

BEYOND THE PRODUCT: THE ROLE OF PERSONAL BRAND ORIENTATION IN TRANSFORMING SME PERFORMANCE IN SOCIAL COMMERCE

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ABSTRACT

The main modification in the competitive logic of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with the increase in social commerce platforms has been the shift of value creation toward relations rather than products. Although brand equity based on the classical theory of brand orientation is supposed to be as a result of product differentiation and the constant organizational messages, the theory is not sufficient to explain the differences in performances of SMEs operating in algorithmically mediated social commerce contexts where corporativeness in human stories is more prioritized than organizational aesthetics. This paper examines the mediating role of Personal Brand Orientation (PBO), as the strategic focus on founder expertise, authenticity, and accessibility as organizational resources, on the performance outcomes of SMEs. We establish three key mechanisms by which PBO alters SME performance through the development of conceptual framework integrating brand orientation theory and entrepreneurship and platform studies literatures, which are trust transference that low-brand-awareness context reduce perceived risk on the part of the consumer, algorithmic visibility benefits inherent to person-forward content strategy, and community co-creation capabilities that improve customer lifetime value. Nonetheless, there are major boundary conditions as our analysis shows such as the risk of founder dependence which leads to scalability vulnerabilities and loss of authenticity in the presence of growth pressures. The results show that PBO is not only a marketing strategy, but a strategic orientation which restructures the resource allocation of SMEs to founder-led relational infrastructure. This study builds upon the brand orientation theory with making the founder the center of brand equity in social commerce environments and provides practical implications on what resource constrained SMEs should do in platform economies where algorithmic distribution values personal narrative over product attributes.

Keywords

Personal brand orientation; Social commerce; SME performance; Entrepreneurial branding; Algorithmic marketing; Brand orientation; Founder CEO effects

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of the social commerce platforms has brought about a radical rearrangement of the value creation processes of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and competitive edge has shifted through the product-focused and relationship-focused interactions mediated by the digital founder-consumer interactions. With the algorithmic disposition of contemporary platforms to promote parasocial interaction (e.g., TikTok Shop, Instagram Commerce, Facebook Marketplace, etc.), SMEs are facing a structural imperative to redefine their strategic orientation towards markets (Ainin, Parveen, Moghavvemi, and Jaafar, 2015; Qalati, Ostic, Sulaiman, Gopang, and Khan, 2022). This trend represents a serious breakage of the classical marketing paradigms, which require the analysis of how the founder visibility and personal narrative act as a strategic asset instead of a promotional tool.

The traditional brand orientation theory that suggests the building of the internal organization structures and processes as a strategic priority, has historically identified product differentiation and the uniform organizational messaging as the main loci of competitive advantage (Urde, 1994, 1999). Although earlier research made brand orientation a mindset of building brands into strategic resources (Urde, 1999, p. 117), and later studies showed that brand equity was synergistic with market orientation (Urde, Baumgarth, and Merrilees, 2013), the frameworks implicitly assume that brand equity is contained in corporate assets and not on founder identities. Equally, empirical studies (proving the existence of the positive correlation between brand-oriented strategies and SME financial performance) (Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan, and Merrilees, 2018) and the moderating impact of innovation and social media capabilities (Odoom and Mensah, 2019) have focused on product-level or organizational-level brand constructs and left a gaping void on the strategic orientation towards the personal brand of the founder as a distinctive organizational source.

This gap in theory is especially critical considering the recorded importance of founder-CEOs towards the achievement of firm performance outcomes. Adams, Almeida and Ferreira (2009) established that founder leadership has significant contribution to organizational performance in terms of decision making independence and strategic vision but how the founder personal branding works out specifically within the social commerce settings is poorly theorized. Moreover, although studies have determined that the adoption of social media contributes to SME performance by mediated mechanisms that consider the technological, organizational, and environmental conditions (Qalati et al., 2021, 2022), and social media is a tool of dynamic capability that promotes value creation in the digital environment (Garrido-Moreno, Garcia-Morales, King, and Lockett, 2020), they largely assume that social platforms are impersonal channels instead of algorithmic architectures that structurally prioritize person-centered content over corporate

The current paper fills this gap by considering Personal Brand Orientation (PBO)- as the strategic focus on founder expertise, authenticity and accessibility as the fundamental organizational resources that lead to market involvement and performance. We argue that PBO is not a marketing strategy in the social commerce setting and environment, but a core strategic stance that repackages the way SMEs establish brand equity and generate value. Particularly, in this study, three questions that raise serious concerns are examined: First, what is the role of Personal Brand Orientation on SME performance outcomes in social commerce settings? Second, how does the association between founder-centric branding strategies and organizational performance work? Third, what are the necessary conditions of the limits of PBO to improve or limit SME competitiveness?

