

SOCIAL

FUNCTIONS OF TRADE: REVIEW

FUNCIONES SOCIALES DEL COMERCIO: REVISIÓN

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to summarize the social functions of trade and examine the impact of digitalization on their implementation. The study utilized publications uploaded to the SciSpace system and indexed by the Elibrary Scientific Electronic Library. Based on the articles studied, the social functions mentioned in different contexts in research focusing on other aspects of trade are summarized, and the results of studies on the influence of digitalization on the social functions of trade are reviewed. It is shown that, in addition to its basic function of meeting consumer demand, trade performs a number of other social functions, namely: serving as an indicator of social status, meeting sociocommunicative needs, organizing leisure, transmitting cultural values and bridging cultural differences, creating jobs and opportunities for self-realization in entrepreneurial activities, contributing to the development of production and other related industries, supporting the development of urban areas, and contributing to the budget through taxes. Given these functions, trade influences the quality of life and well-being of society. The conclusion is drawn that the composition of trade's social functions is universal across its various forms and formats.

Keywords: Trade, Retail trade, Social functions, Population needs, E-Commerce, Digitalization.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es resumir las funciones sociales del comercio y examinar el impacto de la digitalización en su implementación. El estudio utilizó publicaciones cargadas en el sistema SciSpace e indexadas por la Biblioteca Electrónica Científica Library. Con base en los artículos estudiados, se resumen las funciones sociales mencionadas en diferentes contextos en investigaciones centradas en otros aspectos del comercio y se revisan los resultados de estudios sobre la influencia de la digitalización en las funciones sociales del comercio. Se demuestra que, además de su función básica de satisfacer la demanda de los consumidores, el comercio desempeña una serie de otras funciones sociales, a saber: servir como indicador de estatus social, satisfacer necesidades sociocomunicativas, organizar el ocio, transmitir valores culturales y superar diferencias culturales, crear empleos y oportunidades para la autorrealización en actividades empresariales, contribuir al desarrollo de la producción y otras industrias relacionadas, apoyar el desarrollo de áreas urbanas y contribuir al presupuesto a través de impuestos. Dadas estas funciones, el comercio

influye en la calidad de vida y el bienestar de la sociedad. Se concluye que la composición de las funciones sociales del comercio es universal en sus diversas formas y formatos.

Palabras clave: Comercio, Comercio minorista, Funciones sociales, Necesidades de la población, Comercio electrónico, Digitalización.

