

FROM PLEASURE TO NECESSITY: THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND (VIRAL/NON-VIRAL) MARKETING STRATEGIES ON CONSUMER PURCHASE DECISIONS

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Abstract: This theoretical essay aims to discuss the impact of digital influencers on consumer purchase decisions within the context of viral and non-viral marketing, taking into account the type of product being promoted (hedonic or utilitarian). The central hypothesis posits that influencers affect consumer behaviour through their individual and authentic communication when endorsing products on social media. The study proposes that while content creators can influence consumer decisions, the nature of the product and the type of marketing strategy (viral or non-viral) in which the influencer is embedded are also external variables that shape user and consumer behaviour in online environments. In these contexts, the pursuit of products may be driven by functional needs or momentary pleasure. Accordingly, this essay seeks to demonstrate that consumer purchase decisions can be influenced by the presence of digital influencers, depending on whether the promoted product is hedonic or utilitarian, and whether the marketing approach is viral or non-viral. The research suggests that these factors collectively exert distinct influences on online consumer behaviour. Thus, the theoretical essay endeavours to understand how these variables interact and directly affect purchase decisions.

Keywords: digital influencer; viral and non-viral marketing; hedonism; utilitarianism; purchase decision.

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

1 INTRODUCTION

Content creation in the digital environment has become increasingly creative and authentic due to the figure of the digital influencer, who uses their social media audience along with the display of their personality to promote products or services and, through this, becomes an opinion leader (Resch, 2021; Carvalho, 2025; Caiado et al., 2025). The influencer's way of presenting and promoting a product draws attention and consequently seeks to generate identification with users within a virtual setting filled with stimuli and both direct and indirect competition (Barbosa, Silva, & Brito, 2019; Wilis & Faik, 2022).

The rise of social media has brought with it a new model of communication, as well as a new way of presenting a product or service, moving away from traditional advertising and marketing to digital and viral marketing through rapidly disseminated content, with or without the support of the digital influencer (Souza Simas & Souza Júnior, 2018; Caiado et al., 2025). The exposure, whether recorded or live, attracts curious individuals, acquaintances, and similar audiences, from which derives the engagement and influence of the person exposing themselves and who, through their own profile and within a specific platform, conveys their point of view, opinion, experience, digital advertising, and ideas in a more individual and interactive manner (Razac, 2018; Oliveira, 2021; Razali et al., 2023).

The influencer uses their own language to generate identification with the public, using the shared online environment as the foundation and key element in bridging the gap between product and client, adapting traditional advertising and viral marketing methods to either the utility of the product or the pleasure of owning it (Sperb, 2020; Martino, 2023; Caiado et al., 2025). In a rapidly disseminated context, the reasons for needing a product or the potential consequences of having it can be strategically demonstrated. When the product's features are exposed on social media in a deliberate manner, the influencer can be convincing through their perceived authority, even within a viral context (Andrade, Mazzon, & Katz, 2006; Anindya & Indriastuti, 2023; Razali et al., 2023).

Thus, this study aims to theoretically analyse and discuss how the role of the digital influencer, through viral and non-viral marketing, can interfere with consumers' purchase decisions when considering the characteristics of hedonic and utilitarian products. The analysis proposes a theoretical model and preliminary hypotheses connecting these variables in order to discuss how they are interlinked through the digital influencer within an online environment intentionally designed to go viral and influence consumer purchase decisions.

This theoretical article is structured as follows: after the introduction, the theoretical framework is presented, including discussions on digital influencers, viral and non-viral marketing, hedonic and utilitarian product characteristics, and their respective propositions/hypotheses. A theoretical/methodological model articulating the variables is then proposed, followed by the conclusion.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Digital Influencer

The figure of the digital influencer has become prominent due to the increasing use of the internet across various niches, given that the influencer is a social media user with a growing number of followers and consequently greater visibility (Wandoko & Panggati, 2022; Cabral, 2023; Gomes, 2023). Influencer marketing promotes brands, products, and services based on the influencer's experience with the promoted item; in other words, the more followers, the more people there are to influence (Resch, 2021; Serralha, 2019; Razali et al., 2023).

