

Understanding Social Commerce: A Literature Review Approach

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Abstract

Purpose: Various contributions to social commerce studies have been made, so there is a strong need for efforts to incorporate social commerce research into a broad-based body of knowledge. The objective of this study is to provide a clear view of the concept of social commerce by a literature review approach.

Design/methodology/approach: A literature review approach is adopted to achieve our research objective, and studies between 2013 to 2021 are included in our review. After following a study selection process automatically and manually based on our criteria, 30 pieces of articles are selected which focus on the context of social commerce.

Findings: In line with the proposed research questions, our findings reveal the research themes, the key factors affecting customers' purchase intention, the underlying theories, and the major research methods applied in the reviewed literature.

Research limitations/implications: Our findings are subjected to these selected articles which meet our articles selection criteria. For example, we only select articles in which the definition of social commerce is described and indicated, to ensure they are related to our research objective.

Originality/value: Overall, this paper provides a bird's eye view on the topic of social commerce studies conducted over the span of 8 years (2013 to 2021). For marketing practitioners and scholars alike, this study serves as a 'shortcut' to understand and get an overview of the development of social commerce studies carried out throughout the years.

Keywords: Social commerce, Literature review, Consumer behavior, Web 2.0.

Introduction

Emerging along with the evolution of electronic commerce, social commerce was first presented by Yahoo in 2005, and it soon became an important way for large internet companies like Amazon, Alibaba, and eBay to create value to business entities through the utilization of user involvement (Wang & Zhang, 2012). The rise in popularity of social media has ushered in a new era of electronic commerce and has altered our perceptions of online shopping. Social commerce facilitates product and service promotion by supporting online transactions with the

help of a global network of peers online (Liang & Turban, 2014a; Wang & Zhang, 2012). It has witnessed a substantial growth of social commerce in recent years, demonstrating great value and enormous development potential owing to its obvious characteristics of a more social, creative, and collaborative method of doing business (Wang et al., 2019). Numerous businesses are diversifying their business strategies to include social commerce. Meanwhile, customers are actively turning to social commerce to learn about, comment, and purchase commodities and services. Especially, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has gradually changed customers' purchasing habits: customers were spending lots of time online and discovering new social commerce platforms during the lockdown period. According to Grandview Research (2021), the global revenue from social commerce will continue to increase at a considerably high rate; the market size is estimated at USD 584.9 billion in 2021 and is expected to reach USD 3,369.8 billion in 2028.

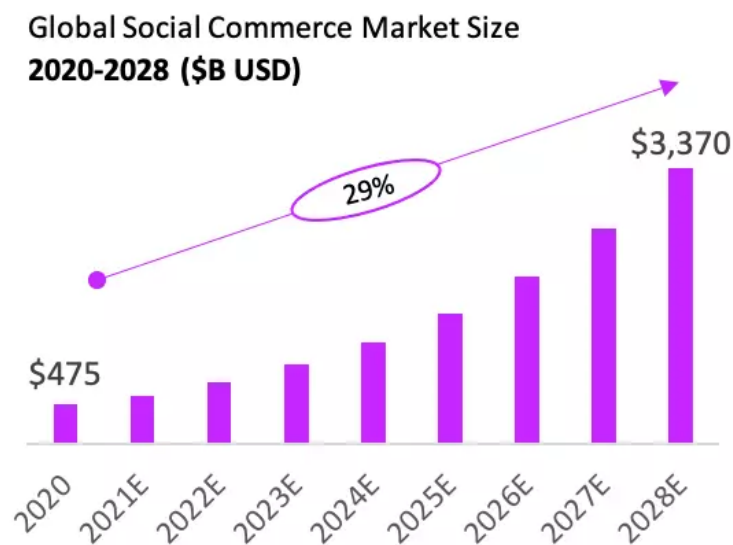


Figure 1. Projected growth in global social commerce

(Source: Grandview Research)

