social commerce; (2) literature review on social commerce; (3) social commerce in Europe; and (4) social commerce. The associated synonyms of each concept were added to the queries in the above-mentioned databases while making use of specific searches to account for any potential papers. Next, we searched for each of the four concepts individually, and the results were combined in a reference list in Zotero, where the duplicates were eliminated automatically. The search words were reused in the references search bar for identifying papers that may be irrelevant from a topic point of view. The titles and the abstracts were then reviewed manually by the authors to identify suitable papers based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, finalizing with a full read of the remaining article to assess their eligibility. The PRISMA process is explained in Figure 2, and the detailed process was as follows.

The initial search on the databases generated 4764 article titles, which were then inputted into Zotero software. With this step, we excluded 1,376 entries since they did not contain the following keywords in the title (the keywords were inserted in the Zotero search bar): “social commerce”, “social media commerce”, “social commerce in Europe”, “literature review in social commerce in Europe”, “literature review in/on social commerce”, “gaps in literature review on social commerce”, and “Europe”. We next excluded an additional 45 titles, which were not considered peer-reviewed journal articles but rather conference papers. This gave us the remaining 3343 articles that we created a list of in Excel
to be screened manually. Out of these, we manually removed a further 1051 titles since they were duplicates, leaving us with 2296 papers to be analyzed. Based on their titles in accordance with the research questions and criteria, we manually reviewed this list and eliminated those articles that contained titles outside our topic of research or outside our chosen geographical area. This left us with 336 papers to be analyzed, but only 243 could be retrieved with full text. We utilized two AI software (Notion and Chat GPT) to summarize the 243 articles that remained. We utilized two different AI instruments to ensure that the results of the summaries are not different in topic or information. Notion provided us with a larger summary of 2000 words based on the command ‘create a summary of 2000 words of this article: <article text>’, while ChatGPT was used to trim those 2000 words further into a one-page summary with the command ‘create a one-page summary of this text: <inserted text of the 2000 words summary for the respective article>’. This process helped us read the 243 papers faster and identify those relevant to the study. The AI’s summaries were more detailed than the abstract, allowing us to take a deeper look at the content of the articles. After reading the summaries and applying the exclusion criteria to further reduce the body of articles, we identified 47 papers (43 papers from the database searches and 4 papers from previous reviews) and a separate report that best addressed social commerce in Europe and analyzed them in their entirety. The papers are listed in Table 1.

Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram Chart Academic Articles on Social Commerce in Europe created based on the guidelines and tool provided by Source: [62].
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Table 1. List of articles selected.

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<th>Authors</th>
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<td>Alkhalifah, 2022</td>
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<td>Alnoor, A. et al., 2022</td>
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<td>Ashoer, 2021</td>
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<td>ATa, S., BAYDAŞ, A. and YAŞAR, M.E., 2021</td>
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<td>Yin, J., Huang, Y. and Ma, Z., 2023</td>
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<tr>
<td>W. Zhao, F. Hu, J. Wang, T. Shu, and Y. Xu, 2023</td>
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The outcomes from this final analysis will be presented in the results section of our paper. As specified in Figure 2, the 198 excluded articles were eliminated for the following reasons: (1) Although they addressed the topic of social commerce, they had a different focus such as data privacy, networks, cosmetics, gaming, electronic word of mouth (we did not include articles on electronic WOM because out of the remaining 243 articles, only 2 titles were addressing this subject, and they were not responding to our research questions; also, those papers were not enough to create a section about this trend), chatbots, the metaverse, or other topics. (2) They were published before COVID-19 when consumer behavior was significantly different regarding social commerce. (3) They were related to electronic commerce or sharing commerce more than social media commerce. However, we did include the topic of livestream shopping as it relates to social media networks. (4) They were focused on specific countries and regions, other than the countries from the European region.

