

MARKETING VIRAL/NON-VIRAL AND PURCHASE DECISION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON THE IMPACT OF HEDONISM AND UTILITARIANISM ON CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract: This theoretical essay aims to propose a framework to investigate how viral and non-viral marketing influence consumers' purchase decisions regarding hedonic and utilitarian products, while also considering the degree of engagement generated by campaigns. The underlying premise is that viral content, by evoking emotions and symbolic values, enhances perceived value and purchase intention, particularly for hedonic items, whereas utilitarian products are more responsive to rational, functional, non-viral approaches. The study further proposes to examine the extent to which social media engagement is impacted by these antecedent effects. This theoretical discussion is justified by the need to understand how different types of products and marketing strategies shape consumer behaviour in digital environments, where both emotional and functional value remain relevant factors for consumers. Accordingly, this work seeks to identify theoretical patterns linking the type of appeal (hedonic or utilitarian) and the type of campaign (viral or non-viral) to purchase decisions and engagement levels, thereby providing insights to guide more effective, consumer-centric digital marketing practices in the future.

Keywords: viral marketing; purchase behaviour; hedonism; utilitarianism; engagement.

Objetivo de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS): 12 - Consumo e Produção Responsáveis

1 INTRODUCTION

Marketing research has for decades indicated that multiple factors can influence consumers' purchase behaviour. Such influences stem both from external elements, such as advertising campaigns and product attributes, and from internal aspects, including personal values, emotions and symbolic motivations (Kotler & Keller, 2018; Solomon, 2016). In this context, the digital environment has significantly transformed how consumers relate to brands and products, highlighting the role of emotions, shopping experience, and engagement as fundamental variables in consumption decisions (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017; Lima & Cordeiro, 2021).

Among the mechanisms that have gained prominence in the digital landscape is viral marketing, a strategy leveraging consumers' spontaneous sharing of content across social networks to increase campaign visibility and influence purchase behaviour (Torres, 2010; Berger, 2014). Effective viral campaigns can activate emotional and symbolic elements, connecting consumers to products and brands in more compelling ways. This emotional connection is particularly evident when content elicits positive feelings, such as pleasure and enjoyment, linked to hedonic consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), or when it communicates functional value, such as practicality and usefulness, typical of utilitarian consumption (Okada, 2005; Solomon, 2016).

In this sense, viral marketing is understood to shape consumers' value perceptions by highlighting hedonic or utilitarian dimensions of the products or services offered. This occurs because consumers, when interacting with viral content, not only absorb information but also construct symbolic meanings and affective experiences that influence their purchase decisions (Berger, 2014; Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Al Abri & Valaee, 2020). Furthermore, these experiences can drive engagement with brands, fostering actions such as likes, comments, shares and recommendations, which in turn strengthen the ties between consumers and companies (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014; Labrecque, Swani & Stephen, 2020).

Accordingly, this study aims to discuss and present a theoretical framework outlining how viral and non-viral marketing can impact consumers' purchase decisions, particularly in relation to the hedonic and utilitarian attributes of products and the role of digital engagement. The proposal is to construct a theoretical model that connects these variables, emphasising the mechanisms through which content influences purchase behaviour and consumer engagement in the online environment.

This paper is structured as follows: after this introduction, the theoretical background is presented, with discussions on viral marketing, consumer behaviour, hedonism, utilitarianism, social media engagement, and related theoretical propositions. Subsequently, a theoretical-methodological explanatory model articulating these variables is proposed, followed by final considerations and suggestions for future research, with emphasis on the theoretical and managerial contributions of the investigation.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Viral Marketing and Its Influence on Consumer Purchase Decisions

Viral marketing is currently one of the most influential forms of digital communication and is characterised by the rapid dissemination of messages through spontaneous sharing among users (Jendoubi & Martin, 2020). Akpınar and Berger (2017) define it as an evolution of digital marketing precisely because it enables companies to expand the reach of their campaigns without relying exclusively on paid media, drawing instead on active consumer participation. In this sense, by fostering natural engagement with content, viral marketing

positions itself as a powerful tool for influencing consumer behaviour while simultaneously transforming consumers themselves into communication agents (Fard & Marvi, 2020).