INTRODUCTION

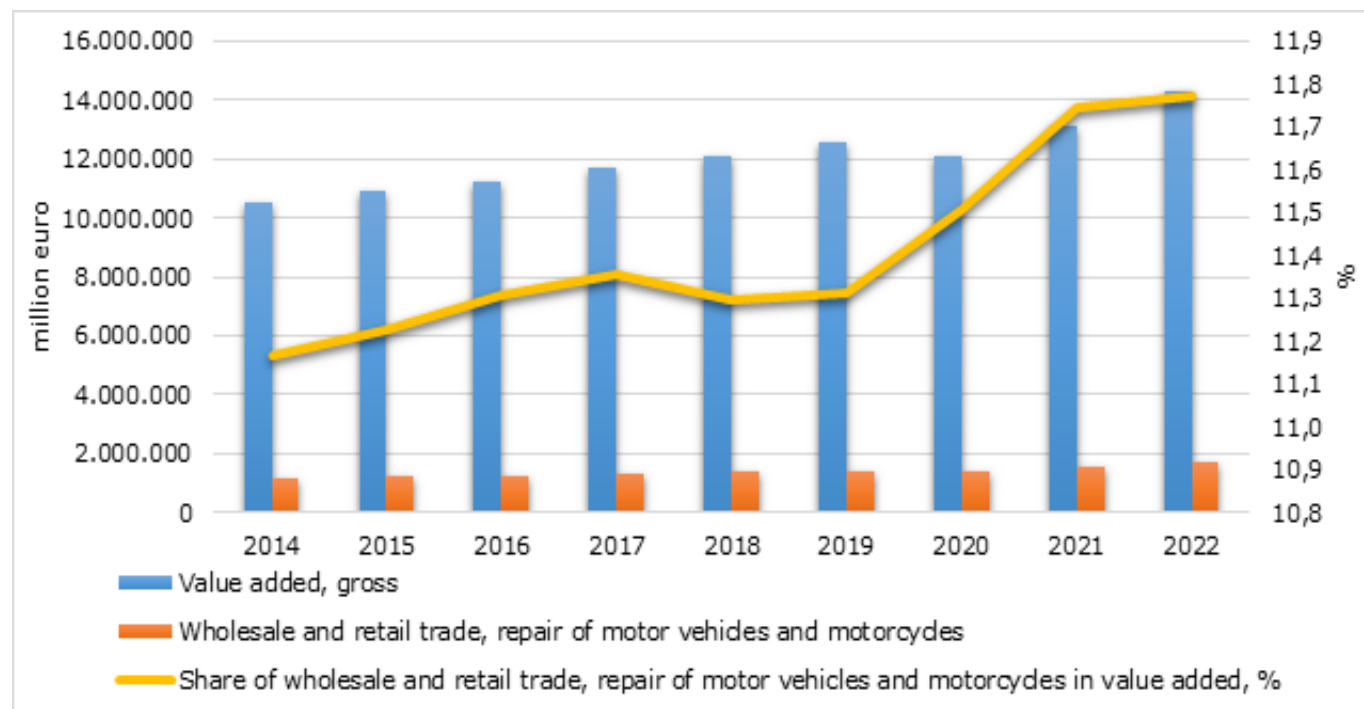
Trade is one of the main sectors of the economy and holds significant socio-economic importance. In the European Union, domestic trade (wholesale and retail, including the repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles) ranks second in share of gross value added across all industries, second only to manufacturing.

The share of trade has shown a growth trend (Figure 1). In Russia, the contribution of trade to gross value added has been even greater over many years – in 2011, its share exceeded 17%, and by the end of 2022, it was 13%, ranking behind industrial production and mineral extraction. Preliminary data for 2023 indicate that trade surpassed the traditional mineral extraction sector of the Russian economy and, with a 13.4% share, holds second place in gross value added, following industrial production at 13.7%.

Trade is often viewed from a commercial perspective, primarily in terms of improving its economic outcomes and maximizing economic efficiency – sales, profit, productivity, profitability, and other indicators. However, firstly, trade, alongside its economic role, also performs social functions and yields social benefits (Barkalova, 2022; Salikhova & Ivanov, 2022; Suvorova, 2019), and secondly, better meeting stakeholder needs, aligning with societal interests, contributes to improved economic results in trade. Therefore, studying the social functions of trade is relevant both from the societal viewpoint and within the business context. Amidst significant changes linked to the adoption of digital technologies, analyzing the fulfillment of social functions under digitalization processes is particularly important.

The purpose of this article is to analyze and summarize the social functions of trade in the context of digitalization and to examine the impact of digital technologies on their implementation.

Fig 1. Trade in Gross Value Added in the European Union in 2022.