This query goes further than being of scholarly importance. In the case of theory, it disputes the product-focused assumptions of classic brand orientation literature by proving that in platform economies brand equity grows to depend more and more on founder-consumer parasocial relations, as opposed to product characteristics alone. As an exercise, it provides practical advice to resource-limited SMEs operating in algorithmically-mediated markets where the visibility -and, in the long run, existence-supporting operation of founder identity as a non-substitutable organizational asset. This article combines findings of research on the topic of founder-CEO effects with that of brand orientation theory and social commerce research to offer a very broad framework through which SMEs can revise performance through the strategic development of personal brand resources within a more humanized digital market.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Brand Orientation and SME Performance: The Product-Centric Legacy.

The theoretical basis of the brand orientation was formed out of the acknowledgment that market orientation is an inadequate explanation of the sustainable competitive advantage, and that internal strategic focus on brand-building is a fundamental organizational process. Urde (1994) originally placed brand orientation as a survival strategy, and stated that organizations had to build up structural competencies in order to cultivate brands as unique resources and not marketing products. This initial view formalized brand orientation as the organization level creation and spread of brand identity by differentiating products and good message transmission. Expanding on this framework, Urde (1999) later developed the construct to be better a mindset to develop brands into strategic resources, as brand equity is based on both organizational efforts towards brand-building practices that are not limited to tactical advertising.

Nonetheless, these conceptualizations are implicitly product, corporate-centric, and give the brand the status of organization, separate and differentiated entities (founders). This theoretical formulation has had far-reaching impacts on the later empirical research in the field of performance of SMEs. Anees-ur-Rehman et al. (2018) showed that brand-oriented strategies helped improve financial performance of B2B SMEs, but their operationalization of brand orientation paid much attention to both organizational brand management competencies and product level value propositions. On the same note, Odoom and Mensah (2019) established brand orientation as an important antecedent that is related to brand performance within SME settings, and innovations capabilities coupled with social media capabilities are the moderating variables. Although their results support the importance of brand orientation in resource limited businesses the research upholds the conventional view that brand equity is an organizational phenomenon as opposed to founder-personal accounts. Urde, Baumgarth and Merrilees (2013) develop the literature by investigating the interaction between brand orientation and market orientation stating that strategic brand management is a supplement to market responsive ability; nevertheless, their model still assumes the brand to be an abstract construct of the corporations independent of the personal identities of entrepreneurial leaders. Together this body of literature creates the performance advantages of strategic brand orientation and a theoretical silence as to the possibility of founder personal brands serving as the core source of SME brand equity.

2.2 Founder Leadership and Personal Brand Orientation Uptake.

Consistent with the brand orientation research, the literature on entrepreneurial leadership has repeatedly shown that the impact of founder-CEOs on the performance paths of firms is also of a distinct nature beyond generic executive impacts. Adams, Almeida, and Ferreira (2009) presented solid empirical results to show that founder-led companies exhibit performance differences that can be attributed to founder-specific human capital, autonomy in decisions and vision. According to their analysis, founders hold idiosyncratic informational benefits and organizational commitment that generate value unrelated to the professional managerial ability. However, although it has considered the centrality of the founder to organizational performance, this line of research has focused more on founder effects using governance, ownership concentration, and strategic decision-making process, but not on the symbolic, relationship processes of personal branding.

Such lack of relationship between the founder-CEO research and brand orientation theory results in a major gap in theory. Although founder identity clearly has a performance impact on firms, the current literature does not comprehensively theorize how the strategic development of founder visibility, expertise, and accessibility, what we conceptualize as Personal Brand Orientation (PBO), is a specific strategic orientation. This control is especially significant to SMEs, whose resource bases do not allow significant investment in corporate brand structures and at the same time serve to enhance the presence of entrepreneurial executives. The fact that PBO is not represented in current brand-oriented models indicates a conceptual gap where the modern entrepreneurship studies have not yet fully internalized the implication of digitally-mediated markets in which the relations between founders and consumers are the major value-generative processes.