Viral marketing involves the creation of campaigns with a high potential for sharing, leveraging the power of social networks and the internet to amplify messages exponentially (Torres, 2010; Jendoubi & Martin, 2020). This generates a digital word-of-mouth effect, where the influence of personal recommendations (even if virtual) can be more persuasive than traditional advertising (Fard & Marvi, 2020). Viral content must therefore evoke emotions, capture attention, and, most importantly, motivate audience action, whether through identification, curiosity or perceived value in the message (Berger, 2014).

Unlike traditional marketing, which operates with greater control and predictability, viral marketing depends on human behaviour and is therefore often unpredictable (Cavallini, 2008; Iribarren & Moro, 2011). Even so, when well executed, it can deliver extraordinary results. As Barichello and Oliveira (2010) point out, the secret of viral marketing lies in offering consumers a reason to talk about and share a brand, creating authentic conversational opportunities that spread organically. Thus, virality is not spontaneous but strategically constructed, based on content with emotional appeal, symbolic value or practical utility (Berger, 2014).

This form of communication directly impacts consumer behaviour, mainly because it influences not only brand recall but also perceived value and purchase desire (Solomon, 2016). Torres (2010) highlights that with the digitisation of consumption, marketing has adapted to keep pace with new forms of interaction and decision-making. The contemporary consumer is more informed, connected and demanding, using the internet as a primary medium to search for information, compare products and engage with brands (Castells, 2003). In this scenario, viral campaigns have proven effective in promoting shared experiences and driving engagement, factors that shape perceptions and directly influence purchase decisions (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

However, Barichello and Oliveira (2010) caution that viral marketing, even when effective, does not replace other forms of communication: rather, it complements the process of building brand value. The mere virality of content does not guarantee conversion into sales if it is not aligned with the interests, values and expectations of consumers (Berger, 2014). Therefore, for viral marketing to positively impact purchase decisions, the message must be relevant, engaging and appropriate to the target audience's profile.

Additionally, Berger (2014) reinforces that viral content which elicits emotions such as joy, surprise or empathy has a greater likelihood of being shared, thus increasing reach and, consequently, the probability of conversion. By emotionally connecting with consumers, viral marketing contributes to building more meaningful relationships with brands, enhancing perceived product value and facilitating purchase decisions (Hollebeek, 2011). In this context, the present theoretical discussion is grounded in the following central proposition:

H1: Viral marketing influences consumers' purchase decisions more than non-viral marketing.

As demonstrated, the virality of a message is closely related to its capacity to generate engagement, convey trust, and arouse purchase interest, elements fundamental in the decision journey of the modern consumer. Thus, understanding this phenomenon and its effects on digital consumption is essential both for advancing marketing theory and for formulating more effective strategies in increasingly connected and dynamic environments.

2.2 Viral Marketing for Hedonic Products

Hedonic products are those that provide pleasure, entertainment, and sensory and emotional experiences to consumers. According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), hedonic value is constructed through emotions, fantasy, and subjective experiences, being strongly associated with the pursuit of excitement, status, self-esteem, and personal gratification. This type of consumption is driven by symbolic and affective factors, often linked to immediate pleasure and self-expression (Poncin & Ben Mimoun, 2014; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Arruda Filho & Dholakia, 2013; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2021).

In the digital environment, viral marketing has proven especially effective in promoting products with hedonic characteristics (Chun & Kim, 2011). This is because the emotional and social nature of these products directly resonates with the triggers that drive content virality, such as emotion, identification and social sharing (Berger, 2014). Creative videos, memes, challenges or emotionally appealing storytelling have high engagement potential, particularly when they promote positive experiences associated with consumption and reinforce the product's symbolic value (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017; Kunsch, 2019; Arruda Filho & Dholakia, 2013).

Moreover, viral marketing acts as a catalyst for social proof for hedonic products (Cialdini, 2006). When consumers see others sharing or interacting with a given product, they are motivated to do the same, either out of fear of missing out or the desire for belonging (Berger, 2014). This behaviour is driven by the emotional logic underpinning hedonic consumption, where desire is reinforced by social visibility and association with desirable lifestyles (Solomon, 2016).

