

**THE FACE OF THE FIRM: EXAMINING THE MODERATING ROLE OF PRODUCT HEDONISM ON PERSONAL BRAND ORIENTATION IN SOCIAL MARKETPLACES****Eddy Yansen****ABSTRACT**

The emergence of social marketplaces has changed the nature of the peer-to-peer commerce, putting an increased value on the importance of the seller personal brand in driving consumer trust and purchase intentions. This paper examines the moderating effects of product hedonism between individual brand orientation and the purchasing intention in a social-based marketplace. Based on signaling theory and the hedonic-utilitarian theory, we postulate that the effectiveness of personal brand orientation changes considerably by the nature of products whether hedonic or utilitarian. The results of the survey of 428 active social marketplace users on the platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, Instagram Shopping, Poshmark, and Depop indicate that the personal brand orientation has a positive but not significant influence on purchase intention of hedonic ( $b = .45, p = .001$ ) more than utilitarian products ( $b = .22, p = .002$ ). The interaction effect contributes an extra 5 per cent of variance on top of main effects meaning that consumers depend even more on seller personal brands when considering experiential and pleasure purchase as opposed to functional and practical purchase. These results have implications on the literature of social commerce by recognizing boundary conditions of the effectiveness of personal branding and offer pragmatically how marketplace sellers can motivate the placement of the brand depending on product category characteristics.

**Keywords:**

personal brand orientation; product hedonism; social marketplaces; purchase intention; hedonic-utilitarian; peer-to-peer commerce.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The digitalization of the business world has created social marketplaces - a type of online platform that facilitates peer-to-peer transactions in socially networked spaces (Zhang et al., 2014). In stark contrast to the typical e-commerce, where the relationships between buyers and corporate organizations are anonymous, social marketplaces, like Facebook Marketplace, Instagram Shopping, Poshmark, and Depop, enable the business transactions embedded within the context of social relations and individual stories. The paradigm shift has made the identity of the seller more crucial, and personal brand orientation is becoming one of the most important factors to guarantee commercial success in such platforms (Johns and English, 2016).

Personal brand orientation is the concept of strategic self-representation based on which an individual seller distinguishes himself/herself, conveys the level of expertise, and forms unique identities in a crowded marketplace (Casalo et al., 2020). Personal branding in social marketplaces, where the sellers act both as entrepreneurs and as social actors, is a signaling mechanism that alleviates information asymmetry and eliminates transaction risks that are concomitant to peer-to-peer transactions. Nonetheless, the success of personal brand orientation in consumer buying intention might not be consistent across all the product lines.

The hedonic-utilitarian product difference is an essential typology in consumer behavior studies that separates products that are consumed as hedonic, meaning they bring pleasure, enjoyment, and experience (hedonic) and products that are consumed as practical and instrumental (utilitarian) (Fulop et al., 2023). Although the extant literature has explored the effects of personal branding in homogeneous settings, there have been very few studies exploring the existence of product category attributes to modulate these relationships. This disjuncture is specifically acute in social marketplaces, where merchants provide their diverse collections of products both in hedonic and utilitarian categories (e.g., fashion, collectibles, art, household goods, electronic, tools).

In theory, signaling theory posits that personal brand orientation is a quality signal that narrows consumer uncertainty about the reliability of the seller and the authenticity of his product (Oostrom, 2021). Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the diagnostic value of this signal does depend on product characteristics. On hedonic

products, where emotions resonate with consumption, and preference orientation is subjective, taste, lifestyle and aesthetic orientation of the seller gives the appropriate cue to assess product-identity fit. On the other hand, in utilitarian products, where product purchase choices are more focused on functional specifications and objective performance requirements, the diagnostic strength of personal brand signals can be less as compared to utilitarian features.