Sharing the usage experience by someone with visibility adds credibility, as influencers often have partnerships with companies to promote their experience with a given product or service to their many followers (Gonçalves, Costa & Maia, 2019; Crisafulli & Singh, 2022).

The influencer aims to inform in the simplest way possible, sparking curiosity among social media users, which leads to their influence over them (Gammarano et al., 2020). For companies, this presents a unique opportunity to disseminate their brand in a strategic, deliberate, and rapid manner (Crisafulli & Singh, 2022; Gomes, 2023). Marketing built around the digital influencer as an opinion leader seeks to organically and naturally promote a usage experience and opinion shared by a familiar figure, suggesting that users might also have that experience (Cabral, 2023; Gomes, 2023; Caiado et al., 2025).

The influencer's expertise within the platform where they promote content lends them authenticity, increasing their credibility and consequently their number of followers, likes, and shares, a result of sharing their routine and manner of expression. At the same time, the pursuit of exposure can shift from being a momentary satisfaction to becoming a source of income (Wandoko & Panggati, 2022; Almeida & Barros, 2025). Therefore, the digital influencer becomes an opinion leader in the online environment, who also affects real-life decisions, based on the follower's identification with their content and how they present products or services (Gammarano et al., 2020; Silva, Guimarães & Barbosa, 2024).

2.2 Type of Marketing and the Role of the Digital Influencer

Viral marketing is primarily characterised by the rapid dissemination of easily shareable content (messages, videos, or fotos) through digital platform users. This dissemination is often driven by content that evokes emotion, using humour, curiosity, or trending topics to encourage sharing (Morais & Brito, 2020; Razali et al., 2023). Viral advertising via social networks influences consumer behaviour, promotional approaches, and product choice based on the sensations triggered during the product or service exposure, as well as the tendency for spontaneous sharing (De Lima & Cordeiro, 2021; Anindya & Indriastuti, 2023).

Communication in viral marketing has a high potential for contagion effects due to mechanisms such as "trends," hashtags, and platform-specific knowledge that facilitate easy reach and visibility among users. Simultaneously, it strengthens a company's brand and identity (Satryo & Megawati, 2022; Silva, Amorim & Brito, 2024).

Given its core characteristic of wide and fast dissemination, viral marketing becomes even more impactful when combined with the figure of the digital influencer. This cooperation can generate higher engagement in promoting services and products (Prado & Frogeri, 2017; Gallego & Torres, 2021). The digital influencer, within a viral context, can stand out and carry greater weight during the intentional exposure of a product or service, reaching a larger

audience and resulting in more organic views and shares through both the viral marketing strategy and the influencer's reach (Silva & Martins, 2017; Razali et al., 2023).

Digital platform mechanisms support this dissemination, such as joint posts with other profiles to expand reach, polls that stimulate user responses to the influencer's questions, and cross-engagement through both the influencer's and the brand's audiences (Brandão & Nascimento, 2023; Anindya & Indriastuti, 2023). The involvement of the influencer's followers adds value to the content creator's experience. Consequently, others may be encouraged to seek the same experience, potentially sharing viral content on the same topic (Prado & Frogeri, 2017). In this context, the following proposition arises:

H1: Viral (non-viral) marketing with a digital influencer influences purchase decisions.

As noted, the digital influencer, when aligned with viral marketing, can affect consumer behaviour and purchase decisions. Content creators are closely aligned with digital marketing, as they elicit spontaneous reactions and greater identification with potential buyers, while adding value to the product/service through strategies centred on authentic exposure (Silva & Martins, 2017; Reichstein & Brusch, 2019; Dantas, 2018).