Another important aspect is that consumers motivated by hedonic values tend to respond positively to content that promotes experiences rather than simply presenting technical features (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). This underscores the need for campaigns targeting these products to adopt strategies that highlight the immediate pleasure of use, emotion, and consumer involvement in the brand's narrative (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Kunsch, 2019). Thus, viral marketing not only disseminates but also builds emotional experiences that intensify desire and purchase intention.

Therefore, the connection between viral marketing and hedonic products is not merely a matter of media format but rather of compatibility between content and consumer motivation (Berger & Milkman, 2020). Viral campaigns that stimulate positive emotions, promote shareable experiences, and reinforce the symbolic value of consumption have greater potential to influence purchase decisions in these contexts (Berger & Milkman, 2020).

By contrast, non-viral marketing tends to exert little influence over the purchase of hedonic products, as these are intrinsically linked to emotion and immediate pleasure (Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2021) elements that require a more intense affective connection with consumers (Silva et al., 2023).

Unlike viral marketing, which spreads organically via social networks and generates emotional and social engagement, traditional or non-viral marketing often adopts a more rational and unidirectional approach (Lopes, 2016), which may not effectively activate the emotional triggers driving hedonic consumption (Schuchmann & Figueira, 2020). Based on this evidence, the following proposition is formulated:

H2: Viral (non-viral) marketing influences (does not influence) purchase decisions when the product/service has hedonic usage characteristics.

2.3 Non-viral Marketing for Utilitarian Products

Utilitarian products, in turn, are those purchased based on their functionality, practical utility and ability to solve everyday problems (Dalal, Bhattacharya & Chattopadhyay, 2025). This type of consumption is guided by rational motivations such as cost-benefit analysis, durability and efficiency, and less by emotional or symbolic appeals (Solomon, 2016). Utilitarian value is constructed from the objective evaluation of product attributes, such as technical quality, functionality and performance (Slama & Singley, 1996; Chung, 2015; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2021), which requires communication approaches that prioritise technical clarity and the delivery of concrete information.

Although consumers of utilitarian products are also exposed to interactive digital environments where viral campaigns circulate widely, such strategies do not always meet the informational needs associated with this type of consumption. The effectiveness of viral marketing in this case depends on the ability of the message to convey functional product attributes in an attractive and accessible way without sacrificing clarity and objectivity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Dinh & Lee, 2024). However, as consumers prioritise functional and informative content, virality only succeeds if the content maintains practical relevance and communicates tangible benefits, something not always achieved through generalised viral formats.

This reinforces that even when viral strategies are adopted, their effectiveness for utilitarian products depends on the inclusion of informative elements. Thus, non-viral marketing, which is naturally structured to communicate specifications, performance and technical arguments, remains highly relevant in the purchase journey (Dantas, Cavalcanti & Trindade, 2020).

Furthermore, non-viral campaigns tend to be more effective for utilitarian products because they enable greater technical detail, facilitate trust building and reinforce brand authority, factors crucial for more rational consumers (Arruda Filho et al., 2008; Batra & Athtola, 2021; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2021). The non-viral format also favours message control and content depth, aligning more closely with the expectations of consumers who prioritise objective information and logical comparisons.

This dichotomy underscores that for utilitarian products, marketing strategy must consider the type of information valued by consumers, in this case, functionality, technical clarity and source credibility. While virality may occur, it tends to play a complementary rather than decisive role in influencing purchase decisions (Solomon, 2016; Batra & Athtola, 2021; Dinh & Lee, 2024).

Additionally, non-viral marketing can leverage resources such as technical testimonials, detailed reviews and quality certifications, which act as mechanisms of social proof and credibility, especially important for functionally oriented items (Cialdini, 2006). Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) emphasise that even in digital strategies, technical products benefit most when communication is balanced, clear, and focused on relevant content regarding their functionalities, characteristics more easily delivered by non-viral approaches.