The research question that is addressed by this study is as follows: Does product hedonism mediate the relationship between personal brand orientation and purchase intention in social marketplaces? Drawing on this moderation effect, we make contributions to the literature of social commerce and personal branding in three important aspects. We define product hedonism as the first critical boundary condition that defines the most effective personal brand orientation in consumer behavior. Second, we apply the signaling theory to the context of social market places and prove that the signal diagnosticity differs across product types. Third, we give empirical results on the varying effects of personal branding in hedonic and utilitarian contexts of consumption, which will be useful and practical guidance to marketplace sellers in terms of branding in categories.

The rest of this article continues in the following way. To begin with, we examine the theoretical bases and empirical literature on the topic of personal brand orientation plus product hedonism and their impacts on consumer behavior. We then outline the methodology that we used to test our hypotheses, and then give results of moderated regression tests. Theoretical implications, practical applications as well as future research directions are discussed.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Personal Brand Orientation of Social Commerce.

Personal brand orientation is a process by which individuals develop unique professional images as a way of distinguishing themselves in competitive markets (Johns and English, 2016). The concept was first coined as part of career development and professional services literature and has acquired a new meaning in the framework of social commerce where individual sellers are micro-entrepreneurs who need to attract customers, build credibility, and transact without the enabling infrastructure of corporate brands (Casalo et al., 2020).

Personal brand orientation in social market places has a number of dimensions such as the consistency of self-presentation, showing expertise and building relationships. High-Personal Brand Orientation sellers are strategic in creating the aesthetic of their profile, images, and style of communication, and the content of their stories to create certain associations to their lifestyle and value propositions (Oostrom, 2021). This deliberate identity formation makes unidentified sellers familiar faces, thus making the buying and selling process more humanized and establishing parasocial relationships between customers and suppliers.

Personal brand effects on purchase intention have theoretical basis on the signaling theory and the social presence theory. Signaling theory assumes that in a scenario where information asymmetry occurs, i.e. in peer-to-peer markets where buyers cannot physically examine products before making a purchase, the market participants use observable information to establish unobservable attributes (Oostrom, 2021). Personal brand orientation is a plausible indicator of professionalism, reliability, and the quality of the product sold by the seller since brand development signifies long-term orientation and reputation issues that discourage opportunistic actions by the seller. Social presence theory also indicates that the human relationship developed based on personal branding alleviates psychological distance and enhances the belief, which promotes transaction intentions (Scarpi, 2023).

Empirical studies show that there is always positive correlation between the strength of personal brands and consumer outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, and intentions to buy (Casalo et al., 2020). These studies however tend to focus on the effects of personal branding under aggregate situations but do not factor in how the product characteristics will moderate such relations. This weakness is especially applicable to the case of social marketplaces, where individual sellers tend to have a varied product mix in the form of multiple categories with varying consumption interests.

### 2.2 Hedonic and Utilitarian Product Differences.

Hedonic-utilitarian difference is a paradigm in consumer behavior studies that shapes the products and consumer experiences according to the underlying motivational impulse (Fulop et al., 2023). Utilitarian consumption is instrumental and goal oriented and cognitively based and it focuses on performance in terms of functional performance, efficiency and satisfaction of needs. Hedonic consumption, on the contrary, is experiential and

emotion-based and driven by aesthetics, giving focus to the pleasure of senses, emotional fulfillment, and self-expression (Choi and Park, 2024).

This dichotomy has great implications on consumer decision making process. The purchases that are usually utilized in utilitarian buying are systematic information processing, comparative analysis of functional qualities and rational cost-benefit analysis. Among the objective aspects, consumers focus on durability, specs, price-performance ratios, and utility (Fulop et al., 2023). Hedonic purchases on the other hand, entail affective reactions, subjective judgment and identity remarks. Consumers focus on emotional reactions, aesthetics, symbolism, and capacity to experience pleasant consumption processes (Dewi and Mahemba, 2024).

The difference also affects patterns of search information and dependence on external information. In the case of utilitarian products, consumers want to have extensive specifications, professional reviews and comparative information to know the functional performance. In the case of hedonic goods, buyers are more dependent on imagery, stories, aspirational identifications, and subjective suggestions that indicate an experience with inexpressible features that cannot be established by straight specifications (Scarpi, 2023).