3. Results

Considering the above-mentioned analysis, three major themes emerged from the PRISMA integrative literature review on social commerce in Europe. (1) Social media is shaping behavior and triggering buying intentions. (2) Trust is paramount in buying impulses and behavior. (3) Success in social commerce is predicated upon relationships and engagement. Although this research is primarily aimed at theoreticians, we feel confident to recommend our findings to European practitioners and policymakers alike. The synthesis of the academic literature identified using the PRISMA method on the topic of social commerce in Europe describes the impact of social media both on commerce and culture. The effects are not strictly economic, addressing only buying
behavior and company profits. They are also social, determining values, norms, and preferences. Understanding the practices and instruments the digital economy made available to establish trust, increase engagement, and shape behavior is paramount for practitioners, theoreticians, and policymakers alike. Although social media and social commerce is mostly utilized by private businesses, the instruments and practices of digital businesses should be understood by regulators and public administrators as well. Private and public organizations can benefit if they learn how to enhance the consumer experience through pleasurable and positive interactions, which will lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. As our research findings suggest, it is important to understand the users’ needs and behaviors and to incorporate social networking practices to increase consumer involvement, build and strengthen relationships, and enhance efficiency and convenience.

3.1. Social Media Is Shaping Behavior and Triggering Buying Intentions

The first major theme that emerged from our research was that customer behavior adapted to the online environment during the pandemic and that it triggered a higher rate of buying intentions. This trend, already present before to COVID-19 pandemic, has been intensified by lockdowns and the curtailing of physical movement during the pandemic. The adoption and utilization of social media and social commerce experienced a significant increase, with people altering their behavior and consumption practices.

E-commerce was supplemented by social commerce, as people had additional time and incentives to spend time and money in the online environment. This was further accelerated by a number of companies and public institutions that transferred their products and services online in record periods [63]. From an economic self-selection perspective, it will be interesting to analyze the laggard organizations that did not successfully transition online during the pandemic and how sustainable will they be in the future.

A number of the papers we analyzed in detail highlighted the transformation in user behavior regarding social commerce. The need to interact online during the COVID-19 lockdowns created a variety of emotional responses linking the user’s cognitive aptitudes with the interactive reality of social commerce platforms. These transformations in user behavior and purchasing habits generated concepts like “impulsive buying,” “theories of emotions”, “impulsive buying tendencies”, “affective reactions”, and “cognitive reactions”. Enhancing user participation and experience on social media platforms seems to make shopping a much more social experience, allowing companies and brands to tightly connect with consumers [64].

Even before COVID-19, social media altered the interaction between consumers and firms, allowing marketing to be more visible, flexible, and ubiquitous at lower costs. A study by Mourelatos and Manganari [13] suggests that the pandemic caused significant psychological and behavioral transformations in young consumers, leading to changes in their attitudes and purchasing habits. The adoption of online technology and social commerce triggered significant behavioral changes. The use of the Internet increased by 54.5%, and online purchase intentions from Instagram and Facebook increased by 39.4% and 25.3%, respectively. It was discovered that personality traits are an important construct of the digital environment, and their study linked specific personality traits with preferences in network social structures [13]. In this manner, social commerce become a personalized and interactive experience. Their study seems to suggest that success in social commerce comes from the users feeling that they are part of an online community and having the ability to interact in real time with the product and services provided or with somebody making a recommendation. This is especially true in live commerce on Western social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, Facebook, etc., and on the Chinese social network media (SNS) [64]. Finally, situational factors such as convenience, mood, and social support also influence purchasing intentions on social commerce websites [65].

Interactive marketing strategies, such as social-interaction-oriented content in a broadcaster’s speech, can positively impact the viewers’ purchasing or gift-giving decisions during livestreaming commerce. However, these strategies must be carefully designed
and executed to optimize their impact. Overly explicit or excessive interaction-oriented content may divert viewers’ attention from promoted products, undermining sales and trust relationships. In contrast, balancing product information and interaction content can engage and maintain viewers’ interest and attachment while still facilitating their cognitive processing of products to support purchasing decisions. As identified by Zhao [64], social commerce thrives on the following three pillars: (1) environmental stimuli including social connectivity; (2) marketing stimulations entailing scarcity, exclusivity, and limited-time offers; and (3) customer qualities focusing on interest and intent. Traditional physical store design and website features were the only means to entail environmental stimuli before social media commerce. Although still important, they pale in comparison to social connections and social interaction made possible by social commerce networks. Real-time interaction on the various livestreaming shopping platforms can immerse the consumer, capture and keep their attention, link them with other users or influencers, and generate the necessary purchasing impulses [64].