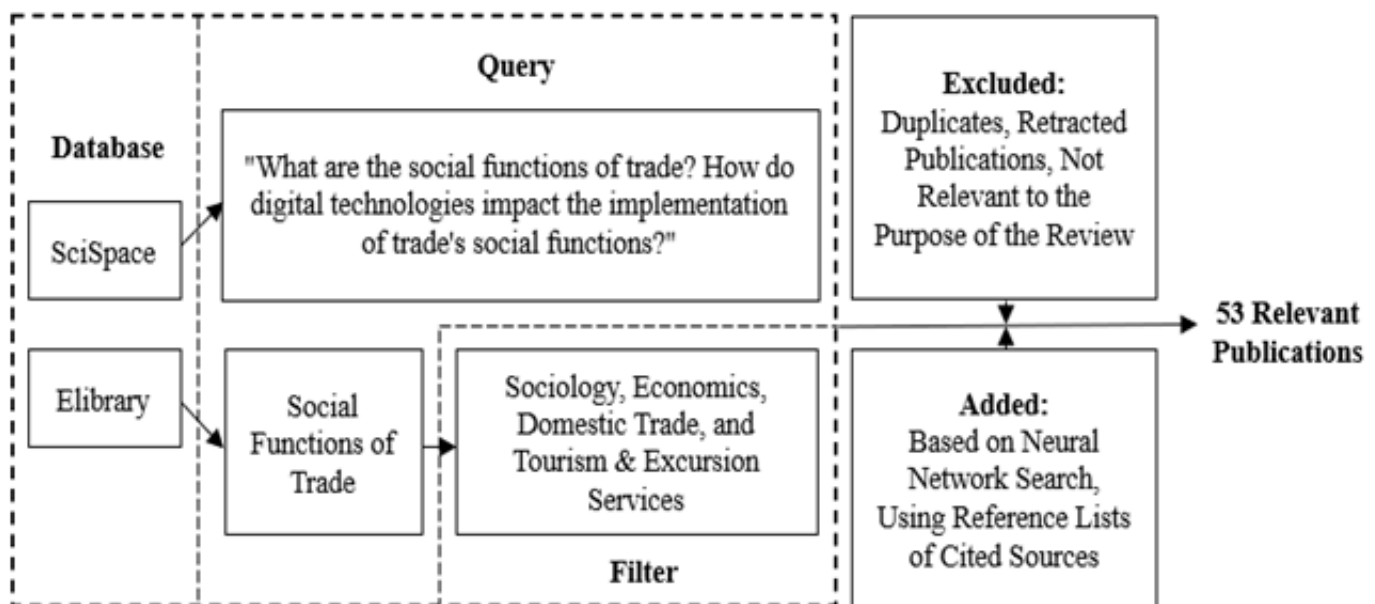
Source: own elaboration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The review utilized publications uploaded to the SciSpace system (www.typeset.io) and indexed by the Elibrary Scientific Electronic Library (www.elibrary.ru).

SciSpace includes over 200 million works and allows literature searches on specific research questions. The search focused on "What are the social functions of trade?" and "How do digital technologies influence the implementation of trade's social functions?" Filters by period, publication type, keywords, journals, etc., were not applied. E-library offers access to texts from over 38 million scientific publications and patents, where a search for "Social functions of trade" was conducted in publication titles and keywords (including morphological variations). As of June 4, 2024, this search yielded a list of 257 publications without additional filters. Narrowing down the topics to "sociology," "economics," and "domestic trade, tourism, and excursion services" reduced the list to 144. In the second stage, duplicate and retracted publications were excluded, and works not relevant to the review's objective were removed. Articles closely related by topic were added based on neural network searches and the reference lists of reviewed sources. As a result, the review included 53 publications directly addressing or touching upon trade's social functions in broader research contexts (Figure 2). Studies on corporate social responsibility and social efficiency of trade were not included in the review.

Fig 2. Publication Selection Scheme for the Review.