It is therefore understood that non-viral marketing exerts significant influence over the purchase of utilitarian products, precisely because it meets the informational demands of

rational consumers who assess attributes such as performance and cost-benefit (Gonçalves, Souza & Silva, 2015; Batra & Athtola, 2021). Even in the face of information overload in digital environments, utilitarian consumers continue to seek reliable sources and objective data before making decisions, further enhancing the value of strategies that prioritise technical content and direct communication (Appel et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2021).

Accordingly, non-viral marketing, despite being more traditional and less interactive, is highly effective in delivering detailed information, building authority, and reducing perceived risk (Okada, 2005; Arruda Filho et al., 2008). By contrast, viral marketing can complement this process but tends to have less impact when consumers focus on rationality, technical comparison and functionality (Godey et al., 2022; Alalwan, 2021). Based on these considerations, this discussion proposes the following:

H3: Non-viral (viral) marketing influences (does not influence) purchase decisions when the product/service has utilitarian usage characteristics.

2.4 Social Media Engagement

In the current digital marketing landscape, engagement has become a central metric for measuring the effectiveness of interactions between brands and consumers (Solomon, 2016; Torres, 2018; Da Silva, Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2024). This concept refers to the level of involvement, attention and active participation that consumers demonstrate towards branded content, going beyond likes or views to encompass comments, shares, recommendations, and the creation of related content (Kotler & Keller, 2018). Thus, engagement represents not only a behavioural response but also an emotional and symbolic connection between consumer and brand.

Social networks play a fundamental role in this process. Because they are highly interactive and collaborative environments, they foster the development of closer, more continuous relationships between companies and their audiences (Gabriel, 2010; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021; Da Silva, Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2024). According to Wellman (2001), these networks function as social structures that organise digital interactions based on shared interests and relational ties, promoting constant exchanges of information, opinions, and emotions. In this sense, social media are not merely communication channels but spaces for constructing meanings and experiences (Lemos, 2020).

Viral marketing finds fertile ground in this digital ecosystem. By stimulating the organic dissemination of content, it amplifies consumer engagement while embedding the brand within the everyday dynamics of online interaction (Gabriel, 2010). Viral content sparks emotions, fosters identification and promotes sharing, which significantly expands message reach and strengthens brand presence on social media (Berger, 2014).

Moreover, viral marketing acts as a trigger of symbolic reciprocity: by sharing branded content, consumers become part of the narrative, contributing to its diffusion and reinforcing their social and digital identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). This co-creation of value within digital interactions is highlighted by Brodie et al. (2011) as one of the pillars of brand engagement, especially in contexts mediated by social platforms. Accordingly, successful viral campaigns foster a sense of belonging to a community, sustaining high levels of ongoing engagement (Gabriel, 2010).

Conversely, non-viral marketing strategies, such as static ads or institutional campaigns, may have less impact in terms of engagement, since they adopt less interactive formats and rely on a unidirectional logic of communication (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021; Solomon, 2016). Digital campaigns that do not stimulate active consumer participation may generate inferior results because they fail to harness the potential for virality and involvement offered by digital platforms. This reinforces the importance of strategies that position consumers as protagonists in communication (Gabriel, 2010; Hollebeek & Macky, 2020).

Furthermore, algorithms of social networks such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok prioritise content that generates meaningful interactions, increasing its exposure (De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012). As a result, viral campaigns that encourage comments, shares or user-generated content are more likely to become visible and relevant. Solomon (2015) emphasises that the success of digital marketing is directly linked to a brand's ability to create socially engaging experiences, something viral marketing enables through emotionally resonant content.

In this context, viral marketing is positioned not merely as a promotional tool but as a relational strategy that increases consumer engagement by valuing experience, emotion and participation (Gabriel, 2010). This approach aligns with the paradigm shift in contemporary marketing, which moves beyond simply transmitting messages to investing in building bonds and memorable experiences with consumers (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017). Accordingly, the following proposition is proposed:

H4: Viral (non-viral) marketing influences (does not influence) consumer engagement on social media.

