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## **WHY WOULD PEOPLE PURCHASE PERSONALIZED PRODUCTS ONLINE? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

**JIE ZHEN**

CHONGQING TECHNOLOGY AND BUSINESS UNIVERSITY

[zhenjie886@163.com](mailto:zhenjie886@163.com)

**LI ZHAO**

UNIVERSITY OF OULU

[li.zhao@oulu.fi](mailto:li.zhao@oulu.fi)

**JIANYUAN YAN**

NANKAI UNIVERSITY

[yan5559@126.com](mailto:yan5559@126.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

Product personalization, which allows customers to tailor products according to their own preference, has become increasingly important to many companies. Although prior studies have investigated service personalization (e.g., offer personalization and web personalization), few studies have comprehensively explored why people are willing to purchase personalized products online. This study uses a qualitative approach with 71 semi-structured interviews to explore the reasons. The data was analyzed using content analysis. The results reveal that people purchase personalized products online primarily due to the following reasons: uniqueness seeking, emotional attachment, identity expression, enjoyment, vanity, innovation, ownership, and perceived control. These factors are interpreted based on uniqueness theory and the theory of planned behavior. In addition, other factors (specifically trust, price, and recommendation) pertaining to the website also explain why customers choose a particular website instead of other websites to purchase personalized products. The theoretical contributions of this study are discussed, along with practical implications and future possible research directions.

**Keywords:** personalized products, uniqueness, emotional attachment, vanity, innovation, control

### **INTRODUCTION**

Companies worldwide are using the web to interact with their customers for brand promotion, product marketing, order fulfillment and after-sales support. As the competition is keen among online merchants, companies have been adopting innovative strategies to attract and retain customers. A common effective strategy is to tailor products to better satisfy each customer's needs. For

example, Amazon offers products such as cups, jewelries, and T-shirts onto which customers are allowed to print their favorite photos. In addition, Apple online store provides personal engraving service through which customers can add a free laser-engraved message to a new iPod or iPad. Etsy has created a platform to support individuals to make, sell and buy unique goods; Etsy also allows customers to personalize various products such as gifts, jewelry, and mobile accessories. In these examples, customers can incorporate their own ideas into the design of the

product's appearance to personalize it and make it different from ordinary products. An interesting question then arises: why do people like to purchase such personalized products online? The answer to this question will help online marketers better understand and serve customers' needs, and help companies increase their profits by selling more personalized products to customers.

Our literature review shows that prior studies have investigated personalization, including service personalization and product personalization. In service personalization, the service to each customer is personalized to fulfill each customer's particular needs. Prior studies on service personalization have investigated offer personalization [5, 38, 39] and web personalization [40, 65]. Offer personalization can be done by product recommendation agents [25] to provide a small set of products that potentially match a particular customer's preference. Web personalization leverages personalization technologies to provide a specific content in a specific format for a particular web user [64].

As shown in above examples of product personalization, a customer can incorporate his/her own creative ideas into the product appearance or design to create a personalized and unique version. Product personalization and product customization are interrelated terms, but are viewed from different perspectives, the vendor's and the customer's. Customization views the process from a vendor's perspective, that is, whether the vendor authorizes the customer to decide certain features of the product. In contrast, personalization looks at the phenomenon from the perspective of a customer (who is an individual) based on whether the product can distinguish this particular individual (customer) from other ordinary individuals (who are customers owning ordinary products). For example, John can personalize a T-shirt by printing his own photo onto it; this T-shirt then differs from ordinary T-shirts that other customers have. Given the purpose of differentiation, as shown in the above examples, product personalization mainly focuses on incorporating a customer's own ideas into the design of the product's appearance to personalize it, whereas product customization mainly focuses on customizing the functionality of the product to better serve a customer's needs for particular functionalities. The reason that customers customize a product's functionalities looks straightforward; that is, they do so in order to enhance their use of its functionalities. However, the reasons why people would like to incorporate their own ideas into the design of the product's appearance to make it personalized and different from ordinary products seem more complicated. Although there are many studies on customizing the functionalities of products, there is a clear paucity of studies that have investigated why people would like to incorporate their own ideas into the design

of the product's appearance to personalize it and make it different from ordinary products. The present study seeks to address this gap through a comprehensive investigation of the reasons behind customers' desire to purchase personalized products online.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As shown in the above examples, a customer can personalize a product by engraving his/her photo onto it. In so doing, the personalized product differs from other ordinary products, thereby becoming special. The reason why an individual wants to own such a special, personalized item may be explained by uniqueness theory [58].