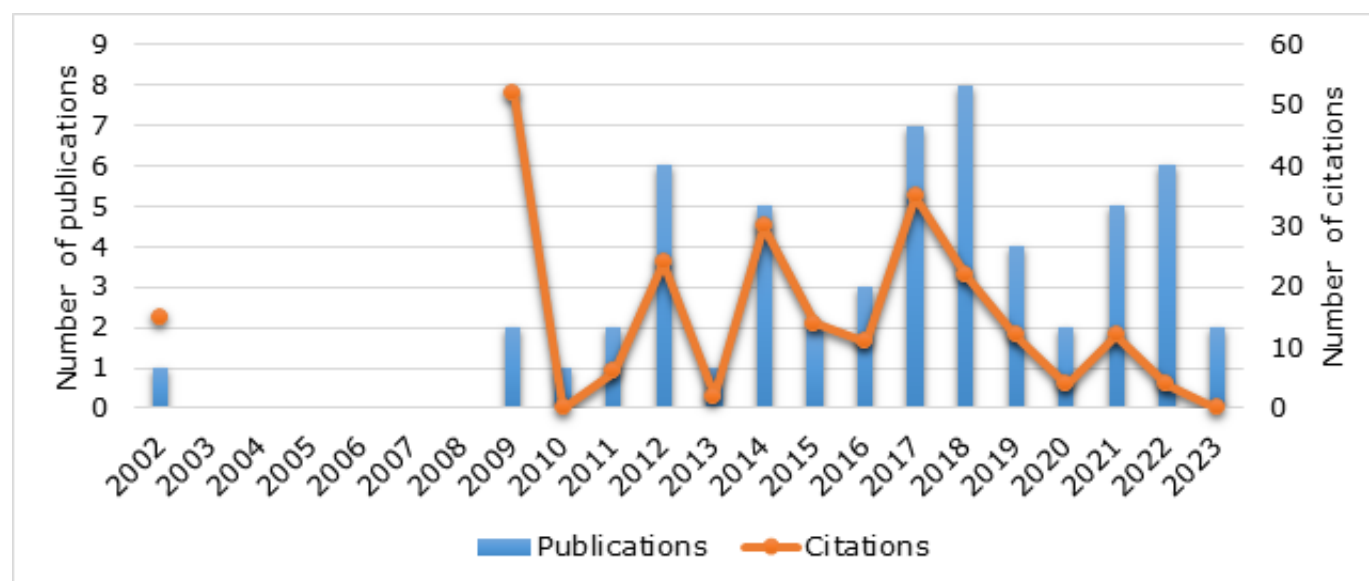


Source: own elaboration.

One of the reviewed articles was published in 2002, while the rest were published in 2009 and later (Figure 3). It concluded that there is a need to move beyond the immediate profit-maximization focus and shift towards the concept of macro-retail trade. The most cited works were from 2009, authored by Borodai (2009). This includes a doctoral dissertation in sociology, aimed at revealing the social characteristics and social functions of trade, and an article on the importance of social communication, sociocommunicative needs, and their fulfillment in the consumption process. The most recent studies address the social functions of trade in the context of trade development amid digitalization and, in particular, the impact of e-commerce on retail trade (Sudheer et al., 2023).

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, publications that directly presented the composition (system) of trade's social functions were reviewed. Next, works that indicated social functions in relation to specific forms and formats of trade, such as cooperative trade, online trade, retail chains, retail markets, shopping centers, etc., were analyzed. In the third stage, social functions mentioned in various contexts in studies focused on other aspects of trade were summarized. In the fourth stage, the results of studies on the impact of digitalization on the performance of trade's social functions were reviewed.

Fig 3. Number of Publications Included in the Review and Their Citations.



Source: own elaboration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The composition of trade's social functions was refined within the context of both sociological and economic studies.

In sociology, Borodai's (2009), work was the most extensive, developing a system of social functions in his doctoral dissertation "Social and Institutional Analysis of Trade in Modern Society," which included:

- Organizational-distributive function (trade accumulates resources at certain systemic levels and distributes them within the system hierarchy),
- Social adaptation function (trade provides resources to meet the system's changing needs, allowing it to adapt to new external conditions),
- Social integration function (trade establishes principles of system unity and solidarity among participants),
- Socialization function (trade influences individual motivation; trading practices establish societal behavioral patterns and norms),
- Social stratification function (trade represents structured exchange practices),
- Social communication function (trade transfers information, enriching social systems' informational resource base),
- Social transformation function (based on a synergetic approach, where society is an open system constantly interacting with the environment).

Later, Aborvalova (2012), defined within the system of social functions of trade an intermediary function (trade facilitates the interaction between producers and consumers), a social stratification function (trade serves as an indicator of dividing individuals into specific strata), and a sociocultural transmission and innovation function (implemented by moving goods from one region to another and distributing them within the social system). She also identified functions aimed at providing services to producers and consumers, such as relieving producers from the need to engage directly with numerous consumers, providing market information to producers and consumers, advertising, forecasting consumer demand and more.

Researches recognize trade as a societal system, basing the classification of social functions on Parsons' methodology of system-functional analysis. They also emphasize the importance of distinguishing between manifest and latent social functions of trade, according to Merton's concept.

