

THE PHENOMENON OF VIRALIZATION: THE CASE OF WOMEN'S FASHION IN BRAZIL

O FENÔMENO DA VIRALIZAÇÃO: O CASO DA MODA FEMININA NO BRASIL

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – One of the biggest business challenges is to understand the phenomenon of viralization, which happens when certain products spread quickly among social strata are adopted by a majority and lose strength shortly afterwards. The importance of this study relies on the rapid economic impact of marketing viralization in women's fashion. The main objective of this research is to understand how the main factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products are related.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a qualitative and descriptive research, based on the sectorial case study method. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with market experts. Content analysis was performed using the three-level coding technique (open, axial, and theoretical), with the help of Atlas.TI software.

Findings – The main results of the research indicate that viralization occurs when the following factors are related: functional and emotional attributes of the product, diffusers, communication, brand strategy, and consumer behavior. In the case of women's fashion, forecasting trends is important for the development of collections. It represents the company's way of being ahead of the consumer and producing the parts to meet their needs.

Research limitations/implications – One research limit is related to the sample. Although they were specialists in the fashion sector, due to lack of time and resources, consumer groups were not included in the research.

Originality/value – The main academic contribution of the study is the proposition of a theoretical model that explains the phenomenon of viralization in the sectorial case studied.

Keywords - Viralization; Fashion; Consumer behavior, Marketing; Communication

RESUMO

Objetivo – Um dos maiores desafios empresariais é entender o fenômeno da viralização, que acontece quando determinados produtos se espalham rapidamente entre os estratos sociais, são adotados pela maioria e perdem força logo em seguida. A importância deste estudo está no impacto econômico da viralização do marketing na moda feminina. O objetivo principal desta pesquisa é compreender como se relacionam os principais fatores responsáveis pela viralização de produtos de moda.

Metodologia – Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa e descritiva, baseada no método de estudo de caso setorial. Os dados primários foram coletados por meio de entrevistas em profundidade com especialistas do mercado. A análise de conteúdo foi realizada por meio da técnica de codificação em três níveis (aberta, axial e teórica), com auxílio do software Atlas.TI.

Resultados – Os principais resultados da pesquisa indicam que a viralização ocorre quando os seguintes fatores estão relacionados: atributos funcionais e emocionais do produto, difusores, comunicação, estratégia de marca e comportamento do consumidor. No caso da moda feminina, a previsão de tendências é importante para o desenvolvimento das coleções. Representa a forma da empresa estar à frente do consumidor e produzir as peças para atender às suas necessidades.

Limitações – A limitação está relacionada à amostra. Apesar de serem especialistas no setor da moda, por falta de tempo e recursos, os grupos de consumidores não foram incluídos na pesquisa.

Originalidade – A principal contribuição acadêmica do estudo é a proposição de um modelo teórico que explique o fenômeno da viralização no caso setorial estudado.

Palavras-chave – Viralização; Moda; Comportamento do consumidor, Marketing; Comunicação.

1 INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of viralization in marketing is an emerging area of research for its current relevance in management practices. It is characterized by messages that should not be seen only as advertising and that are spread by the users themselves. It features technical elements of the internet and combines them with typical human needs; motivations that will make users pass the content on. Digital media enhance the effect, making dissemination faster and easier (Tusche, 2017).

Viralization can occur either from a brand strategy or organically, when certain items gain relevance, spread quickly through different social layers, are adopted by a majority, and lose momentum shortly thereafter (Gladwell, 2013). In the context of the fashion industry, viral products usually emerge from trends, since one of the factors of viralization is novelty.

The study of viralization of fashion products is important for the sector because of its economic relevance. Brazil is the fourth largest producer and consumer of denim and the fourth largest producer of knitwear in the world. The national fashion sector is now the second largest employer within the processing industry – food and beverages rank first (together) – in addition to being the second largest generator of first jobs. In 2018, the turnover of the textile and apparel chain was \$48.3 billion. Non-cotton fiber exports were US\$2.6 billion. The sector received investment of US\$894.4 million and produced 8.9 billion pieces (ABIT, 2018).

Fashion is a social and communication process that has change as its main characteristic. The variations in preferences, mentalities, values, ideas, and cultural preconceptions directly influence its directions. The study of fashion trends is fundamental to understand the various changes and the evolution of social behavior in order to more assertively interpret patterns and trends (Gomes, Lopes & Alves, 2016).

Fashion products that go viral are a challenge for companies, as brands have little time to make production viable, and may resort to labor under slave-like conditions for reasons related to



cost reduction or control failures in the supply chain. Moreover, viral products have a short life cycle as they are soon no longer desired by consumers. Consequently, overproduction generates a high volume of waste that is often improperly disposed of in the environment, resulting in a high cost of maintaining stocks that are liquidated at derisory prices.

Every second, the equivalent of one truckload of textile waste is landfilled or burned. About \$500 billion is lost each year due to the misuse of clothing and the low custom of recycling. It is estimated that by 2050 the fashion industry will consume a quarter of the world's carbon budget if nothing changes. Washing clothes releases half a million tons of plastic microfibers into the ocean every year, equivalent to more than 50 billion plastic bottles (Ellen Macarthur Foundation, 2017). Companies have increasingly come under pressure from their stakeholders to reduce the environmental and social impacts of their operations focusing on sustainable performance, and fostering a low-carbon, circular economy (Pinsky, Dias & Kruglianskas, 2013).