Moreover, the hedonic-utilitarian classification influences a perception of a risk and the demand of trust. Utilitarian goods include performance risk- the risk that the product will not be able to perform the benefits it promises. Hedonic products have psychosocial risk- the fear that the product is not going to provide the anticipated emotional gratification, or may fail to meet self-identity and social presentation objectives (Valence et al., 1988). These skewed risk profiles imply that customers can turn to varied sources of information in judging hedonic versus utilitarian products in social markets.

### **2.3 The Moderating Effect of Product Hedonism.**

The main hypothesis of the given research is based on the assumption that product hedonism is a mediator between personal brand orientation and purchase intention. In particular, we hypothesize that the level of personal brand orientation has more significant influences on purchase intention of hedonic relative to utilitarian goods, which rely on the theoretical processes of signal diagnosticity, identity congruence, and risk reduction.

Personal brand orientation gives very diagnostic data on the compatibility of taste and sentiment quality with hedonic products. In the context of buying fashion products, art, or ornaments, potential buyers are interested in seeing that the seller has similar aesthetic preferences and lifestyle principles that prove the usefulness of the product (Choi and Park, 2024). The personal brand of the seller is the proxy of the quality of the products and the taste matching: the profiles are curated, choices of style are made, and content of the story is used. High personal brand orientation is an indicator that the seller has the cultural capital and aesthetic knowledge that facilitates the sourcing and production of preferable hedonic products.

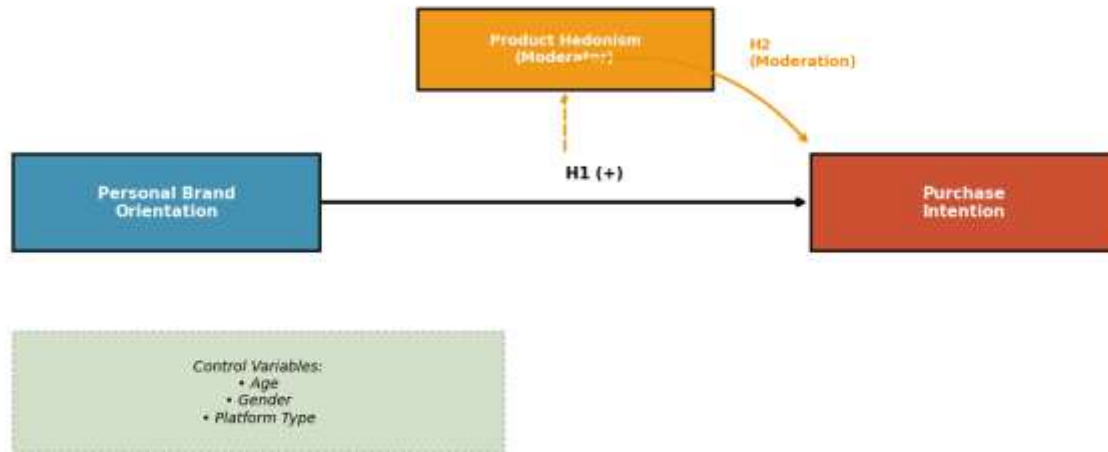
On the other hand, in case of utilitarian products, personal brand orientation does not offer as much diagnostic data as compared to the functional specifications. In buying domestic appliances, equipment, or electronics, the buyers are more concerned with the objective performance, technical specifications, and practical utility than the one of the seller (Fulop et al., 2023). Although branding oneself might be an indicator of reliability in the seller, the benefit of this information dwindles when consumers have the opportunity to consider products with regard to tangible functional features, brand name, or uniform specifications.