### Uniqueness Theory

Some people have a need to be distinctive and special [60]; they do not want to be submerged in the masses. When people see themselves as highly similar to others, they may feel their self-perception is threatened [66]. There are different ways through which an individual can stand out from others. For example, an individual can behave strangely in a group (e.g., talking loudly when having dinner with a group of people). However, being highly dissimilar to other people can arouse negative emotions and social penalties [22]. For instance, there are norms for one's appearance in an office environment. If a male sales representative dyed his hair green to make himself distinctive, he may be judged as less professional and hence be rejected by customers. Therefore, an individual may seek to be moderately different from others; in this way, this individual not only fulfills his/her needs to be unique but also avoids exclusion by others due to being highly dissimilar [43].

According to Snyder [61], an individual can achieve moderate dissimilarity through material consumption, meeting his/her need for uniqueness without risking severe social penalties. Material possession is regarded as an extension of the self because personal possession can be used to define the self [8]. Hence, uniqueness can be achieved by owning a special object (such as a personalized product) that is not available to the masses [41]. Such a special product then conveys a signal that the owner of this product differs from others [66]. For an individual, therefore, purchasing a special product is an effective way to differentiate himself/herself from others.

### Theory of Planned Behavior

Compared to traditional, physical shops, online product personalization websites make it much easier and more convenient for customers to personalize a product. The web has provided an efficient and effective way for

an individual to obtain a special item based on his/her preference. An individual customer can easily incorporate his/her idea into the features of the product to make it special. That is, by controlling the features of a product, the customer feels that he/she can easily express his/her preference in the product design [27]. In addition, an individual's intention to purchase a personalized product is also influenced by the opinion and behavior of his/her close friends or family members, referred to as subjective norms [49]. Perceived control and subjective norms are important aspects of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) [3]. Hence, TPB may be used to understand why individuals are willing to purchase personalized products online.

TPB suggests that an individual's intention to perform a behavior can be predicted by his/her attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [3]. Attitude toward the behavior is predicted by behavioral beliefs, which are an individual's beliefs about consequences of the particular behavior. Perceived behavioral control refers to an individual's perception of his/her capability to perform a given behavior, that is, the extent to which the performance of the behavior is perceived to be under his/her external control and within his/her internal abilities [34]. Reflecting an individual's perceived ease or difficulty of performing the particular behavior, perceived behavioral control is specifically determined by control beliefs, which are the individual's beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or impede performance of the behavior [4]. Viewed in this light, online product personalization has provided the opportunities and resources for customers to make a special product. Customers can thus personalize products on a website easily.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to explore why individuals would like to purchase personalized products online, a qualitative methodology was adopted to obtain naturalistic data. The qualitative research approach is suitable to explore and understand the complexity of individuals' behaviors in real-life contexts [13]. Especially, a qualitative method is a good way to investigate fast-moving phenomena and research topics in information systems [35]. In addition, a qualitative study method is particularly appropriate when answering research questions such as "what", "how" or "why" in situations where little is known [74].

Interviews are a common way to collect qualitative data in case studies about human behaviors and perceptions [74]. In this study, semi-structured interviews were adopted as the primary method of data collection. The research site was a popular product personalization website, Yinxiangpai, owned by NetEase, a leading Inter-

net company in China listed on the NASDAQ stock exchange. There are a wide range of items that can be personalized on this website, such as jewelry, cups, and T-shirts. Customers can give their reviews of the personalized products and discuss them with others in the forum on the company's website. To solicit participants, interview invitations were sent out via the message system on the website to the customers who commented on the personalized products in the discussion forum. Each identified participant was asked to answer the question why he or she purchased personalized products online. If the answer was not clear, the participant was asked to provide further description. In total, we received 71 (48 females and 23 males) open-ended responses. Their age ranged from 17 years to 47 years old; the average age was 25.6 years old. The participants had different educational backgrounds, varying from middle school graduates to those holding a doctoral degree.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We used a content analysis approach to analyze the empirical materials from the respondents. The method of content analysis allows researchers to include a great deal of textual information and systematically identify its properties. For example, the frequencies of most-used keywords have been considered to be an indicator of cognitive centrality [1]. Scholars also assume that the change in the use of frequent words reflects a change in attention [47]. Thus, content analysis provides an efficient method to build up concepts or categories [17] and to access deep individual or collective structures [11]. The primary feature of content analysis is to classify intensive words of the text into smaller content categories [72]. The unit of analysis in this research was the thematic unit. The sentence(s) that expressed the same idea (a theme) were analyzed and coded as a unit. The following are two examples illustrating how the data were analyzed and coded.