Furthermore, the appeal embedded in such campaigns tends to enhance the persuasive effectiveness of the digital influencer, as consumers perceive greater authenticity in communication and feel more connected to the influencer's experiences (Reichstein & Brusch, 2019; Fediuk et al., 2020). This effect is amplified when the influencer already has an established audience and a relationship with their followers, favouring not only immediate purchase intent but also emotional bonding with the brand (Castro & Bomfim, 2020; Razali et al., 2023).

Based on this central theoretical premise, it can be observed that the type of marketing, when associated with a digital influencer, significantly contributes to the formation of positive perceptions of products and services, acting as a catalyst in the purchase decision-making process (Reichstein & Brusch, 2019; Razali et al., 2023). Thus, the theoretical discussion supports the idea that content mediated by influencers has greater persuasive power due to their virtual credibility and the ease of organic sharing (Magalhães et al., 2023).

2.3 Hedonic Products and Type of Marketing

Hedonic products are those that, when consumed or purchased, highlight emotional well-being such as joy, pleasure, status, and satisfaction, attributes that positively influence the consumer's self-esteem (Alves et al., 2022; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023). Before acquiring a hedonic product, the prospective buyer experiences a sense of desire and fulfilment, as sensory attributes are the main drivers of consumer purchasing behaviour (De Andrade et al., 2017).

Hedonism stimulates users' imagination on social media, highlighting the pleasure associated with creative, fun, and interactive marketing strategies that focus on sensations linked to the use or acquisition of a product (Mercado & Barreto, 2011; Arruda Filho & Dholakia, 2013). Because viral marketing relies on sharing prompted by emotional reactions to fast, easily accessible content, it tends to be an effective tool for promoting hedonic products.

This is because consumer behaviour in such cases is driven by the pleasure of owning or consuming a product, particularly under the influence of seeing someone familiar (such as a digital influencer) using it (Aslam & Luna, 2021; Razali et al., 2023; Anindya & Indriastuti, 2023).

Viral marketing can evoke pleasurable characteristics associated with the act of purchasing by embedding them in compelling content that is organically shared (Razali et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the digital influencer encourages purchase decisions by fostering identification with their followers (Caiado et al., 2025). Using viral marketing, influencers can amplify their reach and highlight the attributes and sensations of pleasure linked to hedonic products (Barbosa, 2018; Batista et al., 2020; Silva de Souza et al., 2023; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023).

In this context, the following proposition is formulated:

H2: Viral marketing with a digital influencer influences purchase decisions when the product/service has hedonic attributes and does not influence decisions when the product/service is utilitarian.

As outlined above, the promotion of hedonic products or services within a viral marketing context and through a digital influencer affects prospective buyer behaviour even before the purchase is made. Hedonic products, by eliciting positive emotions and sensations of pleasure, are especially susceptible to the persuasive power of influencer-driven viral campaigns (Crisafulli & Singh, 2022; Matos & Andreoli, 2022; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023).

By leveraging these symbolic dimensions, viral marketing enhances the emotional impact of the message, creating content that links product usage to experiences of pleasure and happiness (Arruda Filho & Dholakia, 2013). Thus, the digital influencer serves as a usage model (Gammarano et al., 2020), validating the symbolic relevance of consumption and amplifying the perceived hedonic value of the product among the public (Marques & Oliveira, 2022).

Therefore, it is assumed that by integrating the emotional and sensory appeal of hedonic products with the sharing dynamics of viral marketing, the likelihood of stimulating purchase desire increases significantly. This combination highlights the potential of digital influencers as mediators of consumer behaviour by legitimising the hedonic experience (Arruda Filho & Dholakia, 2013; Grieger & Botelho, 2019).

Conversely, attempts to use viral marketing strategies to promote utilitarian products may not achieve the same positive effect. Utilitarian products typically involve decision-making based on rational criteria such as functionality, durability, and cost-effectiveness (Gerhard et al., 2015), reducing the impact of campaigns centred on entertainment or virality (De Lima & Cordeiro, 2021). In such cases, consumers seek more technical and objective information rather than symbolic or emotional stimuli, making the influence of digital influencers in viral contexts less significant.