2.5 Proposed Theoretical Model (Mediation/Moderation)

The growing digitalisation of consumption relationships has brought new challenges and opportunities for marketing, particularly regarding how consumers interact with promotional content and make purchase decisions. In this context, viral marketing has emerged as an effective strategy for stimulating consumption behaviours, especially through messages with strong emotional appeal or practical value that circulate rapidly across social networks (Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Torres, 2010). However, the effectiveness of this strategy does not depend solely on how the message is disseminated but also on how it connects to the type of product being promoted (whether hedonic or utilitarian) and the perceptions it generates among consumers (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000).

The literature shows that consumers respond differently to marketing stimuli depending on the nature of the product. Hedonic products, which involve pleasure, emotion and self-expression, tend to generate higher engagement when promoted through viral campaigns, as these elicit emotions and foster shareable experiences (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Berger, 2014). Utilitarian products, associated with functionality and practical necessity, require a more informative and rational approach. Nevertheless, they may still benefit from viral campaigns if these succeed in conveying their technical attributes creatively (Chung, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011).

From this perspective, purchase decision emerges as a central link between the type of marketing employed and the level of consumer engagement. Successful viral campaigns directly influence purchase desire by activating emotional, social or functional triggers, depending on the type of product and the way content is structured (Berger, 2014; Solomon, 2016; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021). When consumers decide to buy, they are essentially

responding to stimuli they perceive as relevant, useful or pleasurable, demonstrating that purchase decision is not merely an end in itself but also a transition point towards subsequent behaviours, such as engagement with the brand (Lemon, 2021).

In this regard, it is proposed that purchase decision mediates the relationship between the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) and engagement (Clark, 2022). This means that the impact of marketing on engagement is neither direct nor automatic but occurs largely because consumers who decide to purchase also tend to interact more with the brand by sharing experiences, reviewing products, commenting or recommending (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014). This mediation is particularly relevant in digital environments, where engagement is consolidated as an indicator of relational value between brand and consumer (Kotler & Keller, 2018).

In addition to mediation, it is observed that product type (hedonic or utilitarian) can moderate the effect of viral marketing on purchase decision. This implies that the impact of viral (or non-viral) marketing on purchase decisions varies depending on product characteristics. For hedonic products, viral marketing is expected to be especially effective because of its alignment with consumers' emotional motivations (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). For utilitarian products, non-viral marketing tends to be more effective when it clearly and functionally communicates utility benefits (Blázquez, 2014; Soares & Pimentel, 2021).

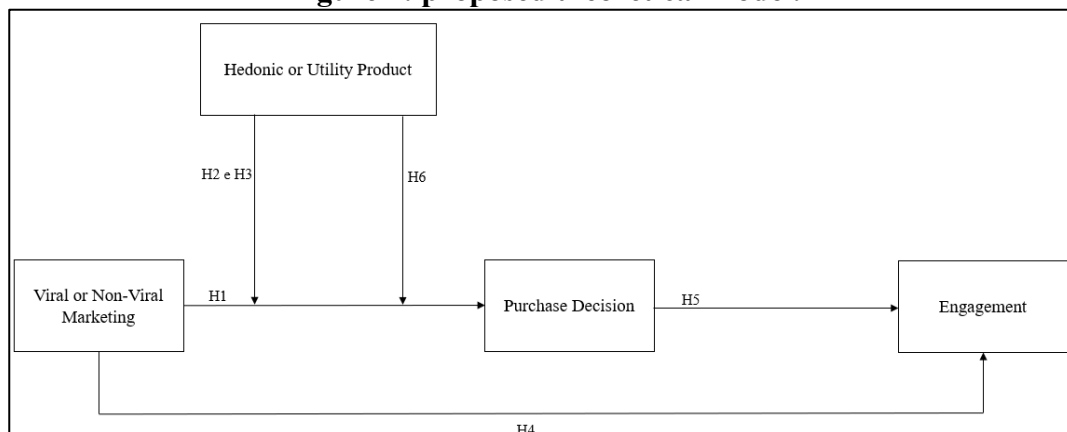
The moderating role of product type is also justified by the way consumers process received information. According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1977), consumption decisions are based on beliefs, attitudes and intentions. Utilitarian products activate more intensive rational processing, while hedonic products elicit affective and impulsive responses. This alters how marketing influences decision-making, making product type a critical moderating factor in this relationship (Okada, 2025).