The first example is the three responses below. The first one is "The reason why I would like to buy a personalized product is that I can have something unique by doing so." The second response is "Owning a personalized good makes me feel I am different from other people." The third response is "I want to buy a personalized product because I can have something special, feeling the object is made only for me rather than someone else." Each of these three responses was labeled as "uniqueness seeking" because the main idea revealed here was that personalized products were different from standard products; or personalized products provided a means of expressing one's uniqueness.

The second example is the following two responses. The first one is "I enjoy the appearance of per-

sonalized products, so I am cheerful when using the products.” The second response is “For me, I often get a lot of fun when buying a personalized product online because almost all of my needs on products can be satisfied.” These two messages were coded as “enjoyment” because the most salient element was customers’ feeling of happiness by purchasing/owing personalized products.

To increase the reliability and validity of the content analysis, the authors analyzed and coded the open-ended interviews independently, and the coding process was iterative until no newer coding labels emerged. All the coding labels were compared, and similar ones were placed into a group. Then the groups were classified into high-level categories. Figure 1 shows an example of how the high-level categories were generated.

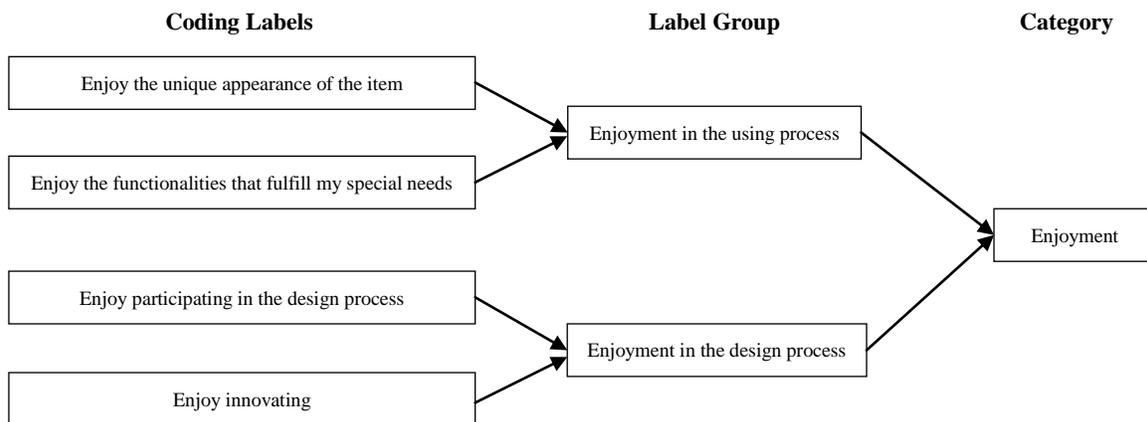


Figure 1: An Example of Category Generation

In total, eleven high-level categories (i.e., uniqueness seeking, emotional attachment, identity expression, enjoyment, vanity, innovation, ownership, perceived control, trust, price, and recommendation) were generated based on the qualitative data from the research site (see Table 1). Each higher-level category revealed in the content analysis was actually a factor that could explain why individuals would like to purchase personalized products online. In what follows, each of the factors is presented and discussed individually.

### Uniqueness Seeking

As shown in the above table, 23 respondents mentioned that they purchased personalized products because they wanted to be unique and different from others. These individuals typically explained that they attempted to distinguish themselves from others by possessing products that no one else has. For example, respondent 5 explained, “I would like to buy a personalized product because it seems very special compared to a standard product.” As respondent 35 stated, “A personalized product is designed and assembled according to my own taste, therefore, it is unique and individual.” We categorized these responses as “uniqueness seeking”, which is defined as

“an individual’s pursuit of differentness relative to others through the possession of personalized products [66, p. 52].”