The popularity and prosperity of social commerce are due to its features of feedback, interactivity, recommendations, which help to increase customers' perceived value, enhance customers' engagement, and promote purchase intentions (Lin et al., 2020). Consumers can connect with one another through social networking sites like Facebook, Weibo (Microblog), and WeChat by sharing information, suggestions, and reviews about products and services. Even though social commerce is generally conceived of as a synthesis of social media and e-commerce, it differs from traditional e-commerce in that it obtains new technical features of interactivity, stickiness, personalization, and sociability, and focuses on commercial operations facilitated by social media (Li et al., 2019). These features enhance communication and collaboration between customers and companies, as well as amongst customers themselves, resulting in changes in customer behavior (Sheikh et al., 2019). On social commerce platforms, customers can get more thorough product details, specialized services, and real-time assistance, all of which influence their purchase decision-making. Additionally, customers create a variety of personalized content in the forms of photos and videos, building up interpersonal

relationships in social commerce, which brings customers together. The contents that customers share on social commerce platforms, including Weibo, Wechat, Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), etc. about their shopping information, consuming journey, comments, and reviews can be spread quickly thanks to Web 2.0 technology, thus influencing purchases intentions of other customers (Lu et al., 2016). Customers tend to prefer shopping information on social commerce platforms, rather than recommendations or comments provided by sellers because the relationships of users on social commerce platforms are mostly friends, acquaintances, or random people, and the information shared by these people appears to be more credible and trustworthy (Li & Ku, 2018). Moreover, bidirectional communication helps businesses better understand their customers, increases value co-creation, and thereby leads to improvements in customer experiences (Hajli et al., 2017a).

Although the past decade has witnessed the rapid growth of the concept of social commerce, a systematic understanding of this subject is still lacking (Huang & Benyoucef, 2014). Since various contributions to social commerce studies have been made, there is a strong need for efforts to incorporate social commerce research into a broad-based body of knowledge. Besides, social commerce is a new field of research with limited empirical data, so companies are still in need of the evaluation of the suitability of various social commerce platforms for business, and marketing practitioners require a greater knowledge of this prominent phenomenon. Therefore, this study tries to fill this gap to provide a clear view of the concept of social commerce by a literature review approach. To achieve the objective of this study, the research questions are proposed as below:

RQ1: What are the research themes that are mentioned in the literature?

RQ2: What are the key factors affecting customers' purchase intention on social commerce platforms?

RQ3: Which theories are employed to examine the mechanism of social commerce?

RQ4: What are the major research methods used by previous studies to explore social commerce?

Overall, the contribution of this study is twofold. From the theoretical perspective, we contribute to academic literature by providing a clear picture of the conditions and development in terms of social commerce related previous studies. Practically, this study tries to provide marketing managers and practitioners a shortcut to understand and overview the state-of-art and development of social commerce. We hope they could make better business decisions and strategies.

This paper is structured as follows. We introduce the research method in the next section, followed by an explanation of our findings, and finally, conclude with a summary and a brief explanation of this study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

Methodology

Literature identification and collection

We select Science Direct and Emerald as our academic databases, which are regarded as among the most important bibliographic databases for scientific research. The keywords used in the research articles should take into account as much relevant material as feasible while without venturing too far into irrelevant disciplines (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). To answer the research questions of this study directly, we retrieve articles with the keywords social commerce or s-commerce from the selected databases. We limit the search by publication year from 2013 to 2021, because of the rapid development of the academic study on this subject in the past decade.

To select the relevant articles and discard irrelevant ones, we manually read the full-text articles to ensure they are in accordance with our research objectives. We record our data using Mendeley and Microsoft Excel to systematically organize articles and exclude the duplicated ones. In this stage, we extract the accurate and related information, with 30 pieces of articles finally retrieved by our selection criteria.