Despite the sector's relevance, the production process and the way consumers deal with fashion products have consequences in both the social and environmental aspects. Edelkoort (2015), a Paris-based Dutch trend researcher considered by Time magazine as one of the most influential people in the fashion industry, presented the Anti Fashion Manifesto, a document in which she points out ten reasons that led her to believe that fashion, as it stands today, it is obsolete. This perception would be based on the existence of people working in degrading conditions or even analogous to slavery, toxic products to the environment, generation of urban solid waste, and the unbridled pace of production without thinking about its environmental and social consequences.

Among the items cited by the researcher are manufacturing, prices, designers, marketing and consumers. For Edelkoort (2015), the fashion system resorts to weak economy countries, exploiting cheap labor and without labor rights. The production of cheap clothes sends the message that fashion is disposable and the pieces lose their value. Meanwhile, designers who previously explored creativity in the production process succumb to recycling trends and the accelerated production of ephemeral collections and products to meet marketing demand. For the researcher, today's and tomorrow's consumers will choose alone what they want to wear and will design their own clothes.

However, this criticism published by Edelkoort concerns the clothing production process in the world. In general, the fashion industry follows minimal planning for the development of its collections. The larger the company, the more formal it is, operating under well-defined contracts. However, when a viral product emerges, planning fails and throws the entire production process out of balance. Formal companies without internal production (which currently constitute the majority) resort to informal workshops to handle their production, which needs to be fast and cheap. This is one of the main factors that lead this industry to use labor in conditions like slavery and low-quality raw materials, with a short life cycle, which increases the generation of urban solid waste and its consequent environmental impact (PORTAL ECOERA, 2020); (WALK FREE, 2019).

This study aims to understand how the main factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products relate to each other because no specific studies were found about the viralization of fashion products.

This paper is organized as following. Section 2 presents the literature review. Methodological procedures are presented in section 3. Data analysis and discussion of results are presented in sections 4 and 5, followed by the conclusion.



2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of viralization (or epidemic) applied to ideas, products, messages, and behaviors is understood in an analogous manner to the behavior of a virus (Gladwell, 2013), translating to the spread of something on a large scale and very quickly.

Viralization is not a new concept. There have always been ideas that spread quickly. The difference is that the Internet has intensified this process, i.e., the dissemination occurs much faster and to more people (Tusche, 2017).

In the 2000s, viral content was based on novelty. During the 2010s, in the age of mass influence, it was influencers who made content go viral. The education of 2020 is known as the era of serendipity, that is, discoveries by chance, action based on discovery, education, creativity, and redefinition of viral contents (NAPOLI, 2020).

It states that there are three principles of viralization, although the audience continues to evolve and the same authors of the new channels continue, they continue over time. They are the originality, the more creative the content, the greater the chance of going viral; public interest, that is, the topics are current and identify with a majority; and emotional help, as networks are like an escape and sharing memes brings comfort (NAPOLI, 2020).

For Lewis and Darren (2004), diffusion is the process by which new ideas spread throughout a community. According to these authors, “diffusion is by now a well-established marketing principle that uses terms associated with the speed with which consumers accept new products or services” (Lewin & Darren, 2004, p. 97).

One of the strategies used by companies is viral marketing, which encourages individuals to pass a message on to others, creating exponential growth potential in both exposure and influence of the message. Like viruses, the strategies take advantage of the phenomenon of rapid multiplication to take a message to thousands and even millions of people (Cyrot, Urdl & Alves, 2005).

According to Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels (2009), product and service referrals by customers and prospects account for between 20% and 50% of all purchasing decisions.

In research conducted in Indonesia, Ananda *et al.* (2019) argue that there is an intention for consumers to engage in word-of-mouth behavior depending on the type of action that occurs on social media. Messages such as “free products or discounts, sweepstakes, contest, e-commerce access, or socializing content generate higher levels of intention to engage in word-of-mouth behavior.”

Fine *et al.* (2017) state that trust is one of the key factors when it comes to consumer engagement in word-of-mouth message sharing. When they find products and services highly trustworthy, they are more likely to share a positive opinion.

It is worth noting the role of WhatsApp as a social media in the spread of messages. According to Cruz-Cárdenas *et al.* (2019) in research conducted in Latin America, the use of WhatsApp leads to the inductive generation of four categories: maintaining and strengthening relationships; improving role performance; emotional support; and entertainment and fun.

For Borges *et al.* (2019), social media allows not only marketers to manage the brand itself by creating a salient brand personality, but also to convey user perception through content generated by consumers themselves.

According to Berger (2014), there are six principles that determine how something goes viral, namely: social currency (when what is shared can cause a good social impression); triggers (stimuli that prompt people to think about related things); emotion (when something that really matters to the individual stirs their emotions); audience (people mimicking others because they feel a need to belong); practical (the content is useful and will help others); and stories (narratives that move the interlocutor).



Stories can also be related to brand positioning. Product, design, communication style, origin, founders, and production process are useful elements that serve as support to build brand identity and generate narratives (Velar-Vera; Herrera-Damas; González-Aldea, 2019).