2.4 Utilitarian Products and Type of Marketing

Utilitarian products are the opposite of hedonic ones. Their purchase is not based on the pleasure of use or momentary satisfaction but rather on a functional need to be met (Cardoso &

Pinto, 2009; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023). Utilitarianism encompasses products that meet needs arising in personal or professional life in situations requiring solutions or aimed at facilitating the achievement of a specific end goal (Gerhard et al., 2015; Silva de Souza et al., 2023).

Even though utilitarian products are purchased out of necessity, consumers may still be active users of digital platforms, researching the best cost-benefit options to solve their problems or simplify their processes (Cantanhede et al., 2018). During this search, users encounter various stimuli, and through product exposure and promotion, they may or may not choose to acquire the item (Da Costa et al., 2017).

Consumers intending to purchase utilitarian products tend to seek specific information about the product's features, its ability to meet their needs, and the best price. Thus, the marketing approach must focus on usage rationale rather than momentary sensations. Promoting such information requires longer exposure, a characteristic that contrasts with the spontaneity and dynamism of viral marketing (Lopes, Teixeira & Moretti, 2012).

As such, non-viral marketing, featuring digital influencers, tends to influence consumer behaviour more effectively when the product in question is utilitarian. This is due to the nature of these products requiring more technical knowledge, rather than mere momentary usability. Consumers' search for information stems from a specific need (Sousa et al., 2014; Godey et al., 2022). Specific characteristics in product communication are essential, and such information is more credible when shared by an influencer in a usage-focused, rather than sensation-driven, approach (Lima & Arruda Filho, 2012). Based on this, the following proposition is made:

H3: Non-viral marketing with a digital influencer influences purchase decisions when the product/service has utilitarian attributes and does not influence decisions when the product/service is hedonic.

As stated, non-viral marketing highlights the usability of utilitarian products through digital influencers by focusing more on product features and their specific function rather than on the immediate gratification they might provide (Gertner & Diaz, 1999; Almeida et al., 2016; Arruda Filho & Oliveira, 2023). Additionally, consumers interested in utilitarian products tend to value clarity and depth of information during the promotional process (Teixeira & Hernandez, 2012).

In such cases, the presence of a digital influencer in non-viral campaigns takes on an educational and informative role, acting as a specialist or trusted source who explains technical characteristics, usage methods, and practical benefits of the product (Wandoko & Panggati, 2022; Barbosa, Silva & Fracarolli, 2024). Unlike hedonic products, which are communicated through emotional experiences and symbolism, utilitarian products require marketing strategies focused on performance and functionality, which help reduce uncertainty and perceived purchase risk. As such, non-viral marketing campaigns can demonstrate that consumers tend to trust grounded opinions and objective demonstrations that attest to the product's efficiency (Sperb, 2020; Neves, 2021).

Therefore, the combination of non-viral marketing and the digital influencer can be particularly effective for utilitarian products, as it favours rational decision-making based on functional arguments (Schuchmann & Figueira, 2020). This type of communication, which

prioritises more detailed and less dispersive content, enables consumers to assess with greater certainty whether the product will meet their specific needs.

Conversely, using viral marketing strategies to promote utilitarian products may not yield the same positive results, as emotional appeal and rapid sharing are less relevant compared to the need for technical information (Arruda Filho, Cabusas & Dholakia, 2008).