### Emotional Attachment

In total, 21 participants indicated that a special emotional bond motivated them to purchase a personalized product. Some respondents stated that personalized products were often used as gifts to express their affections for others. For example, respondent 25 elaborated, “There are some small details that I can feel and remember when using the personalized product. The details are related to my memories and experiences, evoking special feelings.” In addition, other respondents stated that personalized products allowed them to keep a good memory of a specific event. For instance, respondent 60 stated, “I often associate this personalized parent-child T-shirt with the very first birthday of my son, because an image of the birthday party was printed on it.” These responses were categorized as emotional attachment, which is the emotional bond between an individual and a personalized product [36].

Table 1: Summary of Results

Categories	Uniqueness seeking	Emotional attachment	Innovation	Enjoyment	Perceived control	Identity expression	Ownership	Trust	Vanity	Price	Recommendation
1	○				○						
2										○	○
3		○				○					
4					○					○	
5	○		○								
6		○									
7	○	○		○							
8								○			
9	○			○							
10			○			○					
11	○										
12			○			○					
13	○		○								
14		○		○				○			
15			○								
16		○			○		○				
17	○		○								
18	○								○		
19							○				
20	○			○		○					
21					○						○
22					○			○			
23			○								
24				○							
25	○	○									
26			○			○					
27		○			○						
28							○				
29	○	○									
30			○							○	
31	○			○							
32				○			○				
33		○									
34		○		○				○			
35	○										
36		○							○		
37			○			○					
38							○				
39	○						○				
40			○			○					
41	○										
42		○			○						
43	○										○
44	○										
45		○	○			○					
46									○		
47	○			○							
48											○
49		○	○		○	○					
50								○			
51		○		○							
52							○				
53	○	○									
54								○			
55		○	○	○		○					
56					○						
57		○			○				○		
58	○										
59			○								
60		○					○				
61	○							○			
62									○		
63											○
64	○							○			
65										○	
66			○	○							
67	○					○					
68					○					○	
69		○		○							
70		○		○							
71					○						
Total	23	21	16	14	12	11	8	8	5	5	5

## Innovation

Sixteen participants stated that they purchased personalized products because they would like to develop new product ideas and make them happen. For example, respondent 55 indicated, “Users are the designer when personalizing a product online. Take my experience as an example, I get some new ideas from a personalized item, and then I can apply these new ideas to create some other products for my own use.” As respondent 66 elaborated, “I am allowed to design and create a personalized item based on my own idea.” These responses were categorized as innovation, which is defined as “an iterative process initiated by the perception of a new idea and/or opportunity for technology-based invention [23, p. 112].”

## Enjoyment

Fourteen respondents mentioned that they purchased a personalized item online simply to have some fun. Some participants stated that the experience of selecting various appearance attributes of a product online was joyful. As respondent 7 explained, “I really enjoy the sight of products since there are so many different choices of the product appearances and attributes. Hence, I get a lot fun out of the designing process.” In contrast to customers enjoying product appearances, some participants purchased personalized products in the expectation of getting joy and satisfaction in their daily use of them. As respondent 70 commented, “Using a personalized cup makes me feel joyful in workplace. who wouldn’t be happy when a colleague says, ‘I wish I could have a cup like yours?’”

## Perceived Control

Twelve participants indicated that they can easily personalize a product on a website. For example, respondent 42 stated, “Personalizing a product online is quite easy because the operation interface is user-friendly.” As respondent 57 indicated, “An important reason for me to buy a personalized product is that it would be really easy for me to personalize a product on the website.” The customers’ perceived ease or difficulty of performing the particular activity (i.e., the extent to which the performance of the behavior is perceived to be under their control and within their abilities) reveals their perception of how much they can control the activity. Thus, we categorized these responses as perceived control [4, 34].

Furthermore, customers’ involvement in the designing process also indicates the perceived control of the final product’s attributes. For instance, respondent 16

stated, “Involvement in personalization process allows me to influence both performance and aesthetic attributes, so I am capable of assembling the final product easily.” As respondent 27 elaborated, “I would like to spend a lot of time and energy designing the product in order to decide its performance-related outcomes on my own.” These responses typically explained that involvement in product development provided them the opportunity to personalize a product. Customer get involved in the design process in order to control the attributes of the product [9]. Therefore, we also put them in the “perceived control” category.