In the fashion context, a product that goes viral can be the result of a trend described as a direction or sequence of events with a certain strength and stability that is more predictable and lasting than a fad. Tendencies reveal what the future will be like and can promote strategic direction (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Riezu (2011) describes the main factors that will help determine whether a trend will reach the masses. The first is who is behind the trend, i.e., the brand and/or influencers, in addition to the context of social and economic changes tied to the trend. The second is the product that needs to be accessible to the public and, for this, the idea must be intelligible, cheap, easy to get, and attractive. Finally, the message needs to appear in more than one place. If similar manifestations appear in different industries and segments, this is an indication that the trend has spread.

And if there is massification of the trend, it is because people buy the products, items that arouse feelings in others, as those who wear the pieces try to communicate information about themselves to their reference groups (Miranda, 2008).

Consumers are influenced by three factors when making their purchase decision, Kotler (2017) explains: marketing communications across all media channels; opinion of friends and family; and their prior knowledge based on experiences and feelings toward brands. When it comes to the opinion of others, consumers have become highly dependent, often overriding personal preference and marketing communications, and for the author, the reason is connectivity itself.

Ma, Shi, and Luo (2012) affirm that individual fashion consumption can be divided into rational and perceptual. The first refers to the individual's need for quality, best price, convenience, applicability, good looks, and reliability. As for the perceptive motives, they translate into social consumption for novelty, peculiarity, unrealistic comparison, conformity, and subservience to what comes from the outside. The consumer is always a mixture of both factors. Additionally, understanding how consumer perception is formed can facilitate the understanding of purchase decisions based on emotional attributes that escape the predictability of companies (Oliveira, Tavares & Sato, 2010).

Marinao-Artigas *et al.* (2019) assert that purchase is also influenced by consumers' perception of the brand store in research conducted in Chile and Mexico. While there may be a strong and high emotional connection to the store, it is of no value if consumers are not able to tangibly perceive the benefits of their purchases and experience.

Adeola *et al.* (2021) state that happiness, love, satisfaction, and sense of freedom and comfort derived from online shopping for fashion items influence customer behavior more than values such as ease of purchase, cost, convenience, discount, and variety.

For an effective brand strategy, Kotler and Keller (2012) recommend developing strong and profitable long-term relationships with customers. For the authors, the intention is to meet and satisfy the needs and desires of consumers in a better way than their competitors would do. Marketers must have a full understanding of how their customers think, feel, and act in order to offer the best option for their target audience.

Current discussions about the viralization of fashion products center on the strategy of using social media influencers. According to Thilina (2021) by enhancing their perceived credibility, social influencers could improve the attitudes of consumers towards them by using as a source of information, and consequently influencing their purchase decisions. In this sense, the objective of the study focuses on going beyond social influencers and understanding what other elements influence the viralization of products and, consequently, their purchase.



3 RESEARCH METHOD

The research is characterized as applied, qualitative, and exploratory through the method of sectional case study (Yin, 2005). The unit of analysis of this study is the viralization phenomenon. The data collection technique used was in-depth interviews with 10 fashion experts in the areas of retail, style, trend, consumer behavior, product, and communication. The questions were elaborated based on the theoretical framework. The interviews were conducted by videoconference between June and July 2020. The snowball technique (Goodman, 1961) was used to choose the participants by means of indications from specialists within the fashion market in the case of brands where there was no proximity, besides the use of social networks such as LinkedIn.

The following experts were interviewed Riachuelo Fashion and Style Coordinator; Specialist from the Research Center at Lojas Renner; Image Consultant; Peclers Paris Trend Specialist; Specialist in Shoe Development; Specialist in Footwear and Accessories Development at Dafiti Group, Master's in design with a Study in Consumer Behavior, Master in Textile and Fashion, works with the development of fashion products; Fashion Business Consultant; Editor-in-Chief of Harper's Bazaar. The choice of participants was determined by the importance of the business to which the specialist is professionally linked and by the convenience of access.

The questions for the interviewees were previously formulated in a semi-structured script, with six questions, however, with the freedom to partially change certain questions, thus opening space for the capture of information not initially foreseen. The interviews were conducted by videoconference with fashion experts in the areas of retail, style, trend, consumer behavior, product, and communication.

The questions were as follows: Do you believe that the socioeconomic and cultural context of the country influences the viralization of trends? Why? Based on your experience, what are the determining factors for a trend to go viral or not. Why? Do they need to coexist? In your opinion, what message should a fashion product send to the consumer for it to go viral? What would be the functional and emotional benefits of the products? In your opinion, what are the factors that influence the consumer in the purchase decision? Do you believe that specific consumer groups can be responsible for making trends go viral? Who would they be and why? Do you believe that marketing and communication strategies adopted by brands make a difference in making trends go viral? In what way?

Content analysis was performed with the support of the Atlas.ti software. The coding technique used consists of three levels: open, axial, and theoretical integration. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 33 pages of transcript. Open coding at the first level was carried out linearly in the transcripts deductively by assigning codes predetermined in the theoretical model of the research. Throughout the analysis, new codes emerged from the empirical data inductively. Axial coding was done at the second level of analysis through code integration, exclusion, and re-naming. The final step was theoretical integration, which resulted in the proposition of a conceptual model that explains the phenomenon studied through the relationships between the categories of analysis that emerged from the research.