Temporal view of publication

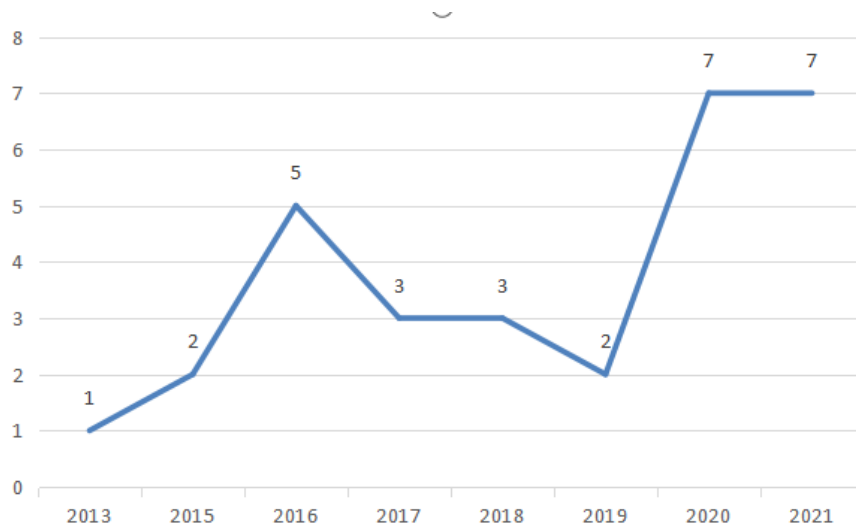


Figure 2. Social commerce articles contribution trend from 2013 to 2021

The trend of publications on social commerce context from 2013 to 2021 is depicted in Figure 2. As it is can be seen clearly from the graph, the number of publications on social commerce subject has increased gradually in the past 8 years with slight ups and downs. There were only two slight drops in the publication from the year 2016 to 2017 and 2018 to 2019; nevertheless, the curve rebounded and arrived at its peak in the year 2020, and it will continue to rise as of the end of 2021.

Findings

RQ1: What are the research themes that are mentioned in the literature?

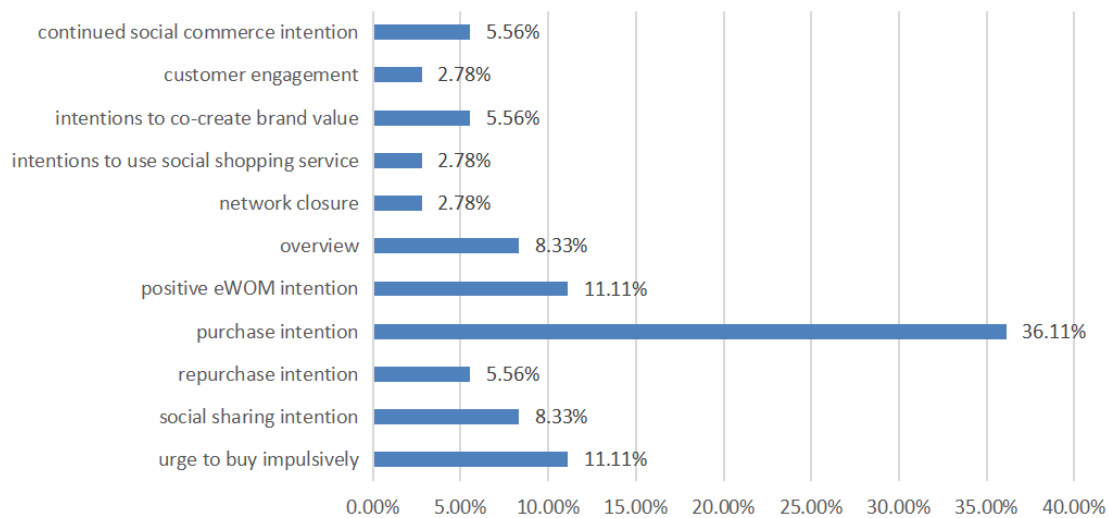


Figure 3. Distribution of social commerce articles by research theme

The research theme is the core problem researchers intend to solve in a study, which, to some extent, could reflect the trend or tendency of researchers' interests. In this study, we categorize the research theme of social commerce into the following: continued social commerce intention, customer engagement, intentions to co-create brand value, intentions to use social shopping service, network closure, an overview of social commerce, positive eWOM intention, purchase intention, repurchase intention, social sharing intention, and urge to buy impulsively. Figure 3 shows the distribution of social commerce articles by research theme.

We can notice clearly from the graph that the purchase intention lies in the first place in terms of research theme distribution, with a total of 13 pieces of articles, covering 36.11% of the past studies in the social commerce context. Following purchase intention is the research theme of positive eWOM intention, as well as urge to buy impulsively, which both take up 11.11%, with 4 pieces of articles lying in the category respectively. Next, researchers are also very interested in review articles and study on social sharing intentions, where 8.33% of all articles can be classified into this theme, followed by continued social commerce intention, intentions to co-create brand value, repurchase intention, customer engagement, intentions to use social shopping service and network closure.