## Identity Expression

Eleven respondents suggested that personalization allowed them to connect different facets of their lives, such as lifestyle, to the products. That is, a personalized product provides people an opportunity to express who they are and what they think. For example, respondent 12 mentioned, “The personalized product is almost perfect for my style and maybe just is my style. I assume that the same reflection may happen to other customers.” Respondent 45 stated, “By making decisions regarding the product’s shape, material, color, sound, and texture, the product becomes more self-expressive of my identity.” We categorized these responses as identity expression, defined as the expression of the different facets of the self that relate to customers’ consumption and choice of personalized products [54].

## Ownership

Eight respondents suggested that a personalized product highlights their ownership. For example, respondent 19 elaborated, “The different attributes of a personalized product are carefully picked by myself, I feel a very high degree of personal ownership when using it.” As respondent 52 commented, “Having my name or some symbol etching onto a personalized product can reveal my personal ownership of it.” As respondent 60 indicated, “By personalizing a product, I can develop the feeling that the object is mine rather than no one else’s.” Therefore, we categorized these responses as ownership, which is defined as an individual’s perception that the personalized product is his/hers rather than anybody else’s [50, 51].

## Vanity

Five participants indicated that they purchased personalized products because they wanted to convey their success and achievement. Individuals who try to impress others intend to use their consumption as a means of showing their success or wealth [15]. For instance,

respondent 46 mentioned, “Some personalized products can usually deliver the information that the owners are successful and wealthy. This is the reason why I am willing to spend more money to buy a personalized product.” As respondent 62 explained, “An expensive personalized mobile phone shell can provide visual evidence of my personal consumption ability.” Therefore, we categorized these responses as vanity, which is defined as an individual’s excessive concern with personal achievements and wealth [48].

### Other Factors (Trust, Price, and Recommendation)

As mentioned above, the qualitative data from the research site revealed three other factors: trust, price, and recommendation. All these three factors are related to this particular personalization website. Specifically, eight participants indicated that they purchased a personalized product due to trust in the website of Yinxiangpai. For example, respondent 34 explained, “I buy personalized products on this website because I totally trust in the online vendor.” Five participants suggested that they buy personalized products in Yinxiangpai because the price is low. For instance, respondent 68 commented, “Personalized products on this website are quite cheap.” Five participants mentioned that they purchased a personalized product on this website due to recommendations from a friend or family member. For example, respondent 43 elaborated, “My friend told me that personalized products on this website were excellent. He strongly advised me to buy a personalized item on the website.” As shown above, these three factors (i.e., trust, price, and recommendation) are closely linked to the website, revealing why customers purchase personalized products on a particular website.

## INTERPRETATION BASED ON THEORIES

### Uniqueness Theory

According to uniqueness theory, individuals have needs to be distinctive and special [60]. If they are highly similar to the rest, they will feel their self-perception is threatened [66]. That is, individuals often attempt to build and maintain their self-perception through self-distinguishing behaviors. Their expressions of uniqueness can be achieved in different forms and outlets [29]. In what follows, seven factors that motivate an individual to purchase a personalized product online are interpreted based on uniqueness theory.

*Uniqueness seeking:* For individuals who are eager to differentiate themselves from others, possessing a

personalized item that no one else has is feasible [42]. Personalized products enable a customer to demonstrate his/her unique tastes via modifying the appearances of target goods [45]. Sometimes, a customer can even transform the object completely according to their special needs and expectations [29]. Thus, owning a personalized product is an effective method that an individual can differentiate himself/herself from others [20]. As Snyder [61] points out, seeking uniqueness through material consumption such as personalizing the product is valued by customers because personalization can satisfy the need for uniqueness without risking severe social penalties. Therefore, personalizing products is an important way that people can differentiate themselves from others [43].

*Emotional attachment:* By receiving a special product such as a personalized gift, an individual can easily develop an emotional bond with it [44]. For example, after a boy gives a personalized gift (e.g., engraving a girl’s name onto it) to a girl, the girl instantly knows the giver has spent time and effort personalizing it. So the girl sees it more valuable and memorable than a regular gift, thereby quickly developing an emotional attachment to the gift [57]. If the girl has received the other gift that is just the ordinary product, the ordinary product cannot attract this girl’s attention and emotional attachment. In addition, a personalized product can remind the owner of particular memories of a specific event [37]. For instance, a person might have had a wonderful experience at a conference. When the person is using a personalized item (i.e., a pen or a cup) onto which the conference name was printed, it can remind him or her of wonderful things about the conference.