The theoretical model of the research started from the analysis of the literature and served as a basis for the elaboration of the questions applied in the interviews with the specialists in the area. The theoretical model of the research considers three categories of analysis: brand strategy, purchase decision, and fashion trends. Brand strategy includes 5 indicators: branding, viral marketing, media, communication, and marketing strategy. Purchasing decisions include friends' opinions, personal experiences, and connection to the brand. Fashion trends include specific consumer groups, specific product characteristics, and specific contexts, totaling 11 indicators. The theoretical model also served as a starting point for data analysis.



4 DATA ANALYSIS

The primary data analysis was carried out in four stages. The first stage consisted of preparing the data collected in the field, faithfully transcribing the interviews and reviewing all the data. In the second phase, content analysis was performed by linearly coding the transcripts of the interviews with experts using the Atlas.TI software. In some cases, entire paragraphs were selected, while in others, only excerpts. More than one code was added in many of the paragraphs.

In the first level coding, the deductive analysis approach was used, where eleven codes were used from the indicators of the theoretical model initially proposed for the research and that are directly related to the factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products. In the open coding, 26 new codes emerged from the data through the inductive analysis, totaling 37. These new codes were created because they attributed meaning to important excerpts of the interview transcripts that had not been considered in the initial research model. Table I presents the inductive and deductive codes and their frequencies, i. e., the number of times the code was attributed to the quotes (important passages of the interviews).

Table I - First level open coding

Codes	Frequency	Codes	Frequency
Specific features of the product	52	Cost x Benefit	4
Communication	35	Aesthetics	4
Specific contexts	34	Recognition of needs	4
Specific consumer groups	32	Easy to use	3
Trends	25	Practicality	3
Brand connection	18	Quality	3
Comfort	18	Status	3
Consumer behavior	18	Social circle	2
<i>Branding</i>	16	Personal experiences	2
Desire	14	Viral Marketing	2
Influencers	12	Feedback from friends	2
Price	10	Sustainable	2
Social networks	10	Fashion image	1
Emotional benefits	9	Impulse	1
Sensuality	9	Personality	1
Marketing strategy	6	Reward	1
Media	5	Versatility	1
Novelty	5	Celebrity	1
Aspirational	4		

Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

The second level of the coding process is called axial and occurs when no new codes emerge in the process of analyzing and coding the data. At this stage, the first data saturation occurred at the end of the analysis of the fourth interview. In the axial coding stage, the list of 37 codes was extracted from Atlas.ti into an Excel spreadsheet and then reviewed. Some codes were eliminated because of their low frequency and capacity for abstraction or conceptual explanation. Some were renamed or integrated with other codes. After the process of eliminating, creating, and integrating codes into the axial coding, 30 codes resulted from the review, as shown in Table II.



Table II – Axial Coding

Codes	Alterations	Frequency
Specific features of the product	Changed name for product attributes	52
Communication	Has been preserved	35
Specific Contexts	Changed name for cultural context	34
Specific groups of consumers	Name changed to diffusers	32
Trends	Incorporated to product attributes	25
Brand Connection	Has been preserved	18
Comfort	Has been preserved	18
Consumer behavior	Has been preserved	18
<i>Branding</i>	Name changed to brand identity	16
Desire	Has been preserved	14
Influencers	Has been preserved	12
Price	Has been preserved	10
Social networks	Has been preserved	10
Emotional benefits	Name changed to emotional attributes	9
Sensuality	Has been preserved	9
Marketing Strategy	Has been preserved	6
Media	Has been preserved	5
Novelty	Has been preserved	5
Aspirational	Incorporated into desire	4
Cost x Benefit	Name changed for functional attributes	4
Aesthetics	Name changed for design	4
Recognition of needs	Eliminated	4
Easy to use	Incorporated into practicality	3
Practicality	Remained	3
Quality	Name changed to perceived quality	3
Status	Has been preserved	3
Social circle	Has been preserved	2
Personal experiences	Has been preserved	2
Viral marketing	Name changed to Word of Mouth	2
Opinion of friends	Incorporated into social circle	2
Sustainable	Has been preserved	2
Fashion image	Eliminated	1
Impulse	Incorporated into desire	1
Personality	Has been preserved	1
Reward	Has been preserved	1
Versatility	Has been preserved	1
Celebrity	Has been preserved	1

Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

In the data analysis, the codes that presented greater capacity for abstraction, strength, and relevance in the theoretical explanation of the phenomenon studied were organized into categories, subcategories, and dimensions of analysis. The codes organized into subcategories explain the categories. The subcategories functional attributes and emotional attributes presented dimensions of analysis, as shown in Table III.



Table III – Categories, Subcategories, and Research Analysis Dimensions

Analysis Categories	Analysis Subcategories	Dimensions
Product attributes	Functional attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Comfort . Price . Convenience . Design . Versatility
	Emotional attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Sensuality . Novelty . Perceived quality . Status . Sustainable
Diffusers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Influencers . Celebrities . Personal circle 	
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Social networking . Media . Word of mouth communication 	
Brand Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Brand identity . Marketing strategy 	
Consumer behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Cultural Context . Brand Connection . Desire . Personal Experience . Personality . Reward 	

Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

5 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5.1 Product Attributes

The Product Attributes category emerged from the empirical data as one of the main determinants of the fashion product viralization phenomenon. This category is formed by the subcategories functional and emotional attributes. The functional attributes are explained by the dimensions comfort, price, practicality, design, and versatility. The emotional attributes encompass the sensuality, novelty, perceived quality, status, and sustainability dimensions. The consumption of viral products by fashion consumers entails a series of analyses on the functional and emotional attributes of the item, ranging from the cost-benefit ratio to the novelty factor.