Livestreaming commerce is a subsection of social commerce, comprising numerous shopping channels offering convenient, attractive, and real-time interaction between buyers and sellers. According to the studies we analyzed, there is a significant and positive impact on impulsive buying by the vicarious experience offered by livestreaming commerce and viewer–product interaction. This is further enhanced by social contagion, where users inform their contacts of their activities. This research broadens the understanding of social influences on impulsive buying by focusing on real-time, viewer-to-viewer interaction. Therefore, para-social interaction, social contagion, vicarious experience, scarcity persuasion, and price perception can drive cognition, affect reactions, and induce impulsive buying [66].

Multiple factors influence the users of social media in their purchasing intentions such as website design, website quality, perceived value, usefulness of the interface, information and interaction level, time efficiency, trust, and social support [64]. Nevertheless, based on our analysis of the literature, social media is emerging as the main instrument that generates purchase intention and behavior alteration. Social commerce offers the preferred method for firms and organizations to connect with users and attract others to their platforms. The digital instruments to develop a unique and customized experience are expanding, allowing firms and institutions to have a deeper, more intimate knowledge of their consumers’ preferences and behaviors.

3.2. Trust Is Paramount in Buying Impulses and Behavior in Social Media Commerce

The second theme that emerged from our research is that trust is paramount in buying impulses and behaviors. Considering the discoveries of some of the less-than-orthodox practices pertaining to user data employed by certain social media platforms, it seems natural that users would place a premium on trust. However, user privacy was not identified as a major concern. Instead, trust in brands, companies, and influencers seems to be more impactful in buying impulses and behaviors [67]. The research indicates that positive moods and convenience are the two key elements that boosted online buyers’ intentions to purchase from social commerce websites during the pandemic.

The findings of Ashoer provide insights into social commerce and expand the model to include the big five personality traits, which contribute to a buyer’s unique patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving [65]. Cultural differences also play an important role in consumers’ behavior and their response to social media stimuli and advertising content [68]. Innovative and informative ads that stand out and frequently appear on preferred social media platforms are more likely to capture consumers’ attention and create a sense of familiarity. Authentic communication, direct and explicit communication in ads, and tailoring communication to the needs of the target audience are significant factors in creating trust and positive attitudes towards a brand or a product [69].

Social media advertisements have four major components that affect impulse buying: (1) providing information, (2) providing entertainment, (3) being reliable, and (4) con-
tributing to the economy. Cultural tendencies significantly influence the perceptions of social media ads. In Turkey, for example, the most important dimension of social media ad perception that leads to impulse buying is “contribution to the economy” [8]. Wang [70] argues that trust plays a vital role in social commerce because it affects consumers’ purchase intentions. Several studies have also identified “trust”, “attitude”, “perceived usefulness”, and “alternative evaluation” as significant factors that affect consumers’ purchase intentions [71]. Huang and Yeap [72] also found that “trust” was the most frequently measured factor that impacted customers’ purchase intention, followed by “interactivity”, “social support”, “perceived member familiarity”, and “customer perceived value”.

Surprisingly, in the context of forums, communities, ratings, and reviews, the relationship between trust and purchase intention is stronger than that between recommendations and referrals. To be sure, social and collaborative activities in forums and communities influence consumers’ trustworthiness perception [70]. However, trust in a vendor has a positive relationship with social commerce intention, while social support and social presence also determine buyer intention. Trust in social media platforms provides firms with significant advantages, and social support from social media platforms increases the shopping intentions of customers. Trust is a critical prerequisite for business success, and social media platforms offer firms significant advantages. Cultural differences influence consumers’ behavior, and effective communication strategies are essential in building trust and creating positive attitudes towards brands and products. Understanding these factors is crucial for organizations that operate in the complex and risky environment of social media platforms.