Alongside sociologists, economists have also addressed the composition of trade's social functions. Salikhova & Ivanov (2022), categorized the entirety of trade functions into:

- Economic function (impact on social reproduction through ensuring commodity and monetary circulation, delivering products to end consumers, and maintaining a balance between supply and demand),
- Social function (forming trade assortment, satisfying consumer demand for goods and services, providing additional services to consumers, improving trade technology, and creating jobs in trade),
- Market function (studying supply and demand, advertising and informational work, developing effective sales methods),
- Temporal function (organizing goods movement and delivering them to consumers through spatial distribution).

As we can see, the characteristics of the economic, market, and temporal functions, not only the purely social function, partially overlap with the content of social functions of trade identified by Borodai (2009); and Aborvalova (2012).

Kosikhin et al. (2021), in the context of analyzing the competitiveness of trade workers, examine the social adaptation, social integration, and social communication functions, which are also included in Borodai's (2009), system, as well as the socialization function. For the latter, there is a noted risk of reduction or even loss due to the disruption of "seller-buyer" and "buyer-buyer" interactions when trade moves online. According to Suvorova (2019), the social function of trade lies in improving the population's quality of life by maintaining social stability, meeting needs, and creating jobs.

The social functions of retail and wholesale trade are examined separately. Authors in analyzing retail trade in the Republic of Tajikistan, identify economic and social functions, such as supporting high living standards, employment, small business development, and economic growth. Retail trade influences the volume and structure of consumer goods production and, alongside its positive impact on financial stability, creates conditions for the development of the social sphere – healthcare, education, culture, and sports. Wholesale trade performs price smoothing, integrative functions, and serves as a condition for sustainable socio-economic development of the region, ensuring the population's livelihood and improving living standards.

Although studies that explicitly enumerate the social functions of trade are few, individual functions are

considered within the context of various forms and formats of trade.

A body of work addresses the social functions of cooperative trade. Cooperative trade is conducted by consumer societies and unions, which are non-profit organizations, giving it a distinct social significance. Consumer cooperatives are intended to "enhance the purchasing power of the population, contribute to income growth, create new jobs, increase rural employment, purchase agricultural products grown by residents" (Nabiyeva & Brodsky, 2021). Ultimately, its social function manifests in retail turnover and the volume of paid services provided to the population. Authors note that the social functions of consumer cooperatives contribute to the moral development of rural residents by strengthening ties with shareholders, developing benefits for shareholders, improving pay for sellers, organizing community leisure, providing tea tables and libraries, informing the population, promoting cooperative values, strengthening ties with the clergy, organizing religious festivals, identifying employment needs, attracting the population to work in consumer cooperatives, creating playgrounds, and landscaping surrounding areas.

Social functions are inherent in both network trade and small business trade. Retail chains create jobs, offer a wide range of products at relatively low prices, help curb food inflation, generate significant tax revenues, support the distribution of products from major producers, contribute to the formation and growth of the country's social capital, and encourage the development of small businesses through franchising (Mayorova et al., 2019).

In small trade enterprises, social functions are associated, firstly, with employment and improving people's material well-being, which fosters the middle class (Gishkaeva, 2022), and secondly, with meeting the consumer demand of specific population groups (pensioners, people with disabilities, women with small children, schoolchildren, etc.). According to Gishkaeva (2022), additional but equally important social functions of small business include preventing negative social outcomes by reducing crime and drug addiction, as well as creating opportunities for self-realization for enterprising and initiative-driven individuals.

In the context of small trade enterprises, markets play a special role with their social functions, providing employment opportunities, especially for those with difficulties finding work in other areas or who have lost traditional income sources. They also support self-realization in entrepreneurship, offer a variety of affordable goods for middle- and low-income consumers, provide a sales outlet for farm and craft products, and foster social interactions

(markets as “meeting places” and centers for cultural integration). Markets also help control retail price growth. Kovalevskaya's (2021), historical study interestingly examines market trade during the crisis of the 1990s as an unconditional benefit and means of survival for the population in Russia's Far East, though it was later perceived by participants as a traumatic experience associated with a temporary “borderline” social status, humiliating and unnecessary within a normal life trajectory.