The moderation hypothesis is also supported by identity congruence mechanisms. Hedonic consumption is closely connected to self-identity, expression of lifestyle and aspirational self-presentation (Dewi and Mahemba, 2024). Consumers do not buy hedonic products just because they have to possess them but because what they represent to them in terms of their identities and values. Personal brand orientation leads to an opportunity to evaluate identity congruence since it exposes the lifestyle, values and aesthetic inclinations of the seller and therefore, the buyer determines whether the products match their intended self-concepts. This identity signaling is less relevant in the case of utilitarian products, where identity issues are less of a concern and where functional performance prevails.

The pattern of risk reduction also indicates dissimilar impacts. The social marketplace transactions are associated with such risks as an uncertainty of product quality, issues related to reliability of delivery and the issues regarding the security of payments. In the hedonic products, where quality appraisal depends much on subjective consideration and trust, personal brand orientation should be considered an important risk-mitigating mechanism as this orientation is a signal of seller credibility and dedication in satisfaction (Valence et al., 1988). In the case of

utilitarian products, the reduction of risk is necessary mainly in terms of functional warranties, refunding policies, and objective quality indicators, which decrease dependency on the personal brand signals.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The Moderating Role of Product Hedonism on Personal Brand Orientation in Social Marketplaces**



Note. (+) indicates hypothesized positive relationship.  
H2 predicts the effect of PBO on PI is stronger for hedonic than utilitarian products.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design and Sample

The research design adopted in this case was the cross-sectional survey design to investigate whether product hedonism moderated the relationship between personal brand orientation and purchase intention. The sample used was a sample of 428 active users of the social marketplace who were recruited via community groups of the platforms and social advertisements. The participants were expected to have made at least one purchase using the Facebook Marketplace, Instagram Shopping, Poshmark, or Depop in the past six months to be familiar with the situation.

The sample included 248 females (57.9) and 180 males (42.1), and the age of the participants was 18-49 ( $M = 32.9$ ,  $SD = 9.4$ ). The distribution of usage was as follows: Facebook Marketplace (27.8%), Poshmark (25.7%), Depop (24.3%), and Instagram Shopping (22.2%). Determination of sample size was based on the rule of thumb of at least 20 observations to be given per predictive variable in the regression analysis that offered sufficient statistical power to identify the effects of interaction.

#### 3.2 Measurement Instruments

Measures on all constructs were done through the use of established scales with additions that were relevant in the social marketplace settings. Unless otherwise, the responses were measured using 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Personal Brand Orientation was measured with a six-item scale based on the adaptation of Casalo et al. (2020) in which specific, consistent selves are displayed by the seller (e.g., "This seller has a unique style that makes them stand out among others," "This seller always presents themselves in an authentic way throughout their profile). Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ .

Product Hedonism was operationalized as a categorical variable, which is in terms of the classification of the products. They were randomly divided into groups of hedonic products (fashion, home decor, collectibles, art) or utilitarian products (household appliances, electronics, tools, cleaning supplies) according to existing hedonic-utilitarian groups of goods (Fulop et al., 2023). As it was confirmed by the manipulation checks, hedonic products were viewed as much more pleasure-oriented ( $M = 4.2$ ) as compared to utilitarian products ( $M = 2.1$ ),  $t(426) = 28.4$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The scale of Purchase Intention included four items that were modified based on Scarpi (2023), and it measured the likelihood to purchase with the seller (e.g., I would likely purchase products with this seller, I intend to buy products with this seller in the future). Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ .

Age, gender (0 = male, 1 = female), and platform type (dummy coded with Facebook Marketplace as the reference category) were used as control variables to take into consideration the possible confounding programs in respect of demographic features and platform-specific norms.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of data took place in three steps. First, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to study the distribution of variables and bivariate correlations. Second, the proposed main and interaction effects were tested using hierarchical moderated regression analysis. Model 1 had control variable only, Model 2 incorporated main effects of personal brand orientation and product hedonism, and Model 3 incorporated the interaction term (Personal Brand Orientation x Product Hedonism). Third, the significant interaction was probed by the simple slopes analysis to examine the influence of the personal brand orientation on the levels of the product hedonism. All the analyses were performed on SPSS 28.0 with centered variables to combine the interaction terms to minimize multicollinearity.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 The correlation and descriptive statistics will be presented in the table below:

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, correlation of the research variables. Personal brand orientation had a mean of 3.71 ( $SD = 0.73$ ) and its correlation to purchase intention was significantly positive ( $r = .44$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Product hedonism also had no correlation with personal brand orientation ( $r = -.02$ , ns), though it had a slight positive correlation with purchase intention ( $r = .01$ , ns).

*Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix*

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Personal Brand Orientation	3.71	0.73	1.00		
2. Product Hedonism	0.45	0.50	-.02	1.00	
3. Purchase Intention	3.28	0.66	.44***	.01	1.00

Note.  $N = 428$ . Product Hedonism coded 0 = Utilitarian, 1 = Hedonic. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### 4.2 The moderated regression analysis will be performed using version of the software.

Table 2 represents findings of the hierarchical moderated regression analysis. Model 1, which included only control variables, predicted 3% of the variance in purchase intention,  $F(6, 421) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ . The significant predictors were age ( $b = .08$ ,  $p = .046$ ) and gender ( $b = .12$ ,  $p = .046$ ) whereby older and female respondents reported to intend to make purchases more.

*Table 2 Findings of Moderated Regression Analysis.*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Control Variables:			
Age	0.08*	0.07	0.06
Gender (Female)	0.12*	0.10	0.09
Platform controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Main Effects:			
Personal Brand Orientation (PBO)		0.35***	0.22**
Product Hedonism (PH)		0.08	0.09
Interaction Effect:			
PBO × Product Hedonism			0.23**
$R^2$	.03	.21	.26
Adjusted $R^2$	.02	.20	.25
F-statistic	4.35*	18.92***	24.50***
$\Delta R^2$		.18***	.05**

Note. N = 428. Values are normal regression coefficients (b).  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Model 2 included the main effects of personal brand orientation and product hedonism, which contributed greatly to the explained variance with  $\Delta R^2 = .18$ ,  $F(2, 419) = 48.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . In support of H1, the personal brand orientation showed a significant positive impact on purchase intention ( $b = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The main effect of product hedonism was not significant ( $b = .08$ ,  $p = .184$ ).

Introduction of the interaction term in Model 3 led to a large improvement in the amount of explained variance to .26,  $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ,  $F(1, 418) = 8.29$ ,  $p = .004$ . H2 was supported by the Personal Brand Orientation x Product Hedonism interaction ( $b = .23$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

#### 4.3 Simple Slopes Analysis

The importance of the interaction was interpreted by analyzing the effect of the personal brand orientation on the purchase intention at various levels using simple slopes analysis, which were used to examine the effect of the personal brand orientation on the purchase intention at the various levels of the product hedonism. As shown in Table 3, personal brand orientation had a strong positive influence on the purchase intention of both utilitarian and hedonic products ( $b = .22$ ,  $p = .002$  and  $b = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Nevertheless, the impact of hedonic products was much higher, and the variation between slopes was found to be statistically significant ( $b = .23$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