3.3. Success in Social Commerce Is Predicated upon Relationships and Engagement

The third theme that emerged from our analysis is that social commerce success is dependent upon relationships and the engagement of users. User engagement refers to the amount of time a user spends on a platform or a website and the likelihood to refer that platform to one of their contacts. Engagement is utilized both for purchasing and nonpurchasing behavior such as promoting awareness or altering consumer behavior. The established social media platforms give firms and institutions the opportunity to build strong relationships with their customers and constituencies. If managed properly, those relationships can be transformed into commitment and loyalty and eventually be converted into revenue and/or altered behavior. In some sectors of the economy, certain industries have successfully positioned themselves as “effortless, engaging, enjoyable, that it can be trusted, simple to use, and time-saving, which motivates them to consume products via social commerce platforms” [63].

Firms and organizations can enhance relationships and engagement by inviting their users to become value creators and co-creators. Consumers can engage and contribute to value creation in various ways, including “customer lifetime value”, “knowledge value”, “influencer value”, and “referral value” [73]. Identifying user needs and preferences can be accomplished through various social networking opportunities and nudges, which can increase involvement, build or strengthen relationships, and enhance efficiency and convenience. Significant academic research has been undertaken on how social media platforms have transformed the consumers’ roles from mere passive customers to active creators and distributors as part of a social digital ecosystem [73]. There are several dimensions to customer engagement, which include cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement. These are captured and interpreted considering antecedents, decisions, and outcomes on social media. The antecedents of customer engagement on social media include brand-related, customer-related, industry-related, marketer-related, message-related, platform-related, social-related, and value-related antecedents. In the same way, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement consist of “identification”, “enthusiasm”, “attention”, “absorption”, and “interaction” [74].

The success of social commerce platforms is dependent on user engagement and contributions, and the activities that users perform to promote their contributions have to
be understood [75]. Research has indicated that customer ratings and positive reviews have a positive impact on trust [76]. As previously mentioned, trust is essential in promoting positive consumer behavior and enhancing successful social commerce platforms [67]. Nevertheless, some firms and institutions fail to efficiently convert the enhancement of safety, awareness, and novelty into consumer satisfaction. “Hedonic quality elements” are important for fostering good customer relationship management in social media commerce as it has a larger effect on consumer satisfaction than functional quality elements. Therefore, it is important for firms and institutions to focus on enhancing consumers’ experiences by providing them with pleasurable, enjoyable, and fun interactions [72]. It further behooves social commerce platforms to offer more group information to assist consumers in making purchase decisions, and traditional e-commerce websites should integrate social media features into their platforms to attract and retain consumers [70].

Lim and Rasul (2022) shed light on the outcomes of customer engagement on social media, which are categorized into “business related”, “brand related”, “customer related”, and “social media related” outcomes. The review indicates that customer engagement in social media creates positive brand-related outcomes, such as better connection with customers and better brand image and responsiveness in the eyes of customers, and solicits brand attachment, intimacy, trust, usage, and loyalty among customers [74]. Shin et al. (2021) also offer valuable strategies for conventional e-commerce firms transitioning to social commerce platforms to enhance consumers’ experiences and satisfaction as well as a useful decision-making process incorporating both research findings and data envelopment analysis modeling to assist practitioners in making efficient decisions [77]. Marlot [78] surveyed the Slovenian population using structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques. Their results show that social media use for customer relationship management has a significant effect on relational social commerce capability and competitive advantages. Their findings seem to suggest that firms and institutions should align their commercial activities with emerging digital technologies. They recommend an ongoing commitment to the process of bundling tangible and intangible resources and developing capabilities to leverage digital technologies for relational activities more successfully and provide a better customer experience [78].

4. Discussion

The field of social commerce in Europe warrants a robust discussion and further investigation. As the technology evolves, spurred on by generous R&D investment and bolstered by the consumer behavior altered during the COVID-19 crisis, we can expect continuous transformations. The discussion around social commerce research and practices should be constructive and transparent among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. In the following section, we will suggest a few implications and discussion areas based on our research findings and the literature in the field.

4.1. Implications for Researchers

The current literature on social commerce provides valuable insights for theoreticians in the field of digital marketing and e-commerce [79–81]. As a subfield of digital marketing, social commerce is a relatively recent, complex, and dynamic phenomenon. Social commerce is built on three primary pillars, namely environmental stimuli, marketing stimulation, and customer qualities [64]. To understand social commerce in depth, scholars should continue to focus on the mechanisms of online consumer behavior [12,65,82]. The findings of this review have raised a novel taxonomy that suggests a hierarchical understanding of how social commerce affects consumers and businesses.