Among specific trade formats, considerable attention is given to the social functions of shopping centers. Firstly, shopping centers serve as places for leisure, entertainment, and social interaction, fulfilling the function of organizing recreational activities (Baghaee et al., 2020, 2021). Shopping centers' role as centers of social activity is their main competitive advantage over online trade, which lacks physical space and thus cannot perform such social functions. Secondly, shopping centers' social role is considered in the context of urban development (Rahimi & Khazaei, 2018). Rational placement of shopping centers in cities “reduces unproductive time costs... and increases the share of free time, allowing the population to make extensive use of public service enterprises”. Kunc et al. (2022), rightly state that “shopping centers do not operate in a vacuum but in a society of diverse stakeholders,” and enhancing shopping centers' social role is necessary to maintain employee well-being, increase customer loyalty, and positively impact profitability and growth.

Regardless of trade forms and formats, several social functions are highlighted by researchers in various trade studies:

- Ensuring a certain level of well-being through meeting consumer demand and mediating between market society institutions (Barkalova, 2022);
- Promoting a healthy lifestyle, particularly proper nutrition and conscious (sustainable) consumption (Nasrtdinov, 2020);
- Facilitating sociocultural exchange, bridging cultural differences, and fostering cultural and social values;
- Establishing social status (Ahmed et al., 2022; Barkalova, 2022);
- Organizing leisure and fulfilling sociocommunicative needs (Salikhova, 2019);
- Generating tax revenue for the state budget, which is subsequently used for social purposes (Barkalova, 2022).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying the impact of digitalization on the social functions of trade, with mixed results.

On one hand, the structural transformation of trade due to online growth supports the fulfillment of its socio-economic functions. The development of digital ecosystems, in particular, creates a synergistic socio-economic effect for all participants and, at the macro level, results in societal well-being and improved quality of life by creating consumer value through technological platforms, consolidating resources and competencies within a self-regulating ecosystem. In Japan, Jo et al. (2022), found that e-commerce reduced inflation rates for products actively sold online, with an average reduction in retail prices by 0.9% from 1996 to 2014 after adjusting for assortment.

Digitalization also supports the social functions of trade in the context of labor practices. Trade has traditionally involved a high share of manual labor, and significant reductions in human involvement have only become possible with the spread of digital technologies (Kosikhin, 2021). Shibana (2021), emphasizes that e-commerce expands employment and earning opportunities, especially for housewives, enabling them to increase self-esteem and social status.

On the other hand, negative consequences of e-commerce's impact on the labor market have been observed. Using data on 2.6 million retail workers, Chava et al. (2023), found that the expansion of e-commerce centers reduced the income of traditional retail workers in geographically nearby areas by 2.4%.

Simultaneously, digitalization increases the risk of reducing or even losing the socialization function of trade, as it disrupts “seller-buyer” and “buyer-buyer” interactions. It also raises risks related to consumer rights and unethical behavior of buyers and sellers in transactions (Kosikhin, 2021). Some researches offer a different perspective, arguing that the social qualities of the online environment are underestimated and analyzes how web content affects emotions and shopping enjoyment, using fashion products as an example. Social aspects of trade through social networks are also separately studied. Researches connect the motivation to shop on social networks with the quality and usefulness of posted information, as well as a sense of community, belonging, entertainment, and enjoyment.

In analyzing the social aspects of trade in the context of digitalization, researchers do not suggest the emergence of fundamentally new social functions but demonstrate that the development of digital technologies has both positive and negative effects on the realization of trade's social functions. Therefore, it is essential for science to focus on maximizing the effective use of digital technologies

to fulfill trade's social functions while minimizing the risks associated with digitalization.

The social functions of trade are far broader and more diverse than its immediate purpose – to satisfy consumer demand for goods (considering product range, services, price levels, time savings in purchasing, etc.).

Before allocating resources to meet consumer demand, trade accumulates them, stimulating producer activities, including in agriculture. Trade provides employment, including opportunities for entrepreneurial interests in small businesses. Trade also reflects individual social status and manifests social stratification. It influences culture and social expectations, promotes sociocultural exchange, and helps bridge cultural differences. Key functions include fulfilling sociocommunicative needs, organizing leisure, encouraging sustainable consumption, and promoting a healthy lifestyle, including proper nutrition. Additionally, trade activity generates tax revenue needed for societal needs and impacts regional and urban development. It is generally recognized that effective trade, by fulfilling these functions, contributes to an improved quality of life and increased societal well-being.