2.3 Social Commerce Platform Affordances and Capabilities.

The rise of social commerce has led to radical changes to marketing capabilities in the context of SMEs, whereby the manner in which digital platforms facilitate interactions between firms and their customers has to be reconceptualized. Ainin et al. (2015) determined that the performance results of social media adoption by SMEs do not limit to the conventional ones but also include the measures of customer interaction and quality of relationships. Their results indicated that social media is not only a promotional channel, but a feature that allows communication and development of the community towards the two way actions. The latter ability-based approach fits into the paradigm of Garrido-Moreno et al. (2020), who placed social media as a dynamic capability that allows SMEs to generate value in online environments, especially with the help of absorptive capabilities and relational infrastructures.

Nonetheless, though such studies validate the strategic significance of social media capacities, they largely imagine social platforms as non-algorithms technological platforms, and not as algorithmic environments that are structured to privilege certain modalities of content. Qalati et al. (2021), the model constructed by the authors proves that social media use affects the performance of SMEs in relation to complex technological, organizational, and environmental factors, but their framework does not consider the algorithms of platforms as an active mediator of content visibility. Later studies by Qalati et al. (2022) had the continued results to the developing country setting whereby, they found that abilities of social media have a positive impact on the performance of SMEs in the institutional setting though neither study specifically explored how the algorithm used on social media platforms is beginning to prioritize personal stories more than those that are corporate-focused.

The issue that is disclosed in this literature is that, although SMEs are recommended to build social media capabilities to improve performance, the content-specific strategies that can make the most out of algorithmic visibility are under-theorized. The reported significance of founder-CEO impact (Adams et al., 2009) and the inherent performance advantages of brand orientation (Urde, 1994, 1999; Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018) imply that PBO can be such a critical, but unrecognized capability of the social commerce system- a hypothesis that the current complexity management frameworks, which treat brand orientation (Odoom and Mensah, 2019) and social media adoption (Ainin et al., 20

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

The examined literature indicates that there is a tripartite theoretical gap at the crossroads between brand orientation, founder leadership and social commerce. To start with, although brand orientation theory (Urde, 1999; Urde et al., 2013) determines the strategic worth of brand-building, its product and corporate-based assumptions are insufficient to reflect humanization of digital commerce where founder narratives build consumer trust. Second, the founder CEO study (Adams et al., 2009) has confirmed the performance relatability of entrepreneurial leadership yet has not investigated the importance of personal branding as a strategy

orientation in isolation of governance organizations. Third, the literature on social commerce (Qalati et al., 2021, 2022; Garrido-Moreno et al., 2020) recognizes the capabilities of platforms as the antecedent of performance but does not consider the structural aspects of how algorithmic infrastructures prioritize founder-generated content and disregard organizational product messages. As a result, the mediating processes of Personal Brand Orientation to SME performance in social commerce (including trust transference, algorithmic visibility, and community co-creation) are underdeveloped empirically and theoretically, so the current study is needed.