Accordingly, the proposed theoretical framework (Figure 1) highlights two main contributions: the mediation of purchase decision between viral/non-viral marketing and engagement, and the moderation of product type (hedonic or utilitarian) in the relationship between marketing and purchase decision. Based on this, two additional theoretical propositions are formulated:

H5 (Mediation): Purchase decision mediates the relationship between the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) and consumer engagement on social media.

H6 (Moderation): Product type (hedonic or utilitarian) moderates the relationship between the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) and purchase decision.

Figure 1: proposed theoretical model.



Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

The proposed model investigates the effects of the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) on purchase decision and social media engagement, considering product type (hedonic or utilitarian) as a moderating variable and purchase decision as a mediating variable. This framework aims to understand the pathways through which viral or non-viral marketing influences consumer behaviour, based on its emotional, functional, and relational nature. It broadens the understanding that digital marketing (particularly viral marketing) does not operate in a linear manner but rather through interactive and conditional mechanisms involving cognition, emotion, and the consumption context (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

3 METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

For the empirical testing of this study's propositions, controlled experiments with factorial design will be conducted, using planned manipulations aligned with the theoretical assumptions discussed. Hypothesis H1 will be tested through a 2 x 1 experimental design, in which the independent variable is the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) and the dependent variable is consumers' purchase decision. The objective of this experiment is to verify whether, when exposed to campaigns with viral or non-viral characteristics, consumers demonstrate significant variations in their purchase intention or decision.

Hypotheses H2, H3, and H4 will be tested using a 2 x 2 experimental design, considering two independent variables: (1) the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) and (2) the type of product or service (hedonic or utilitarian). The dependent variable remains purchase decision, followed by engagement. This format will allow the assessment of main effects (each factor individually) and interaction effects, i.e., whether the impact of marketing varies depending on the type of product, as theoretically proposed. This 2 x 2 model is appropriate for testing moderated relationships and provides greater validity by analysing multiple combinations of experimental stimuli. The study's 2 x 2 matrix model is illustrated in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Proposed 2 x 2 experiment matrix.

Product/Service Hedonic	↓ Dependent Variable	↑ Dependent Variable
	↑ Dependent Variable	↓ Dependent Variable
Non-Viral Marketing		Viral Marketing

Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

To enable the execution of these experiments, data collection will be conducted through web surveys, using a suitable digital platform for administering online questionnaires. This approach facilitates access to a larger and more diverse sample of participants, ensuring greater control over group randomisation and the presentation of experimental stimuli. Questionnaires will be developed based on scales previously validated in international and national literature, adapted to the specific context of this research, and using a 5-point Likert scale.

The data obtained will be analysed using SPSS statistical software, applying different tests according to the objectives and requirements of each study phase. The internal reliability of the scales will be assessed by Cronbach's alpha, to confirm whether the items in each questionnaire dimension are consistent with each other. Alpha values above 0.70 are considered acceptable, indicating that the scale reliably measures the intended construct (Kline, 2011).

Prior to hypothesis testing, a manipulation check will be performed, using means, standard deviations and p-values <0.05 to ensure that participants correctly perceived the experimental manipulations (for example, whether they recognised that the content was indeed viral or non-viral, and whether the product was perceived as hedonic or utilitarian). This verification is essential to validate the integrity of the experiment and to ensure that observed effects are due to the intended manipulations (Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023).

Finally, an ANOVA will be applied to test the main and interaction effects of the independent variables on purchase decision, in accordance with the 2×2 experimental structure. ANOVA will allow for the identification of statistically significant differences between group means, which will be decisive for testing Hypotheses H2, H3 and H4, particularly regarding the moderation exerted by product type.

For testing Hypotheses H5 (mediation) and H6 (moderation), the SmartPLS version 4 software will be used. This approach is appropriate for complex models involving multiple latent variables and simultaneous relationships among them, especially when the research objective is prediction and the explanation of variance in dependent variables (Hair et al., 2009; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023).