Some studies reviewed focus specifically on the social aspects of trade from a sociological perspective, while others combine both social and economic aspects of trade. For instance, trade is described as the “function of two interrelated processes and phenomena: economic – exchanging goods for money to make a profit, and social – ensuring a certain level of well-being by meeting consumer demand”. It appears that implementing trade's economic functions, such as generating turnover and profit, is impossible without a social context. Economic indicators directly depend on meeting the needs of consumers, employees, and other stakeholders. In turn, the social component of trade implies an economic rationale. Therefore, it is accurate to consider the social and economic functions as interconnected and interdependent, viewing them collectively as “socio-economic” functions.

The review shows that social functions are characteristic of different forms and formats of trade – cooperative trade, e-commerce, retail chains, markets, shopping centers, etc. However, no fundamental differences in the composition of social functions were identified; their specific features manifest in the implementation process. For example, both retail chains and small enterprises fulfill the function of providing employment. Retail chains create a large number of jobs with career growth potential, while small trade businesses provide opportunities for entrepreneurship and self-realization. Stores with various price levels (discount stores, outlets, specialty stores, boutiques,

etc.) meet the needs of different social groups, collectively contributing to social stratification. It seems that all existing trade forms and formats perform social functions as long as they satisfy a specific portion of consumer demand, even if they may not be suitable for other consumer segments.

The most debated issue in the reviewed studies is the impact of digitalization on trade's social functions, including e-commerce. The results are contradictory. On one hand, a positive effect is noted in more fully meeting population needs, as reflected in inflation slowdown, reduced manual labor, expanded employment opportunities, and increased earning potential and status (Kosikhin, 2021; Jo et al., 2022; Shibana, 2021;). On the other hand, negative impacts of e-commerce on traditional retail workers' wages have been identified, as well as risks of losing the sociocommunicative (socializing) function (Chava et al., 2023; Kosikhin, 2021;). Furthermore, some researchers argue that e-commerce “lacks physical spaces and thus cannot perform social functions”.

In our view, digitalization has not led to the creation of fundamentally new social functions in trade but has significantly transformed the implementation of existing ones. This transformation indeed brings risks typical of any innovations but also creates positive opportunities, such as improving service quality by reducing purchasing time and improving working conditions by reducing labor intensity. The lack of face-to-face interaction in social network-based commerce is compensated by expanding communication with like-minded individuals in the virtual environment. A crucial task for contemporary science and practice is to develop tools that will promote a fuller realization of social functions through digital technologies while minimizing negative consequences and risks.

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CONCLUSIONS

The review showed that, in addition to its basic function of meeting consumer demand, trade performs several other social functions, namely: it serves as an indicator of social status, fulfills sociocommunicative needs, organizes leisure activities, transmits cultural values and bridges cultural differences, creates jobs and opportunities for self-realization in entrepreneurial activities, promotes the development of production and related industries, contributes to urban development, and adds to the budget through taxes. These functions allow trade to influence the quality of life and the well-being of society.

The composition of trade's social functions is universal across its forms and formats. All formats are significant, perform social functions, and meet some part of consumer demand, albeit with different implementation mechanisms. For example, the function of organizing leisure is implemented differently in a shopping center, a trade cooperative, and an online store, but is characteristic of each. The social functions of trade are interconnected and interdependent with economic functions and should be considered collectively.

The impact of digitalization on the implementation of trade's social functions remains a subject of debate. Research findings are contradictory, with both positive and negative consequences and risks identified. So far, digitalization has not led to the creation of fundamentally new social functions in trade, but it has transformed the fulfillment of existing ones. An important direction for further research is to develop mechanisms and tools to manage the digitalization processes in trade that will support the fuller realization of its social functions and meet population needs while minimizing risks.

Publications focusing on corporate social responsibility and social efficiency of trade were not included in the review. Their analysis in future research would deepen understanding of the social aspects of trade activity and complement the presented findings and conclusions.

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