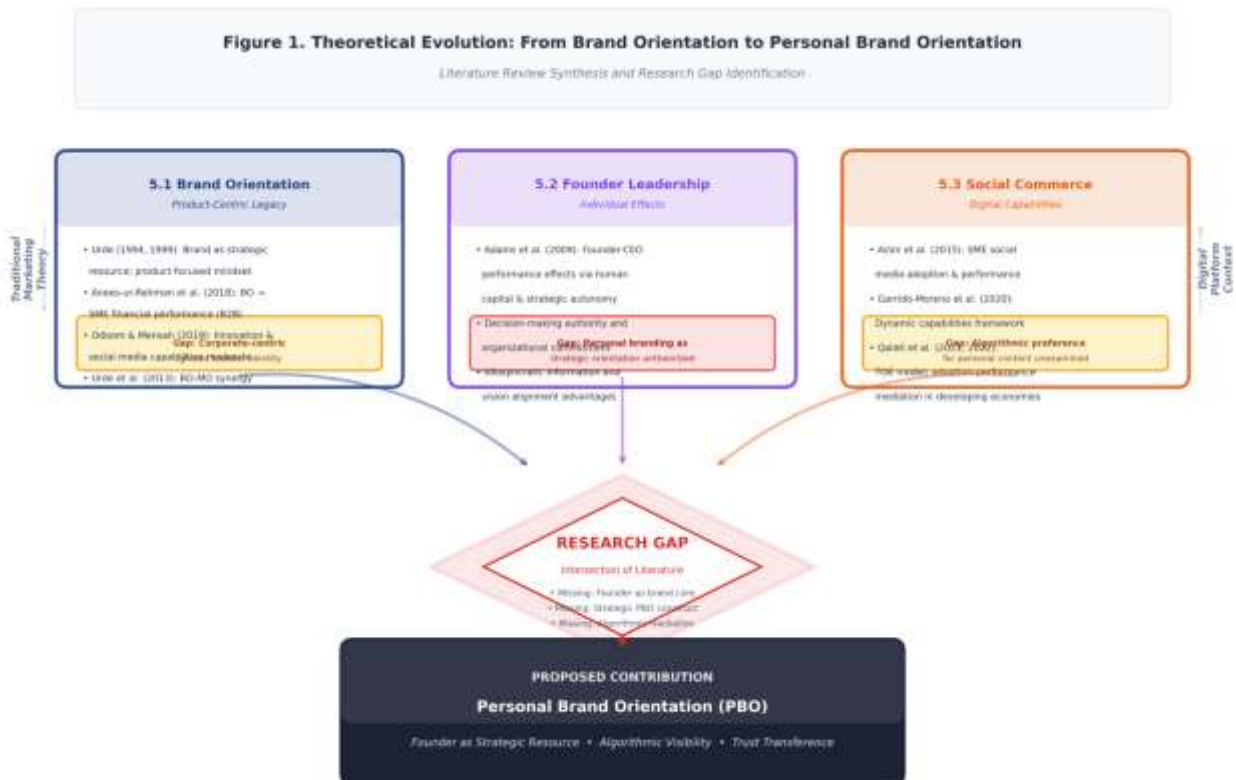


Figure 1. Theoretical synthesis: From traditional brand orientation to personal brand orientation in social commerce. The diagram illustrates the convergence of three literature streams (Brand Orientation, Founder Leadership, and Social Commerce) and identifies the resulting research gap addressed by Personal Brand Orientation (PBO).

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper has a conceptual methodology suitable in theory development in the convergence of brand management, entrepreneurship, and digital marketing fields. Since the research on Person Brand Orientation (PBO) remains naive in the context of the SME setting, and there are no theoretical frameworks established to explain how the founder-centric branding strategies mediate performance in the environments of the algorithmic mediation, a conceptual methodology can allow one to systematically incorporate the divergent bodies of literature in order to produce new theoretical propositions (MacInnis, 2011).

The research design is based on a theory synthesis methodology, as the existing empirical evidence regarding brand orientation, founder leadership, and social commerce studies are combined to see the gaps in the existing theory and build an explanatory model. This approach is especially appropriate to the exploration of phenomena when the current paradigms are unhelpful in explaining the emergent contextual realities- in this instance, the move to a person-centric value creation in social commerce platforms. The analytical procedure was broken down into three stages, namely, systematic review and classification of the literature in three domains; the second step entailed the identification of conflicting assumptions and gaps in explanations; and the third step

implied the formation of iterative frameworks defining conceptual relationships, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions.

The sources of data used in developing this conceptual framework are peer-reviewed empirical studies on brand orientation in SMEs (Urde, 1994, 1999; Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018; Odoom and Mensah, 2019) and founder-CEO performance effects (Adams et al., 2009) as well as social commerce adoption (Ainin et al., 2015; Garrido-Moreno et al., 2020; Q The choice of these sources was guided by the citation impact, the methodological rigor as well as the applicability to the context of SME performance. The selection of studies that were analyzed in terms of operationalization of brand constructs, quantification of performance effect, and the role of entrepreneurial leadership conceptualization offered systematic gaps in the definition of founder personal branding as strategic orientation.

The process of framework development used visualization mechanisms to plot relation between variables and make them logically coherent. The boundaries of concepts were delimited by construct delineation, where PBO was identified as a distinct concept separate to others such as corporate brand orientation (Urde et al., 2013), personal branding as the management of impressions on an individual level and influencer marketing as the act of transactional promotion. Conjectures were formulated by use of an abductive reasoning, starting with empirical data (e.g., the founder effects in the study by Adams et al., [2009] or the mediation of social media performance in the study by Qalati et al., [2022]) to theoretical processes (trust transference, algorithmic visibility) that could account for the observed relations.