2.5 Initial Proposal of the Theoretical and Methodological Model

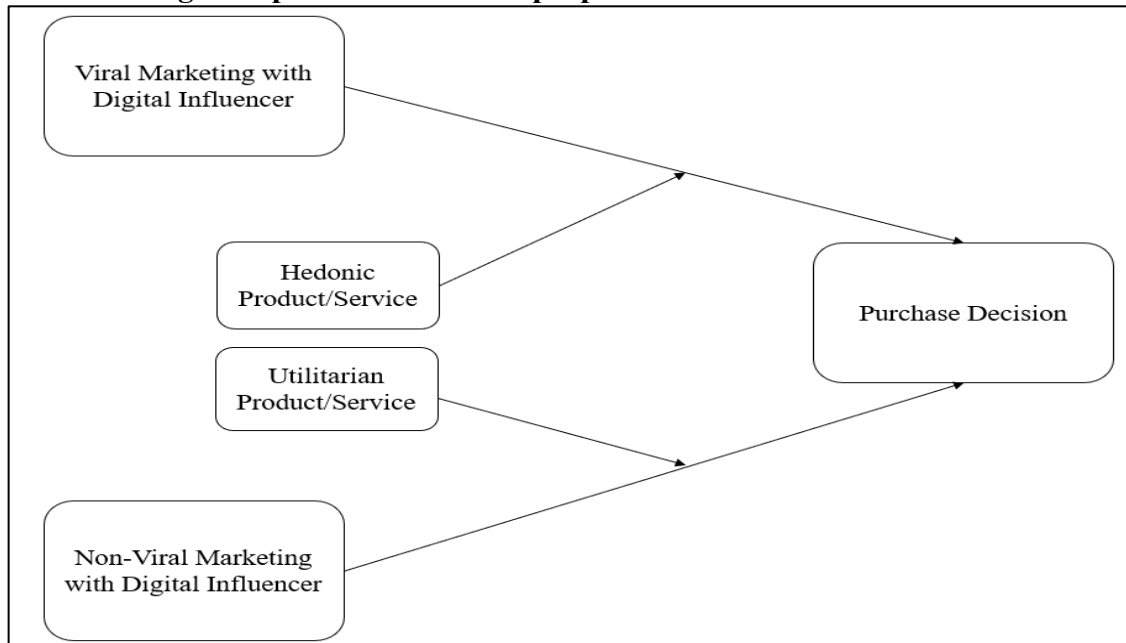
The research will be conducted through a controlled experiment using a factorial design, in which participants will be exposed to different simulated marketing scenarios. Respondents will be asked to place themselves in the situations described in the scenarios and then complete an online questionnaire (web survey) composed of validated, previously tested, and contextually adapted scales.

Subsequently, internal consistency of the employed scales will be assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. This statistical indicator measures the internal consistency among items within a given dimension, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable. A manipulation check will then be performed to confirm whether participants perceived the differences between scenarios as intended, for example, distinguishing between a hedonic and a utilitarian product, or between viral and non-viral content.

Once these stages are confirmed, Hypothesis H1 will be tested using a 2 x 1 design and a one-way ANOVA. The independent variable will be the type of marketing (viral or non-viral with a digital influencer), and the dependent variable will be the consumer's purchase decision. The goal of this direct relationship experiment is to examine whether exposure to a campaign featuring a digital influencer in viral and non-viral marketing contexts leads to significant variation in consumers' purchase decisions, thus providing both theoretical and empirical grounding for the next steps.