When the respondents were asked about the main benefits that a product needs to present for it to go viral, six participants out of ten responded comfort as an element that permeates all social classes, followed by elements that characterize sensuality. The novelty factor was pointed out by only two participants, because for the others, when the product spreads, it stops being novelty – the novelty factor is important for early adopters.



Half of the participants reported the importance of price. This choice is justified by the viralization phenomenon, because for products to reach all social classes, they must be presented in more affordable versions, or else there will be no adoption by the lower classes and, consequently, no viralization; the trend will be restricted to a niche. Difficult to use products that are not democratic with all types of biotypes, which rely on expensive materials, or which are not versatile are unlikely to go viral, according to the respondents.

Product attributes lead fashion consumers to evaluate what they will gain by purchasing the product (what kind of reward comes attached to this purchase decision). After evaluating both the functional attributes based on rational elements and the emotional attributes based on their feelings related to the product, the consumers can receive three types of rewards: social (they become part of a group), material (they acquire a new product), and/or information, knowledge, from the moment that when it is a very innovative, different item, they need to absorb as much content as possible to make the decision of buying it or not (Eyal, 2014).

Another emotional attribute is related to status and the need to belong. The strong imposition of groups generates a behavior of submission, often influenced by low self-esteem and overvaluation of the other, of what is sold, especially in social media, a reality increasingly present and discussed in current times.

Fashion consumers have the need to express meanings when wearing certain products and thus communicate with society by interacting with their social groups. The symbolic attributes depend on the social context. In this way, fashion consumers seek nothing less than communicating through the clothes they wear with the society in which they live. (Miranda; Garcia; Leão, 2003). The same principle is stated by Gilles Lipovetsky (2004) when the author says that consumers seek a social position when consuming fashion products. Hence its ephemerality since the intention is to reproduce a social differentiation.

5.2 Diffusers

The category Diffusers emerged from the empirical data as one of the main determinants of the fashion product viralization phenomenon. This category is formed by the subcategories influencers, social circle, and celebrities. Specific consumer groups, the diffusers, are composed of family members, friends, connections in social networks (social circle), digital influencers, and celebrities, people with whom fashion consumers identify and admire in some way, wishing to be part of that context.

Among the respondents, both mass and niche broadcasters are relevant to viralization, because niche broadcasters are those who discover the novelty and initiate the phenomenon, while mass broadcasters are those who spread it.

The experts' opinion is corroborated by Solomon (2002). Consumers generally belong to or admire different groups that influence them in their purchasing decisions. With social media, consumers' opportunities have expanded, as they are exposed to many different reference groups. Virtual communities are united by enthusiasm or knowledge of a specific product or service.

Diffusers are responsible for driving the product through different social strata. The influence chain is directly linked to the social groups and the behavior of influencers, who can be both those who launch the trend and those who translate the trend within their social group.

The consumer segmentation concept is addressed by Rogers (2003) in the Diffusion of Innovation Law that seeks to understand how to accelerate the diffusion rate of an innovation. For him, a product is only integrated into the market when 15% of people start using it. The author classifies customers as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Segmentation makes sense in the viralization phenomenon, if innovation adoption is indeed fast, spreads to a majority, and loses momentum shortly thereafter.



5.3 Communication

The Communication category emerged from the empirical data as one of the main determinants of the fashion product viralization phenomenon. It is formed by the subcategories social networks, media, and word of mouth.

Part of the emotional engagement process is done through communication. Besides the content, the form, and the medium influence how the message will be received by consumers and the impact it will have. Brand stories gain amplitude through communication channels such as magazines, websites, television, and mainly the social networks. And with them, viral marketing strategies (word-of-mouth communication that generates a rapid process of information dissemination) are enhanced.

The media can transform a possibility into certainty. For Santos (2013), a product starts to be imitated or copied on a large scale when it appears in the media, and word of mouth is an essential part of this process, as stated by Cyrot, Urdl and Alves (2005). When word of mouth gains strategic commercial focus by companies, it becomes viral marketing (Bello, 2014).

Viral marketing is a strategy that encourages individuals to pass a message on to others, creating a potential for exponential growth in both the exposure and influence of the message. Thus, like viruses, these strategies take advantage of the phenomenon of rapid multiplication to get a message out to thousands or even millions of people.

Perfect alignment between product and customer is essential for the message to go viral. “Gucci, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton have become leaders in their categories by understanding consumer motivations and desires and creating relevant and engaging images for their product” (Kotler; Keller, 2012, p. 259).

5.4 Brand Strategy

The Brand Strategy category emerged from the empirical data as one of the main determinants of the fashion product viralization phenomenon. It is formed by the subcategories brand identity and marketing strategy.