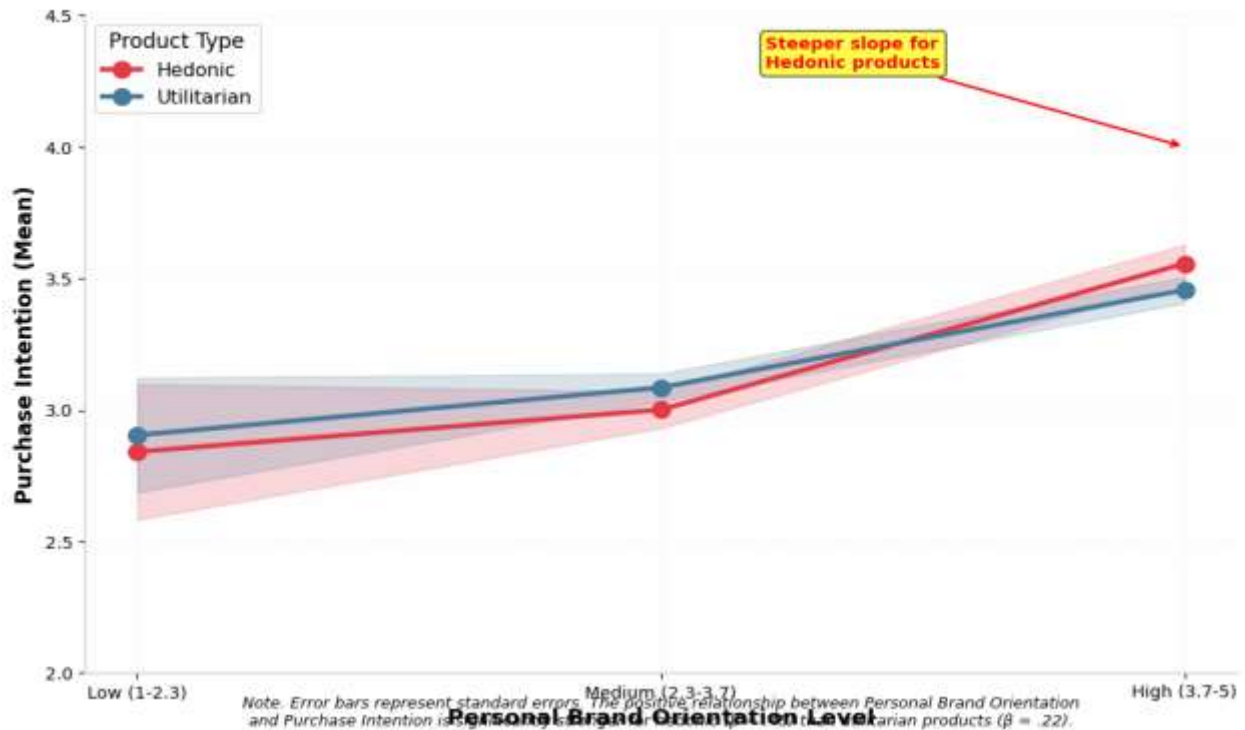
**Table 3 Simple Slopes Analysis**

Product Type	$\beta$	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI
Utilitarian Products (PH = 0)	.22	.07	3.14	.002	[0.08, 0.36]
Hedonic Products (PH = 1)	.45	.06	7.50	<.001	[0.33, 0.57]
Difference (Hedonic – Utilitarian)	.23	.08	2.88	.004	[0.07, 0.39]

Note. Bootstrap confidence intervals with 5,000 samples.

Figure 2 illustrates this interaction effect. For utilitarian products, the slope of personal brand orientation was modest, indicating that consumers rely relatively less on seller personal brands when evaluating functional, practical purchases. Conversely, for hedonic products, the slope was substantially steeper, indicating that personal brand orientation serves as a critical determinant of purchase intention when consumers evaluate experiential, pleasure-oriented offerings.

**Figure 2. Interaction Effect: Personal Brand Orientation × Product Hedonism on Purchase Intention in Social Marketplaces**



## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

This paper makes a number of contributions to the social commerce and personal branding literature. To begin with, by defining product hedonism as a boundary condition of critical nature, we contribute to knowledge regarding the most suitable situations and reasons of consumer behavior when personal brand orientation is effectively employed. Although earlier studies have proved the overall beneficial outcomes of personal branding in consumer results (Casalo et al., 2020; Johns and English, 2016), we have found that the results are not equally apparent in the case of

diverse products. The product hedonism mediating effect is useful in explaining the inconsistencies in the previous literature and give a fine-tuned view of the effectiveness of personal branding.