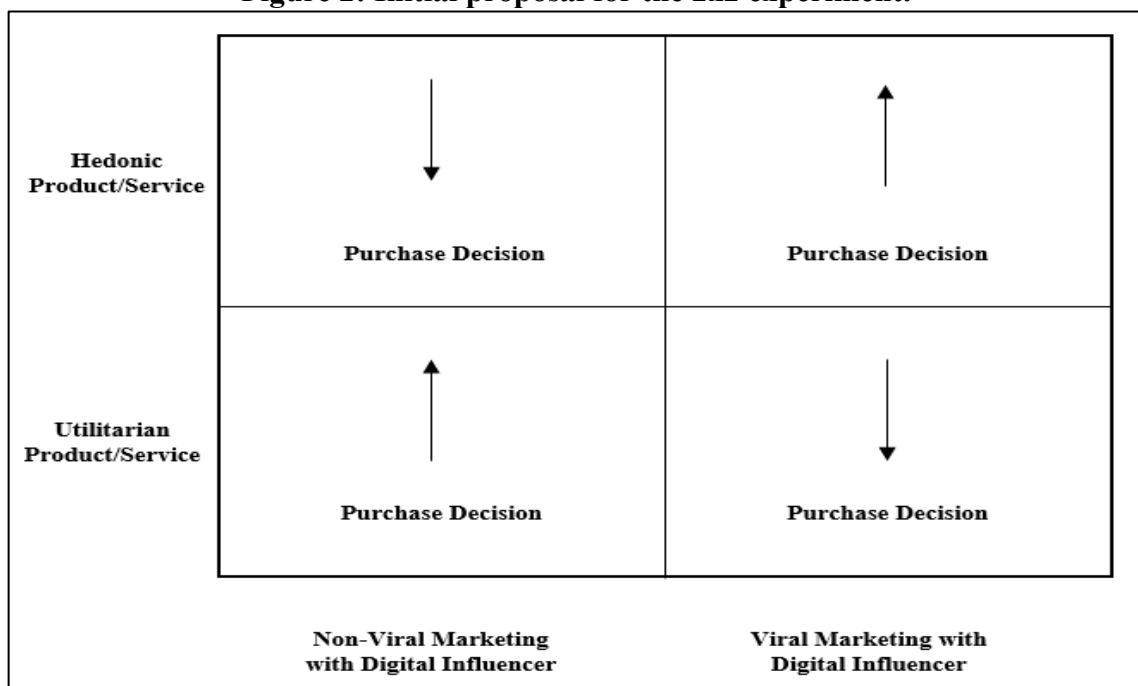
Hypotheses H2 and H3 will be tested through a 2 x 2 experimental design (two-way ANOVA), considering two independent variables: (1) the type of marketing (viral or non-viral with a digital influencer), and (2) the type of product or service (hedonic or utilitarian). The dependent variable remains the purchase decision. This design allows for the evaluation of both main effects (of each factor independently) and interaction effects, that is, whether the impact of viral or non-viral marketing with a digital influencer varies depending on the type of product, as proposed theoretically. The 2 x 2 model is appropriate for testing scenario-stimulus relationships and offers greater validity by assessing multiple experimental combinations. The initial theoretical design proposal and the 2 x 2 study matrix model are represented in figures 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1 presents the initial proposal of the theoretical model.



Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

Figure 2: Initial proposal for the 2x2 experiment.