A fashion brand can be the driving force behind viralizing a product through a marketing strategy, provided it has a strong identity. In this way, it produces content that generates value for a well-defined target audience through channels that establish a true dialogue between brand and customers.

The statement meets Kotler and Keller’s (2012) assertion on the connection between brand and consumer. Through marketing, companies seek to inform, persuade, and remind consumers about the products and brands they sell. It collaborates with consumers by showing how, by whom, when, and where certain products are used (Kotler; Keller, 2012). Thus, the brand facilitates the adoption process by consumers by presenting all the emotional and functional attributes of the product at once, by using strategies that involve diffusers that make sense to the target audience, and through the appropriate channels, i.e., that are aligned with the profile of their customers. The challenge lies in how this story is put together – it needs to be spontaneous, not imposed – for viralization to occur. It is the strategy that appears to be casual on the surface.

An essential element for the connection between consumers and brands is branding, the way the brand positions itself, the identity, and the image it presents to the market, and especially to its consumers. A strong brand work offers the necessary impulse to awaken desire and, consequently, generate sales.

A good brand identity is crucial to seduce consumers, as Rech and Farias (2009) point out. It reinforces the customer/brand relationship since it acts directly on the emotional. Particularly in the fashion market, desires tend to prevail over needs. To become desired, the brand needs to have a strong image with meaning for the consumer and always take the emotional into account.



It is worth noting that, just as fashion brands that have a strong identity play the role of bringing the novelty, launching the product, and sustaining the phenomenon, mass brands that produce cheap versions of that product are equally relevant for a majority to be able to adopt it. Otherwise, viralization does not occur.

5.5 Consumer Behavior

The category Consumer Behavior emerged from the empirical data as one of the main determinants of the viralization phenomenon of fashion products. It is made up of the subcategories cultural context, brand connection, desire, personal experiences, personality, and reward.

The reward is directly related to the level of connection between consumer and product, which occurs in a more intense way when there is an identification process - when both those who transmit and those who receive the message identify with the product because they feel represented.

Danish author Martin Lindstrom (2016) defines amplifiers as those responsible for spreading news. They are consumers who act as true ambassadors of the brand and/or product. According to the author, fashion products have a concrete reason to exist in the customer's life. Shoes, for example, reflect the mood, the attitude of those who wear them, which directly implies their self-esteem, cognitive process and decision making.

This identification with the other is explained by Lindstrom (2008) based on the power of mirror neurons. The acceptance of something new takes time to occur. Only when there is repetition, that is, the consumer starts to see the same type of product in several different people, does adoption occur.

Sernovitz (2015) addresses the five key elements of word-of-mouth marketing: finding talkers (people who will talk about the brand or product); address topics that are interesting to speakers, give reason to speak; use tools that will boost the message so that it spreads to more people and faster; participate in the conversation (the brand needs to be an active element in the process); and measure the results.

The cultural context also influences consumer behavior. Handmade materials are more likely to go viral in the North and Northeast of the country, for example, than in the South, since they are elements belonging to the region's culture.

Thus, the only way to understand how people buy is to first understand who these people are, as addressed by Aaker (2014) on the importance of analyzing the target audience's lifestyle.

Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2005) highlight the socioeconomic and cultural context as an important factor in the purchase decision process. They state that lifestyles are patterns in which people live and spend time and money. In this way, besides the motivations related to individuals and their own repertoire, external motivations related to the context in which consumers are inserted have significant weight. The way people consume is significantly affected by culture: the "set of values, ideas, artifacts, and other meaningful symbols that help individuals communicate, interpret, and evaluate themselves as members of a society" (Blackwell; Miniard; Engel, 2005, p. 326).

Thus, according to the literature and based on the points of convergence between authors Berger (2014), Gladwell (2009), Eyal (2014), Sernovitz (2015) and Lindstrom (2008, 2016), the main factors responsible for viralization of fashion products are: specific groups of people, specific product characteristics and specific circumstances related to contexts or mental triggers as seen in the Table IV. Through this research, we seek to understand how the main factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products are related.



Table IV – Factors of viralization

Factors of viralization				
Berger (2014)	Gladwell (2009)	Eyal (2014)	Sernovitz (2015)	Lindstrom (2008, 2016)
Social Currency	Rule of the Elect	Kitten	Talkers	Amplifiers
Triggers	Fixation Factor	Action	Topics	Purpose
Emotion	Power of Context	Reward	Tools	Mirror Neuron
Public		Investment	To Participate	Ritual
Practical Value			Measure	
Stories				
Points of convergence				
Specific groups of people are responsible for making a message go viral.				
The message that goes viral is endowed with specific characteristics such as emotion, stories, usefulness, or providing something for the receiver.				
There are specific circumstances that facilitate viralization, such as mental triggers and the context in which they occur.				

Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

5.6 Proposing a new theoretical model

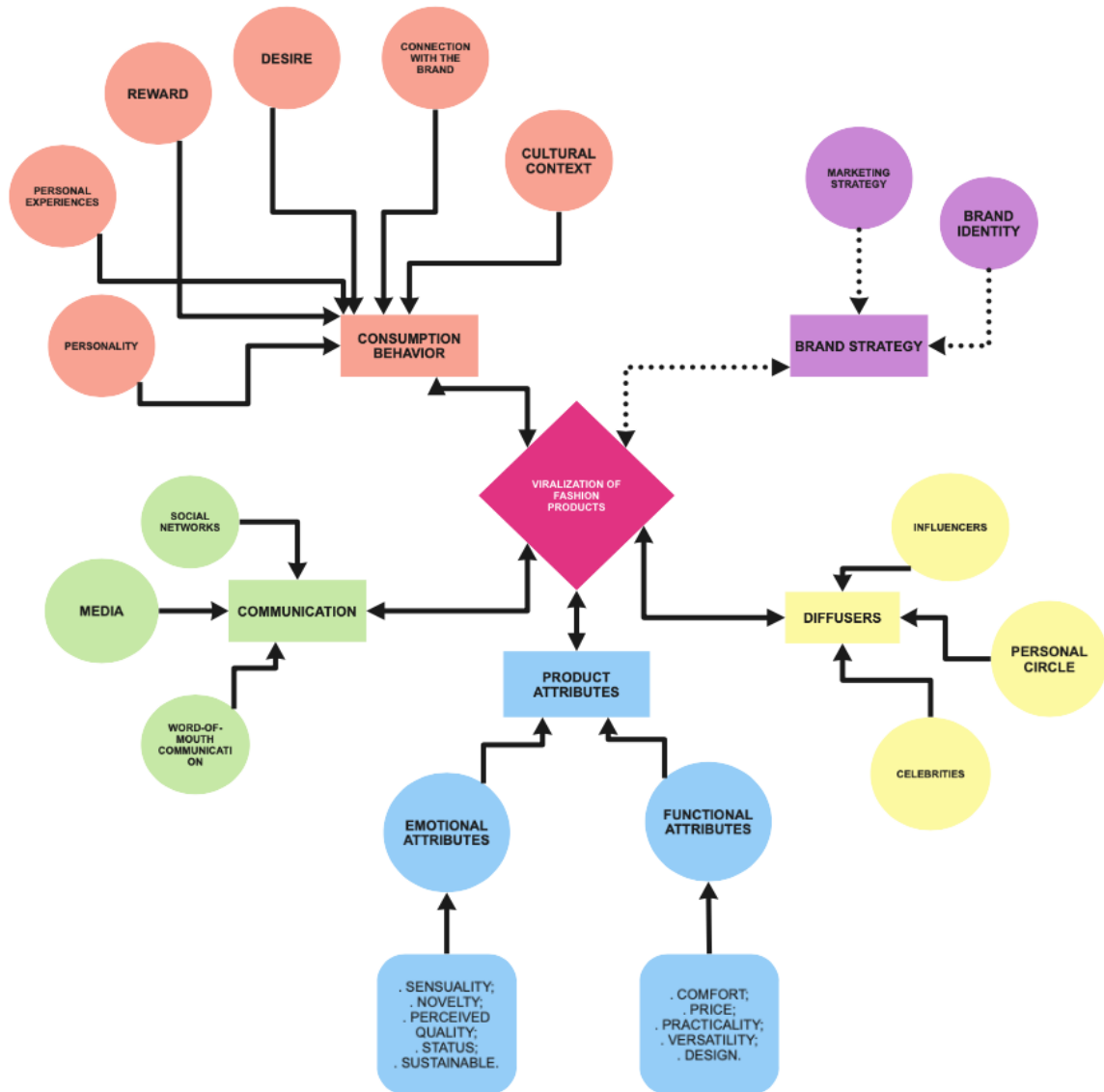
The proposal of a new theoretical model arose from the data and analysis conducted by the researchers and explains the phenomenon of viralization of fashion products through the relationship between the research analysis categories.

The model is formed by five categories: product attributes, diffusers, communication, brand strategy, and consumption behavior. The subcategories are divided into 16: functional attributes, emotional attributes, influencers, social circle, celebrities, social networks, media, word-of-mouth communication, brand identity, marketing strategy, cultural context, brand connection, desire, personal experiences, personality, and reward.

Figure 1 explains how categories, subcategories, and dimensions are organized. Brand strategy is the only category that may or may not be part of the phenomenon.