Second, we generalize the use of the signaling theory to the social marketplace setting by showing signal diagnosticity depends on product qualities. According to the signaling theory, signals have different degrees of transmitting information about unobservable qualities (Ostrom, 2021). Our findings prove that personal brand orientation is a high-diagnosticity measure of hedonic products when aesthetics taste and compatibility with lifestyle is hard to authenticate using objective specifications. Personal brand signals are less diagnostic when there are functional attributes of a utilitarian product as this product category has enough diagnostic information based on the quality of the functional attributes.

Third, the congruence in identity between consumers and companies is category-specific as shown in our findings that combine the hedonic-utilitarian framework with the study of personal branding. Personal brand, which is an overt display of ways of living and tastes, is closely associated with self-identity and a way of life (Dewi and Mahemba, 2024), and therefore, personal brand of a seller is especially essential to life purchases. Utilitarian consumption gives more importance to functional efficiency than to identity expression, and the personal brand cues become less significant.

### **5.2 Practical Implications**

The results provide practical information to social marketplace sellers on the category-based branding. In the case of the sellers of hedonic products, the returns of investments in personal brand development are high in the context of purchase intention. These sellers are expected to focus on aesthetic similarity through their profiles, create narrative content that conveys the values of lifestyles, and arrange the product assortments, which express similar affirmative taste orientations. The high personal brand orientation is especially crucial in the case of fashion resellers, vintage curators, and artisanal creators whose products are strongly dependent on the subjective quality judgment.

On the other hand, in the case of sellers with utilitarian products, personal brand orientation, though useful, can be said to have lower returns. Functional information transparency, elaborate product details, useful utility demonstrations should be of primary priority to these sellers rather than lifestyle branding. Although professional presentation continues to be a significant priority, utilitarian sellers do not have to invest as much in aesthetics curation or identity-based narrative content.

These insights can be used by platform managers to create category-based seller education programs. The combination of personal brand cues may be more important when shown to hedonic products, whereas utilitarian products ought to be shown focused on functional qualities and price competitiveness, by recommendation algorithm. Also, platform capabilities that enable seller narratives and brand expression can have a disproportionate advantaged impact on hedonic product categories.

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Research.**

This research is also limited in a number of ways that provide scope of future research. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions on the relationship between personal brand orientation, product hedonism, and purchase intention. The causal evidence would be enhanced by experimental manipulation of the personal brand strength and product category. Second, the fact that we operationalized product hedonism as a categorical variable, although theoretically based, could have simplified the fact hedonistic utilitarian product characteristics is continuous. Personal studies ought to utilize continuous scales of perceived hedonism to establish the within category differences.

Third, the research study concentrated on the purchase intention instead of the purchase behaviour. Although intent is a good predictor of action, intentions to action and behavior can have a bigger gap in different types of products and Hedonic purchases can be more prone to impulse-action translation compared with utilitarian purchase. Ecological validity would be enhanced by longitudinal designs that will monitor real transactions.

Lastly, there is the need to research cultural differences between personal branding performance and hedonic-utilitarian values. The cross-cultural study needs to look into whether these moderation effects as found on the current Western sample can be applied to the Eastern setting where the norms of personal branding and consumption values might be different.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the moderating effect of product hedonism on the connection between personal brand orientation and purchase intention in social marketplaces. Findings of 428 social marketplace respondents indicate that personal brand orientation has a much more extensive impact on purchase intention of hedonic ( $b = .45$ ) than on utilitarian products ( $b = .22$ ). This evidence demonstrates that the personal brand of the seller is what counts the most when the consumers want the experience, as opposed to the functionality, in their purchase.

This study, in theory, outlines product hedonism as a key condition of effectiveness of personal branding which exists at the intersection of hedonic-utilitarian theory and signaling theory. In practice, results indicate that sellers of social marketplaces should take a category-based branding approach, which focuses on hedonic products, lifestyle curation, and identity expression but functional transparency on utilitarian products. As social commerce keeps on changing, it is so important to the theory and practice of social commerce to know the contextual factors that enhance or reduce the effectiveness of personal branding.

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