These findings seem to suggest that the impact of social commerce can be organized into a graded structure where the effects of social commerce on consumers and businesses can be categorized into different levels of importance or influence in a direct or indirect relationship with independent variables influencing the end result. At the lowest level, social commerce may have a superficial impact on consumer behavior, such as influencing
their preferences for certain products or brands [82]. At the middle level, social commerce may have a more profound impact on consumer behavior, such as changing their attitudes or values [83]. At the highest level, social commerce may have a transformative impact on the entire consumer–business relationship, such as facilitating deeper engagement and building long-term trust between consumers and businesses [40,70,84].

Studies in the European context should consider cultural differences that influence consumer behavior [7,63,82,85] and communication strategies that build trust and create positive attitudes [84–86]. Our suggestions for future research initiatives on social commerce in Europe also include but are not be limited to the following areas that can act as relationship variables for the structure: (1) livestream shopping and impulse buying [87–90]; (2) analyses on cultural influences upon social commerce [83,91,92]; (3) analyses of regulations on social commerce in Europe, including data privacy, misinformation, and taxation [93–95]; (4) sustainability for users of social commerce, such as well-being, addiction, and fairness [29,96,97]; (5) the opportunities and risks of livestream shopping, including psychological drivers of spending, social interactions, and data privacy implications [90]; (6) social commerce best practices applied to European organizations, especially the transference from Asian giants, and the identification of capabilities, partnerships, technologies, skills, processes, and practices; and (7) data-driven case studies on the impacts, costs, benefits, risks, and opportunities of social commerce growth within an ethical context.

Future work on theory could focus on examining the mentioned variables in relation to a hierarchical structure for social commerce behavior and explore further how it evolves in the European context. This could potentially lead to the development of a social commerce theory that explains the different functions social commerce serves in a consumer–business relationship, particularly in Europe.

4.2. Implications for Practitioners

Social commerce is becoming an essential component of modern marketing strategies, and business practitioners can benefit greatly from the insights provided by academic research. In the past, website features and store attractiveness were the primary sources of environmental cues for consumers. However, in contemporary social commerce networks, social connections and interactions reign supreme. Social media has fundamentally altered the relationship between companies and consumers, providing greater visibility and flexibility for marketing messages. As a result, businesses must incorporate social networking into their strategies to increase consumer involvement, build and strengthen relationships, and enhance efficiency and convenience [30,98].

Communication has to be focused and customize for the needs and preferences of each audience [6,98]. Practitioners should focus on enhancing user participation and making online purchasing a more social experience [99–101].

The practical implications of the review suggest that businesses could benefit from the understanding of how social commerce underpins a consumer’s purchase decision-making process, namely that it supports a consumer’s trust building, value perception, and purchase intention. This understanding could help provide clarity for businesses on how to optimize their social commerce strategy while ensuring the social commerce used at each stage remains contextually appropriate. If businesses understand the hierarchical functions of social commerce in a consumer–business relationship and cascade this knowledge to their marketing and sales teams, this could help foster both improved marketing effectiveness and business performance.

Based on the literature encapsulated in our findings, here is a list of implications for European businesses, designed for and aimed at practitioners: (1) Build trust through thoughtful and personalized communication [86,102–104]. (2) Europe is a mélange of cultures and languages; therefore, the content, product, and experiences must be adequately customized [105]. (3) Experiences and interactions must be fun, not just informative. Social commerce is predicated upon user engagement through livestreams, games, co-creation,
etc., and the line between entertainment and commerce tends to be blurry [65,106–109].

(4) Local influencers and marketing partners must be identified and cultivated [110,111]. They understand the local culture and values and enjoy credibility. According to a survey undertaken by Deloitte in 2023 in Europe, 67% of social media users would consider a brand or a product if promoted by their favorite influencer, and 28% of shoppers want to purchase directly from an influencer. (5) It should be ensured that the product or brand is recognized across markets. Nations have different ways of searching for and purchasing products. (6) The user experience must be monitored and improved through surveys, focus groups, observations, and analytics.