RQ2: What are the key factors affecting customers' purchase intention on social commerce platforms?

Table 1. Major antecedents that impact customers' purchase intention on social commerce

Factors	Studies	Total number of studies
Customer perceived value	(Ryu & Park, 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Molinillo et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021)	5
Deal scarcity	(Song et al., 2017; Sohn & Kim, 2020)	2
Economy	(Sohn & Kim, 2020; Wang & Davison, 2020)	2
Hedonic	(Akram et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2021)	2

Information availability	(Akram et al., 2021; Phan et al., 2020; Meilatinova, 2021)	3
Interactivity	(Liu et al., 2021; Tajvidi et al., 2021; Vonkeman et al., 2017; Xiang et al., 2016; Sohn & Kim, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021)	7
Necessity	(Xiang et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2020)	2
Normative social influence	(Fu et al., 2020; Akram et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020)	3
Perceived information quality	(Fu et al., 2020; Molinillo et al., 2021; Chen & Shen, 2015; Xiang et al., 2016)	4
Perceived member expertise	(Fu et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2016)	3
Perceived member familiarity	(Fu et al., 2020; Hajli et al., 2017b; Vonkeman et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2016; Al-Adwan & Kokash, 2019)	5
Perceived member similarity	(Fu et al., 2020; Chen & Shen, 2015; Xiang et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2016)	4
Social presence	(Jiang et al., 2019; Hajli et al., 2017b; Vonkeman et al., 2017; Al-Adwan & Kokash, 2019)	4
Social support	(Jiang et al., 2019; J. Chen & Shen, 2015; Molinillo et al., 2020; Yang, 2021; Tajvidi et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2021)	6
Trust	(Jiang et al., 2019; Chen & Shen, 2015; Molinillo et al., 2020; Hajli et al., 2017b; Yang, 2021; Chen & Shen, 2015; Meilatinova, 2021; Al-Adwan & Kokash, 2019)	8

A broad variety of factors affecting customers' purchase intention have been investigated by previous studies in the context of social commerce. Table 1 shows the major antecedents that have been examined more than twice in our selected articles. Among these factors, most are social-oriented and informational related. To be specific, as it is depicted in the table, trust is the most frequently measured factor significantly impacting customers' purchase intention, which is the antecedent in 8 articles, followed by interactivity, which is examined by 7 articles as it is significantly related to purchase intention. Social support is the independent variable in 6 articles. Factors of perceived member familiarity and customer perceived value are also characterized by our selected articles as significant antecedents that impact customers' behavioral intentions. Similarly, social presence, perceived member similarity, perceived information quality, perceived member expertise, normative social influence, information availability, necessity, hedonic, economy, deal scarcity, etc. are also found to be significantly related to purchase intention.

RQ3: Which theories were employed to examine the mechanism of social commerce?

Table 2. Underlying theories in the literature

Theory	Studies	Total number of studies
Brand equity theory	(Liu et al., 2020)	1
Cognitive-affective framework	(Vonkeman et al., 2017)	1
Commitment-trust theory	(Chen & Shen, 2015)	1
Construal level theory	(Song et al., 2017; Vonkeman et al., 2017)	2
Environmental psychology theory	(Xiang et al., 2016)	1

Information economics theory	(Liu et al., 2020)	1
Information gap theory	(Shin & Lee, 2021)	1
Information support theory	(Jiang et al., 2019)	1
Loyalty theory	(Molinillo et al., 2020)	1
Motivation theory	(Hu et al., 2021)	1
Network closure theory	(Xiao et al., 2015)	1
Parasocial interaction (PSI) theory	(Xiang et al., 2016)	1
Relationship quality theory	(Tajvidi et al., 2021)	1
Self-congruity theory	(Liu et al., 2020)	1
Signaling theory	(Chen et al., 2019)	1
Social capital theory	(Yang, 2021)	1
Social identity theory	(Molinillo et al., 2020)	1
Social learning theory	(Akram et al., 2021; Shin & Lee, 2021)	2
Social network theory	(Sohn & Kim, 2020)	1
Social power theory	(Wang & Davison, 2020)	1
Social presence theory	(Al-Adwan & Kokash, 2019; Hajli et al., 2017b; Jiang et al., 2019)	3
Social support theory	(Chen & Shen, 2015; Hu et al., 2021; Molinillo et al., 2020; Tajvidi et al., 2021; Yang, 2021)	5
Stimulus-organism-response model	(Liu et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021; Molinillo et al., 2021; Phan et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2016)	5
Similarity-attraction theory	(Fu et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2016)	2
The theory of informational social influence	(Fu et al., 2020)	1
The Theory of Reasoned Action	(Liu et al., 2021; Sohn & Kim, 2020)	2
Theory of heuristic information processing	(Chen et al., 2019)	1
Trust theory	(Hajli et al., 2017b; Meilatinova, 2021)	2
Trust transfer theory	(Chen & Shen, 2015)	1