This theoretical approach has produced a theory based on synthesis and not on primary data collection to serve as a basis of further empirical validation and contributes to the present state of knowledge on the role of PBO in the performance of SMEs. The resultant framework also provides testable propositions on mediating mechanisms and moderating conditions that can be explored in future by quantitative or qualitative research.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.

Owing to the discovery of the research gap and theoretical synthesis, we suggest a conceptual framework (Figure 2) that demonstrates the role of Personal Brand Orientation in improving the performance of SMEs in the three mediating mechanisms, including transference of trust, transference of algorithmic visibility, and transference of community co-creation. The framework goes on to define the conditions of boundaries such as platform algorithm adaptation and industry pressure of commoditization that buffer these relationships.

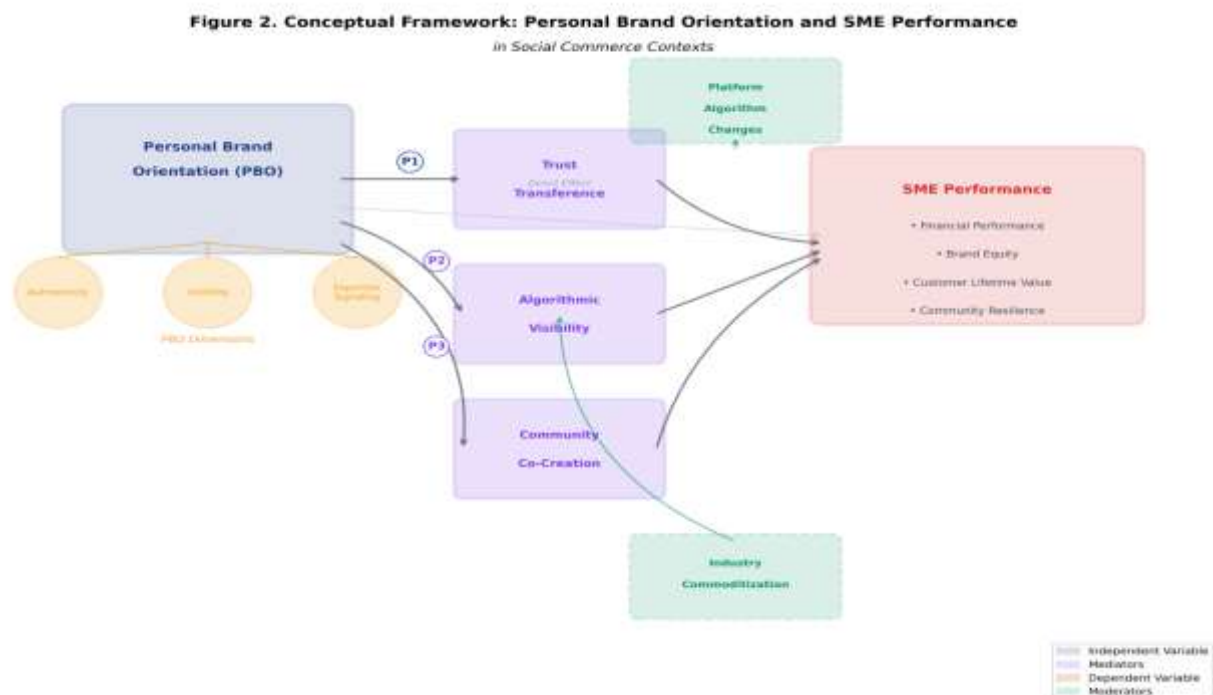


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: SME Performance and Personal Brand Orientation in the Social Commerce. The model shows the presence of direct and mediated relationships between PBO and performance outcomes, and contains three mechanisms of mediation and two conditions of moderation.

4.1 Personal Brand Orientation: Concept and Dimensions.

We consider Personal Brand Orientation (PBO) to be the degree to which an SME employs personal identity, expertise, and relational accessibility of the founder as part of its organizational resource to generate market differentiation and stakeholder value. In contrast to generic personal branding, which includes managing reputation at an individual level, PBO is an organizational-level strategic orientation, in which the personal brand of the founder is considered an inimitable resource, part of the business strategy, resource allocation, and the value proposition design (it relates to the brand orientation conceptualization proposed by Urde [1999] to the founder-as-brand conceptualization).