*Innovation:* When an individual innovates by creating or designing a special product, such a product differs from regular products, thereby differentiating the person who designed it (i.e., the owner of this product) from other customers. In addition, customers can also share their creative ideas with online vendors in the hope of having them provide completely new products [21]. For example, an online vendor who offers personalized T-shirts can totally rely on the contribution of customers in the product design process. In short, when an individual creates and designs more self-related products to meet his/her new requirements, it also fulfills his/her need for uniqueness [28]. This result is in accordance with previous studies, which stated that designing/creating new products before others do is one way to satisfy a person’s need for uniqueness [10, 75].

*Enjoyment:* According to uniqueness theory, people are happy when they feel moderately different from others. That is, when they are extremely similar to others, they may feel a threat to their identity [66], but when they are extremely dissimilar to others, they may be

excluded or punished by others [22]. Purchasing a personalized product can help an individual achieve this goal (i.e., feeling moderately different from others) without risking severe social penalties [66]. In addition, the process experience of designing a personalized product and the effort involved can offer people enjoyment and a sense of playfulness [19, 76]. Customers can also feel joyful when using the personalized product because the unique appearance and special features of the item are tailored according to their preferences and needs [18].

*Identity expression:* One's possessions are an important component of the sense of self. Hence, customers would like to use key possessions to extend, expand, and strengthen their sense of self [8]. Since a personalized product is assembled on the basis of an individual's preference [19], customers can thus directly express who they are and what they want through personalization [2]. That is, an individual can make his/her identity tangible by associating himself/herself with the unique products [56]. For example, a guitar player can embed his/her own style into a personalized guitar. In so doing, he/she can make sure that the guitar is consistent with his/her visual style. As a result, an individual benefit from a personalized product because it can express his/her particular identity [44].

*Ownership:* As mentioned above, online product personalization allows customers to modify product features (i.e., customers can control the outcomes). In doing so, an individual expends time and mental energy in designing the product (i.e., self-investment) [19]. As a result, an individual may feel ownership about this unique product due to self-investment and control over product outcomes [51]. The feeling that this item is only mine rather than anyone else's denotes psychological ownership [53]. When customers possess a personalized product, they feel like they are using only their own product, which might generate a feeling of superiority due to psychological ownership [37].

*Vanity:* Personalized products with a unique appearance, such as cosmetics and clothing, are important for an individual who wants to be attractive in the group [73]. That is, an individual may be considered physically attractive by displaying the personalized item [63]. Some individuals also use consumption of personalized products as a means to convey their individual achievement and personal success [71]. As Hoch and Lowenstein [26] point out, material consumption of special products is often associated with "you are successful," which reflect the achievement of vanity. For example, an individual can demonstrate how different he/she is by showing off the unique personalized item in public. In doing so, he/she successfully informs other people of his/her achievement

[16, 55]. An individual can thus directly satisfy his/her vanity by purchasing a personalized product.

### Theory of Planned Behavior

According to TPB, an individual's intention to perform a behavior is predicted by his/her attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [3, 69]. Attitude toward the behavior is predicted by behavioral beliefs, which are an individual's beliefs about consequences of the particular behavior. The above-mentioned factors (i.e., uniqueness seeking, emotional attachment, identity expression, enjoyment, vanity, innovation, ownership) act as behavioral beliefs that affect an individual's attitude toward purchasing personalized products online. The factor "recommendation" is akin to subjective norms, which refer to the perceived social influence to perform a behavior [70].

Additionally, a person's perceived behavioral control influences behavioral intention, which in turn determines his/her behavior [4]. In particular, perceived behavior control relates to an individual's perception of the availability of opportunities and resources required to perform the behavior [46]. Consistent with this view, perceived control is interpreted below based on TPB.

*Perceived control:* Many companies have served customers on websites that enable customers to personalize their own products. The toolkits of these websites dramatically reduce the level of skill necessary to design a product oneself [19]. Designing a product online merely requires clicking the mouse [57]; the websites then quickly provide the user with simulated feedback on the screen. The design process is so easy that even a novice designer only needs a few minutes to create a personalized product [52]. Furthermore, online product personalization engenders a high degree of customer involvement [59]. Customers can tailor the product due to their control over product performance [67, 68]. Customers can thus enjoy a high level of perceived control when personalizing a product online [31]. Accordingly, Hunt et al. [27] have suggested that customers who are highly involved in personalization tend to transform the perceived behavioral control into product purchase decisions.

## CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Using a qualitative study approach, the current study reveals that individuals would like to purchase personalized products online due to uniqueness seeking, emotional attachment, identity expression, enjoyment, vanity, innovation, ownership, and perceived control. This study contributes to the literature in the following ways.

First, this study has provided a comprehensive and systematic investigation of the reasons why individuals purchase personalized products online. Eleven factors emerged in this study, some of which are relatively new in the context of online product personalization. For example, although emotional attachment has been studied in the literature of consumer research, prior studies have not reported its various forms. In online product personalization, individuals may attach to personalized products in two ways: 1) expressing emotion through personalized gifts, and 2) keeping memories of a specific event. In addition, although it was found that consumer identity is linked to consumption, this concept has not been discussed in an online personalization context. The current study shows that personalized products allow customers to express their identity due to active control over product performance. Additionally, although vanity has been introduced in numerous research fields (e.g. psychology, sociology, and marketing), it is the first time that vanity has been discussed in the context of online product personalization from the perspective of the customer.

Furthermore, the current study uses uniqueness theory and TPB to interpret why individuals are willing to purchase personalized products online. These two theories are different from the theories used in prior studies on product personalization. Uniqueness theory and TPB complement one another in explaining and understanding what motivates individuals to purchase and possess personalized products. This is also the first time that these two theories have been used jointly to explain online product personalization.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have several practical implications for companies that have not offered a product personalization service to customers, as well as for companies that are already operating product personalization websites. For the companies that have not offered a product personalization service, the factors identified in the current research provide them with a guide to efficiently attract and retain customers. For example, some individuals would like to show off their achievement through personalized products, that is, gratify their vanity. Given this, online merchants should provide some personalized products that are useful to display and create a sense of accomplishment. Other individuals expect to develop a strong emotional attachment to personalized products. Online marketers, therefore, should make it easy to achieve this objective by providing personalized products through which customers can express their feelings online and endow the products with symbolic meanings. Moreover, many people want to maintain or strengthen

their identities through personalized possessions. Online marketers should therefore provide personalized products to allow customers to make sense of who they are and to maintain a connected identity between past, present, and possible imagined futures [2]. For companies that are operating product personalization websites, each factor identified in this study has offered a theoretical insight that can help them to better fulfill individuals' needs and improve the sustainability of personalized products in the future.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As a qualitative study, this research has a limitation inherent in all studies employing a qualitative method. To some extent, the case study and interviews limit the generalization of the results. We tried to mitigate this limitation by increasing the number of participants. For a qualitative study, 71 participants are not a small number, thereby mitigating this limitation to some extent. The objective of the current study is to explore and understand the reasons why customers would like to buy personalized products online; therefore, a qualitative method was an appropriate method and thus adopted. Future research could employ quantitative methods to study why people would like to purchase personalized products. Specifically, the factors identified in the current study could be used in a questionnaire, and a large-scale survey could attempt to measure the influence of the factors in product personalization situations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored why individuals would like to purchase personalized products online. The results suggest that customers buy personalized products online primarily due to the following reasons: uniqueness seeking, emotional attachment, identity expression, enjoyment, vanity, innovation, ownership, and perceived control. These factors are interpreted based on uniqueness theory and TPB. In addition, other factors (specifically trust, price, and recommendation) pertaining to the website also help explain why customers choose a particular website instead of other websites to purchase personalized products. This study has offered a systematic explanation and understanding of the reasons why customers are willing to purchase personalized products online. Accordingly, this research provides some important guidelines for companies that serve customers personalized products on their websites. Each factor offers a theoretical insight that can help online vendors better provide personalized products to customers, which can improve their profits.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Jie Zhen** is an Assistant Professor in Department of E-commerce at Chongqing Technology and Business University, China. His current research interest includes e-commerce adoption, consumer behavior, and online personalization service.

**Li Zhao** (corresponding author) is a faculty member in the Department of Information Processing Science at the Faculty of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering at the University of Oulu. He holds a Ph.D. in information systems from McMaster University in Canada. His research interests include knowledge management, security, social networks, social media, and e-marketing. His research has been published in *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Government Information Quarterly*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, and others.

**Jianyuan Yan** is a Professor of Management Science and Engineering in at Nankai University, China. She obtained her Ph.D in Management from Nankai University. Her research interests center around supply chain management, information systems, and e-commerce.