4.3. Implications for Policymakers

Finally, the results provide insights for European policymakers who are regulating the practices of global tech giants while at the same time stimulating local digital champions. The first task of policymakers is to create an environment where social commerce can develop trust, transparency, and consumer protection. This can be carried out through a quantitative longitudinal study to identify the main factors affecting those indicators in the current state.

Governmental organizations are in a unique position to lead by example and adopt social commerce practices such as enhancing user participation and customer experiences [112,113]. Based on the survey of the literature encapsulated in our findings, here is a list of implications for European policymakers: (1) provide funding and training to help businesses develop digital skills, including grants and loans [114,115]; (2) conduct objective research on the economic and social impact of social commerce; (3) balance regulations with innovation to prevent the exploitation of data and attention, predatory lending, and algorithmic discrimination [93,95]; (4) facilitate public–private partnerships across sectors to address international and regional problems; (5) support research on the sustainability of social commerce and its impact on well-being, such as addiction, distraction, and comparison effects; (6) support research on ethical and sustainable business models; and (7) provide incentives for companies to build trust-enhancing features into their platforms and practices [98,116,117].

5. Conclusions

Social commerce is a complex and dynamic phenomenon giving rise to numerous opportunities for consumers, firms, and public institutions to interact and produce mutually beneficial products and experiences. There are risks associated with social commerce such as user privacy, fake news, manipulation, low product quality, etc. These dangers have to be addressed and mitigated throughout the world, yet their presence should not limit European creativity and innovation. As the recent COVID-19 crisis has showcased, technology can be beneficial, even lifesaving.

In this study, we analyzed 4,764 articles published during the 2015–2023 time period on the topic of social commerce. After scrutinizing this large body of literature with various instruments including artificial intelligence, we identified a final list of 47 articles that are most pertinent to our research questions. The emerging themes were that social media is shaping behavior and triggering buying intentions, that trust is paramount in buying impulses and behavior, and that success in social commerce is predicated upon relationships and engagement.

There are a limited number of academic studies comparing Europe with China and the US, and even fewer focusing exclusively on Europe. This is the research question and the research gap we addressed through our article. In providing a literature review on the topic of social commerce in Europe, we hope to stimulate further research and a robust debate among European researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. We began our study with a brief literature review regarding the state of social commerce research globally. Then, we explained our methodology, the PRISMA flow diagram, a research instrument used to analyze a large body of literature and present an integrated perspective. Next, we
presented our research findings with the emerging themes and proposed a few possible implications and topics of discussion for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

5.1. Limitations

The first limitation of our study was that we did not analyze articles published in languages other than English. Considering the strength of academic research in French, German, and Spanish, this may be a considerable limitation. The second limitation of our study was that we excluded non-academic publications. Although they lack the rigor of blind peer review, commercial research can be more pragmatic and timelier. The third limitation of our study is that the field of social commerce is still relatively young and does not have established institutions and research patterns. It is still evolving, sometimes lacking an adequate vocabulary and research framework.

The fourth limitation of this paper is the fact that it is constrained by the articles included in the review. The authors acknowledge that the search criteria may have excluded relevant articles, and some relevant articles may have been published after the search was conducted.

Another limitation of the paper is the focus on social commerce in Europe. The authors acknowledge that studies from authors located in other regions were included in the review as long as the countries of the respective authors were referred to only in a general matter and not in a study case analysis. The paper primarily focuses on social commerce in Europe. Future research should explore social commerce in other regions, such as Asia and Africa, to better understand how cultural differences influence consumer behavior in social commerce.

Overall, this integrative review offers valuable insights into the current state of social commerce research. The authors identify key themes and findings related to social commerce and provide an analysis of the literature. While the paper has some limitations, it provides a useful reference for academics and practitioners seeking to enhance their understanding of social commerce.

5.2. Future Research Recommendations

Our first recommendation is for an increase in the number of empirical studies on social commerce in Europe. Our second recommendation is for an increase in the number of empirical studies on individual nations or language groups in Europe. Our third recommendation is for an increase in comparative studies between Europe, the US, and China on social commerce. Our fourth recommendation is for industry-specific or age-group-specific case studies that articulate social commerce best practices that can be transferred to European firms and public institutions.

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