PBO is made up of three dimensions. Authenticity is a strategy that is founded on the personal narrative and organizational mission that is designed to be strategic through transparency of the entrepreneurial path, values and vulnerability. Visibility refers to the purposeful development of the presence of founders throughout social commerce sites by creating regular content and engaging with the audience. Expertise Signaling is the exhibition of domain knowledge and thought leadership that creates the credibility of the founders and reduces consumer information asymmetry. All these aspects make PBO stand out of both corporate brand orientation (product-oriented) and generic social media presence (tactical, but no longer strategic).

4.2 Mediating Mechanisms

Trust Transference. PBO also promotes the transference of trust between the founder and the organization in social commerce situations when the brand awareness is low, and the perceived threat is high. In case the expertise and the genuine tale are strategically revealed to the founders (expertise signaling dimension and authenticity dimension), buyers endow the SME with credibility depending on the features of the founders and not on the track record of the organizations. This process mitigates the liability of newness comprised by SMEs (Adams et al., 2009), as a result of exploiting the relationships of parasociality to alleviate uncertainty in the purchase. We propose:

Hypothesis 1: The positive interaction between Personal Brand Orientation and SME performance is mediated by trust transference, where the stronger PBO is, the better the consumer trusts the founder, which in turn increases the organizational credibility and purchase intention.

Algorithmic Visibility. Social trading sites have a recommendation engine that favors content that results in a high-engagement density. The content that is created by founders is generally the one with better engagement rates than the corporate product-focused content because of its perceived authenticity and relatability (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2020). PBO, in turn, maximizes the algorithmic visibility, the likelihood of content dissemination via platform recommendation engines, to generate a structural benefit in attention economies. This is a crucial mechanism in regard to the findings of the study by Qalati et al. (2021) on the significance of technological aspects in social media performance. We propose:

Proposition 2: Algorithmic visibility moderates the positive association between Personal Brand Orientation and SME performance, whereby the founder-centric content will have better platform algorithmic distribution, which enhances reach and engagement metrics.

Community Co-Creation. PBO promotes metamorphosis of transactional relationships with customers to community memberships. A high level of visibility and accessibility predetermines the fact that customers should become active participants and co-creators of products, revealing their feedback, providing user-generated content, and promotion (Ainin et al., 2015). This type of community infrastructure increases customer lifetime value and defensive moats against competitive intrusion. We propose:

Proposition 3: Community co-creation moderates the positive correlation between Personal Brand Orientation and SME performance, whereby founder accessibility leads to customer communities that are gained in retention, advocacy, and innovation abilities.

4.3 Boundary Conditions

The performance of PBO in improving the performance of SMEs depends on the contextual moderators. Platform Algorithm Changes are a critical boundary condition, as the platform recommendation system evolves (e.g., the de-emphasis of business content at Meta), the visibility benefits of the PBO could increase or decrease. Pressure of Commoditization of an Industry likewise moderates PBO impacts in a way that in highly commoditized sectors where product differentiation is challenging, PBO is able to offer crucial differentiation by founder personality, and in highly technical B2B, expertise signaling might prevail over visibility and authenticity dimensions (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018).

Proposition	Relationship	Mechanism	Theoretical Basis
P1	PBO → Trust → Performance	Trust transference reduces information asymmetry in low-awareness contexts; founder credibility transfers to organizational legitimacy	Adams et al. (2009); Brand orientation trust mechanisms
P2	PBO → Visibility → Performance	Algorithmic distribution favors high-engagement personal content over corporate product posts	Garrido-Moreno et al. (2020); Qalati et al. (2021)
P3	PBO → Community → Performance	Founder accessibility transforms transactional exchanges into collaborative co-creation relationships	Ainin et al. (2015); Dynamic capabilities framework
Boundary	Moderating Effect	Condition	
B1	Algorithm Changes × PBO → Performance	Platform algorithm updates amplify or diminish PBO visibility advantages	Platform affordance theory
B2	Commoditization × PBO → Performance	High commoditization increases returns to PBO differentiation strategies	Anees-ur-Rehman et al. (2018)

5 DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study develops theory on three important dimensions. We, first of all, elaborate the brand orientation theory (Urde, 1994, 1999) by redefining the locus of brand equity in SME settings. Although the current literature considers brand orientation to be organizational and product-based (Urde et al., 2013; Odoom and Mensah, 2019), our framework shows that brand equity in a social commerce setting is becoming more of a founder identity than a corporate resource. This brand as organization, brand as founder change requires revision of brand orientation measuring scales and brand implementation models, especially where the SME is constrained in resources such that it cannot invest in brand infrastructure.