Various theories have been adopted by previous studies to understand social commerce. Table 2 depicts the underlying theories identified in our select articles. As can be seen from the table, the stimulus-organism-response model and social support theory are the most commonly employed theories in our reviewed literature, which have 5 articles respectively. Following that, the social presence theory is adopted by 3 articles. Besides, social learning theory, similarity-attraction theory, trust theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action, and construal level theory are also widely employed in our reviewed literature, which has at least 2 articles adopted respectively.

First of all, there have been great interests in various studies to examine the influence of environmental cues, whether audible or visible, on customers' behavior through a mediating role of customers' cognitive or emotional state. The Stimulus-organism-response model is an ideal theory to be applied to understand this issue. To be specific, the stimulus includes some environmental factors, such as website design, sales, and other customers, etc. (Parboteeah et al., 2009). Organism refers to customers' mental states, including perceived values, customers involvement, informative and emotional states, etc. (Jiang et al., 2010). The response represents customers' behavior, such as purchase intention, repurchase intention, positive eWOM intention, and urge to buy impulsively, etc. (Xue et al., 2020). The Stimulus-organism-response

model has been widely applied as an appropriate technique to understand customers' behavior on a social commerce platform because it examines the influence of environmental cues of social commerce on customers' perceptions and purchase decisions.

Then, it is not surprising to notice that social-related theories are also commonly adopted in selected articles of this study, due to the social nature of social commerce studies. As we can see from Table 2, these social related theories include social support theory, social presence theory, social learning theory, social capital theory, social identity theory, social network theory, and social power theory. The social support theory implies the supports obtained from social commerce platforms, such as informational support and emotional support. The recommendations, emotional care, and concerns from peers in social commerce communities can help customers solve problems encountered in the information-seeking process, thus making better purchase decisions (Yang, 2021). Besides, social presence theory indicates that to achieve a better communication experience, the communication medium should have a certain extent of social presence to enable interpersonal activities. Social presence theory is very significant in the social commerce context because it lacks face-to-face communication when it comes to a social commerce platform. With a social presence, customers are enabled to get access to useful information, social experiences, and valuable knowledge which facilitate customers to make better purchase decisions (Jiang et al., 2019). Social learning theory is also used in many articles on social commerce, which describe that users are provided with various information and knowledge generated by other users on social commerce platforms (Chen et al., 2017).

RQ4: What were the major research methods used by previous studies to explore social commerce?

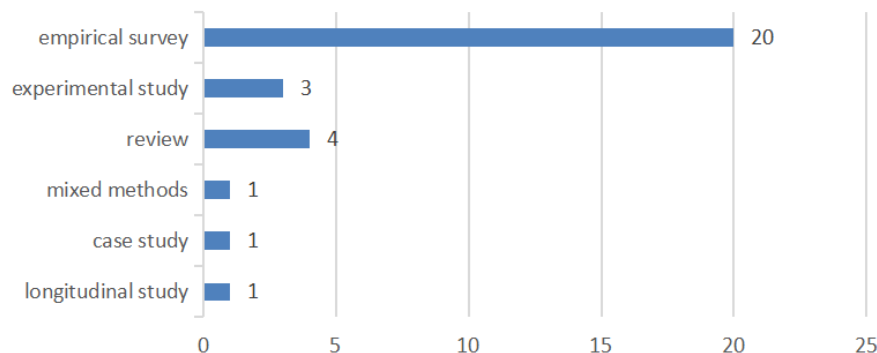


Figure 4. Number of articles by research methods

Previous studies adopted various research methods to investigate the mechanism hidden behind social commerce. The research methods employed in our selected articles include empirical survey, experimental study, review, mixed methods, case study, and longitudinal study. As can be seen clearly from Figure 4, a majority of studies adopted quantitative research method, for example, empirical survey, experimental study, which account for 23 out of 30 in total selected studies, followed by qualitative research method, including review and case study, with 5 articles falling into this category. There is only 1 study using mixed research methods, which means qualitative and quantitative methods are both applied in the researches.