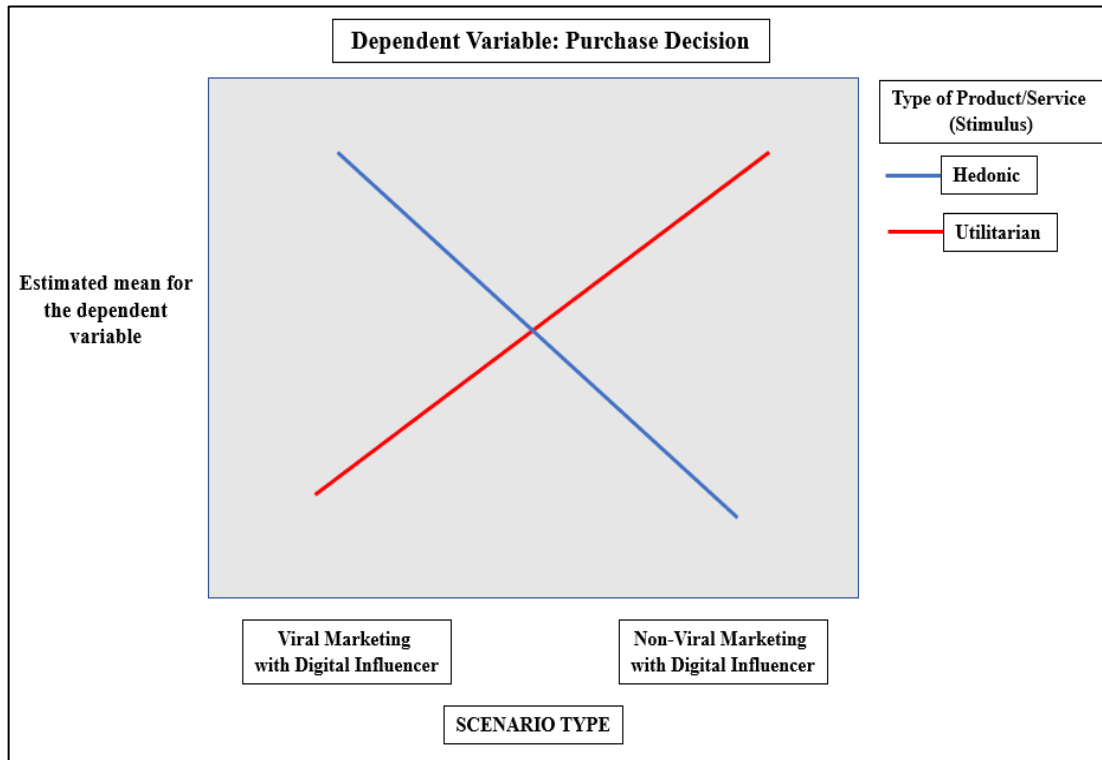


Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

Based on theoretical discussions, it is expected that hedonic products (associated with pleasure and subjective experiences) will show greater purchase intent when promoted in a viral marketing scenario with a digital influencer. Utilitarian products (linked to functionality and practical need), on the other hand, are expected to be better received in non-viral marketing contexts, where the focus is more rational and informative. Figure 3 illustrates potential

scenario interactions from the 2 x 2 experiment, which will be analysed using two-way ANOVA in SPSS.

Figure 3: Possible interactions of the 2 x 2 experiment.



Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

3 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to theoretically discuss how the role of the digital influencer, when embedded in viral and non-viral marketing contexts, can influence consumer purchase decisions, considering the characteristics of hedonic and utilitarian products. Based on the literature reviewed, it is evident that the effectiveness of digital marketing depends on a strategic alignment between the type of product, the communication approach used, and the role of the influencer. Hedonic products tend to be more effectively promoted through viral campaigns associated with influencers that explore emotional and symbolic appeal, whereas utilitarian products require more informative and rational communication, favouring non-viral strategies focused on functionality.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the proposition of a conceptual model that integrates the type of marketing (viral/non-viral), the role of the digital influencer, and product categories (hedonic/utilitarian), highlighting their interactions in the purchase decision process. This model expands discussions in the field of digital consumer behaviour by demonstrating how symbolic and functional factors can be mediated by communication strategies and the presence of influencers.

From a managerial perspective, the study offers relevant insights for digital marketing professionals and brand managers, by showing that the success of influencer campaigns depends on coherence between the campaign format and the type of product promoted.

However, this study presents limitations, as it is a theoretical essay with propositions that still need to be tested empirically. Moreover, the model can be enhanced by including new moderating and mediating variables such as the perceived credibility of the influencer, type of endorsement, number of followers, engagement level, and the degree of audience identification with the influencer. These variables would allow the development of additional hypotheses that could be tested through structural equation models using SmartPLS software, contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Additionally, the experimental design demands methodological rigour. The choice of social media platform (Instagram, TikTok, or others) should consider the target audience profile and the nature of the viral or non-viral content. Regarding the products, it is essential to clearly define hedonic and utilitarian stimuli—hedonic products should evoke pleasure, aesthetics, or symbolic desire, while utilitarian products should reflect practicality, functionality, and necessity. This avoids ambiguity in categorisation, which could compromise the validity of the experiment.

Finally, the literature synthesis demonstrated the relevance of this research to the field of digital marketing and consumer behaviour by articulating contemporary elements such as digital influencers, content virality, and product type differentiation. This study reinforces the importance of strategic approaches in the use of influencers, pointing to directions for future research and more effective practices in the competitive environment of social media.

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