Second, we combine the founder-CEO study and marketing plan. Adams et al. (2009) have determined that founder leadership affects performance in terms of decision-making, vision; our framework indicates more processes, including trust transference, algorithmic visibility, and community co-creation, in which founder identity can generate value. This fills the gap between the entrepreneurship and the marketing literatures in the sense that the founder effects are not just managed internally but also externally through the market relationships that are mediated by the digital platforms.

Third, through the identification of PBO as a unique dynamic capability to create value in the digital context, we add to the literature on social commerce and dynamic capabilities (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2020; Qalati et al., 2022). Although current literature focuses on social media adoption and technological capacities, our framework refers to one of the key capabilities that correspond with content strategy as a founder-centric personal branding, which can be a pivotal moderator that alters the adoption-performance relation. This is in response to the demand of finer insights of how SMEs are using digital platforms in ways other than presence (Ainin et al., 2015).

5.2 Practical Implications

To SME practitioners, the study offers practical advice when it comes to the allocation of resources in online marketing. Instead of merely investing on product photography, inventory depth or paid advertising, SMEs ought to design founder visibility as one of the fundamental business assets. This involves training founders on how to create content, how to create consistent narrative frameworks that connect personal journey and business mission, and focus on engagement rather than reach metrics. These three mediating mechanisms imply certain

tactical focuses: authenticity-building to build trust, consistency to develop an algorithmic preference and accessibility to develop community.

To policymakers and platform designers, our structure outlines the benefits and threats of the structural nature of algorithmic systems that prefer personal content. As much as this democratizes visibility to the founder-led SMEs who do not have budgets to buy ads, it also builds dependency on individual founders and is thus prone to alterations in the algorithm. Platforms can also think of creating a SME-specific version of transparency through the algorithm, and policy makers can promote digital literacy initiatives that focus on strategic personal branding, in addition to technical skills with platforms.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research.

The present conceptual framework will have to be empirically tested with the help of mixed-method research. The proposed mediating relationships could be tested in quantitative surveys with the help of the existing scales adjusted to PBO measurement and qualitative case studies could be used to study how the founders cope with the authenticitystrategy tension arising in the context of strategic authenticity. Longitudinal designs will be required to measure the volatility in the algorithms and determine the sustainability of PBOs as the firms grow bigger than their founder sizes.

Boundary conditions should be considered in more detail. The cross-cultural analysis is needed to find out whether the effects of PBO are different in individualist and collectivist contexts and the industry comparisons may help locate the sectors where expertise signaling is more powerful than personal story. Moreover, the dark side of PBO such as the burnout among the founders, loss of privacy, and loss of authenticity at the pressure of growth needs critical analysis to offer balanced advice to the practitioners.

Lastly, since artificial intelligence produces more complex content in the future, a study should investigate how AI-aid content production influences perceptions of PBO authenticity and whether AI-driven methods of detecting AI-created founder content influences any achievement of visibility benefits. The dilemma between mass content generation and the genuine personality presence is most probably going to be the future development of a social commerce approach.

6. CONCLUSION

Switching of product-centric to the person-centric commerce is a completely new way that SMEs generate and develop value in the digital marketplace. The study defines Personal Brand Orientation as a strategic orientation in which personal identities of founders play the role of organizational resources that are inimitable and mediate performance via trust transference, algorithmic visibility, and community co-creation. Combining the brand orientation theory with the research on founder leadership and social commerce, we will prove that the performance of SMEs in platform economies is closely related to the strategic use of founder identity, as opposed to the conventional product-oriented brand-building.

The framework confronts SMEs to rethink their marketing investment priorities and refocus resources on narrative building of the founders rather than on purely promoting the product. The limitations found, however, as the boundary conditions (especially dependency of algorithms and scalability), warn against blind usage. With social commerce sites increasingly favoring social over business communications, figuring out how to tap into the power of Personal Brand Orientation and reduce the likelihood of founder dependency will be critical to survival and success in SME-level. The empirical validation of the suggested mechanisms in the future will help even better understand how resource-constrained enterprises can compete to the extent that they are not competing based on the depth of inventory, but rather based on the depth of the bonds between the founders and the consumers.

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