Empirical survey and experimental study are two research methods widely adopted as quantitative research. In our review, the empirical survey was the most frequently used, because questionnaires are employed to contact a huge amount of individuals on social

commerce platforms and collect data of a variety of theoretically relevant constructs. In a contrast, an experimental study is only used by 10% of studies in our literature. This might be due to that it takes time to make a website design, since experimental websites on social commerce platforms have to be built to examine customers' behavior, and manipulation and control of variables should be taken into accounts during the experimental design process. Additionally, it is also noticeable that 1 study out of 30 applied mixed methods to examine the social commerce context. Wang & Davison (2020) first conducted an interview to test which dimensions in the social power of influencers affect followers' purchase intention on social commerce platforms. Then, to further measure the effects of antecedents on consequences, an online survey was designed to collect data on proposed hypotheses.

Conclusion

The objective of this study is to provide a clear view of the concept of social commerce by a literature review approach. Although the past decade has witnessed the rapid growth of the concept of social commerce, a systematic understanding of this subject is still lacking (Huang & Benyoucef, 2014). To achieve the objective of this study, 4 research questions are successfully answered: RQ1: What are the research themes that are mentioned in the literature? RQ2: What are the key factors affecting customers' purchase intention on social commerce platforms? RQ3: Which theories are employed to examine the mechanism of social commerce? RQ4: What were the major research methods used by previous studies to explore social commerce?

A literature review approach is adopted to answer these research questions, and studies between 2013 to 2021 are included in our review. After following a study selection process automatically and manually based on our criteria, 30 pieces of articles are selected which focus on the context of social commerce. Other articles are excluded because they neither meet our criteria nor reach our quality level.

In data analysis, research themes of previous studies are identified and classified in this review study. Purchase intention is the theme of 13 pieces of articles, covering 36.11% of the past studies in the social commerce context. Following that is the research theme of positive eWOM intention, as well as urge to buy impulsively, which both take up 11.11%, with 4 pieces of articles lying in the category respectively. Additionally, major antecedents influencing purchase intention on social commerce platforms are examined in our review. Among these factors, trust is the most frequently measured factor significantly impacting customers' purchase intention, which is the antecedent in 8 articles, followed by interactivity, which is examined by 7 articles as it is significantly related to purchase intention. Social support is the independent variable in 6 articles. Besides, the theoretical background of the selected articles is also reviewed and classified. Stimulus-organism-response model and social support theory are the most commonly employed theories in our reviewed literature, which account for 16.7% respectively. It is not surprising to notice that social-related theories are also commonly adopted in selected articles of this study, due to the social nature of social commerce studies. Lastly, research methods adopted in these studies are also identified in our review. 76.7% of studies applied quantitative research methods, which are empirical survey and experimental study, followed by review and qualitative study.

Overall, this paper provides a bird's eye view on the topic of social commerce studies conducted over the span of 8 years (2013 to 2021). For marketing practitioners and scholars alike, this study serves as a 'shortcut' to understand and get an overview of the development of social commerce studies carried out throughout the years.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. First, our findings are subjected to these selected articles which meet our articles selection criteria. For example, we only select articles in which the definition of social commerce is described and indicated, to ensure they are related to our research objective. Thus, those articles that may include social commerce context are not selected. Additionally, we only select from peer-reviewed journals, so, conference papers are excluded in our criteria. Future studies are suggested to include a broader pool of databases, to provide a clearer picture in terms of social commerce-related studies. Although our analysis and findings can give academicians and practitioners some insights into this prevailing phenomenon, more evaluation and research are required to investigate the suitability of various social commerce platforms for business. Last but not least, this study adopted the conventional literature review method, which means it does not strictly follow a systematic literature review process. In future research, we suggest employing a systematic literature review approach, to conduct a more extensive review, and address more aspects concerning social commerce.

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