In the final stage of analysis, Hypothesis H5 proposes that purchase decision mediates the relationship between the type of marketing (viral or non-viral) and social media engagement. To test this, a mediation procedure will be conducted involving three main steps: (i) testing the direct effect of the type of marketing on engagement (total effect), (ii) testing the effect of the type of marketing on purchase decision (path a), and (iii) testing the effect of purchase decision on engagement (path b). The indirect effect ($a \times b$) will then be calculated and assessed for statistical significance, as recommended by Hair et al. (2009).

If the indirect effect is significant and the direct effect (marketing type $\rightarrow$ engagement) becomes non-significant when the mediator (purchase decision) is included, full mediation is confirmed. If both effects remain significant, partial mediation is indicated, suggesting that part of the marketing effect on engagement occurs through purchase decision.

Hypothesis H6 posits that product type (hedonic or utilitarian) moderates the relationship between marketing type and purchase decision. The objective is to test whether the effect of marketing on purchase decision significantly varies according to the product type perceived by the consumer.

The choice of SmartPLS 4 is justified by its capacity to handle predictive models with moderate samples, formative and reflective variables, and non-normal distributions, characteristics compatible with the expected data in this research. Therefore, the use of this approach will provide statistical support for testing Hypotheses H5 and H6, enabling a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and conditions that determine the impact of viral (or non-viral) marketing on engagement, mediated by purchase decision and moderated by product type.

4 CONCLUSION

This theoretical study had as its central purpose the development of a framework to investigate how viral and non-viral marketing strategies influence the purchase decision for hedonic and utilitarian products and how such decisions unfold in consumer engagement on social media. The construction of the proposed model is based on the premise that consumption behaviour in digital environments is shaped by multiple dimensions, rational, emotional, and relational, that intersect and demand new forms of analysis and interpretation by marketing theory and practice.

The reviewed literature evidenced that viral marketing, by leveraging spontaneous content sharing, not only expands campaign reach but also activates emotional and symbolic mechanisms that directly influence perceived value and purchase desire, especially in hedonic product or service contexts (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Berger, 2014). Conversely, for utilitarian products, the effectiveness of non-viral marketing depends on its capacity to communicate functional value, aligning with traditional promotion models based on the rationality and functionality that consumers seek (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Solomon, 2016; Santini et al., 2022).

The main theoretical contribution of this proposal lies in the articulation of three central constructs, viral or non-viral marketing, product type (hedonic/utilitarian), and engagement, that influence purchase decision within an integrative model that also considers moderating effects. The model broadens the understanding of the role that different communication strategies play in the initial and subsequent phases of the consumer journey, offering a relational and experiential perspective. Additionally, by proposing 2 x 1 and 2 x 2 experimental designs and moderated/mediated effects, the study advances methodologically by integrating predictive analyses with causal validations.

From a managerial perspective, the anticipated findings offer direct implications for brands and marketing professionals seeking to align their strategies with contemporary digital consumption behaviours. The proposal enables the identification of which types of campaigns (viral or non-viral) are more effective for different product categories, thereby informing communication investments with greater precision and evidence-based decision-making. Moreover, understanding the mediation of purchase decision on engagement and the moderation of product type can guide the development of more personalised content with higher potential for virality and conversion.

Like any research, this study has limitations. The first relates to the theoretical and experimental nature of the model, which, although it allows for variable control and causal analysis, may limit the generalisability of results to real market contexts. Furthermore, the use of manipulated stimuli may not fully capture the spontaneous interactions of consumers with brands or products in digital environments. Another limitation concerns the selection of hedonic and utilitarian products/services and the contexts used in the experiments, which, although representative, may not encompass the diversity of possible scenarios.

Accordingly, it is recommended that future studies deepen the analysis by exploring different product categories, including services and durable consumer goods, and examine other moderators such as consumer profile, brand familiarity, or category involvement. Research designs in which individuals choose between hedonic and utilitarian products/services in response to viral or non-viral campaigns are also encouraged.

In summary, this theoretical proposal presents an up-to-date model for investigating the effects of viral and non-viral marketing in digital consumption contexts, contributing to the advancement of the literature on consumer behaviour and interactive marketing strategies. Its academic relevance and practical applicability strengthen the justification for its development,

positioning this research as a timely response to the transformations of consumption in the era of connectivity and experience.

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