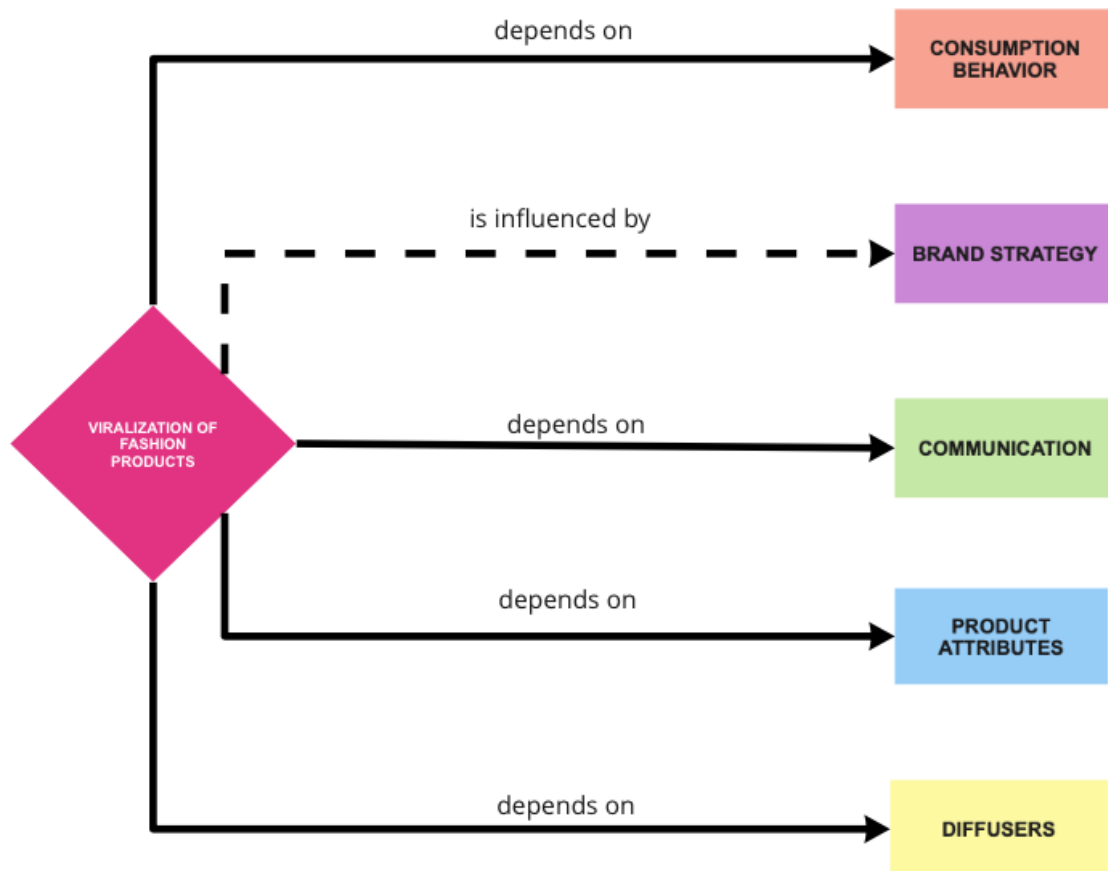
Figure 1 - Factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products



Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

The identified categories explain the viralization of fashion products and relate to each other in different ways, given the complexity of the phenomenon. Figure 2 shows how the main factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products relate to the viralization of these products.

Figure 2- Relationship of the main factors of fashion product viralization with the phenomenon

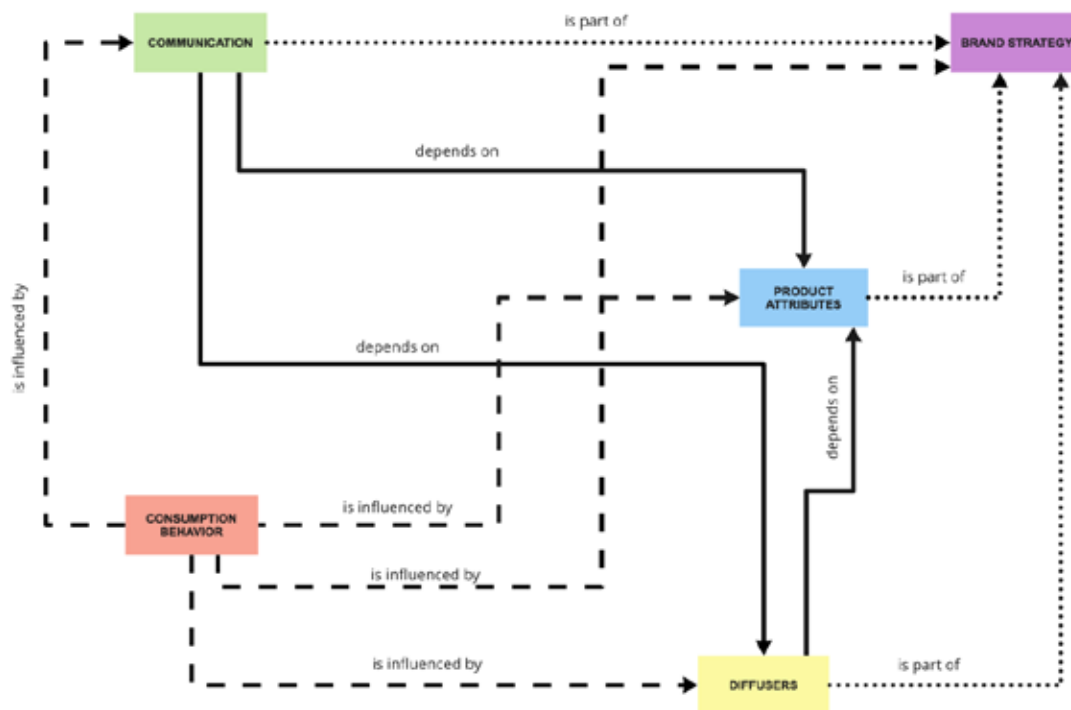


Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

The viralization of fashion products depends on diffusers, communication, product attributes, and consumer behavior. This is a relationship of dependency because viralization is the result of communication by specific groups of people, the diffusers, who can be influencers, celebrities, or consumers' personal circles. Moreover, the purchase decision - the behavioral factors that motivate consumers to acquire a certain product - is crucial for viralization to occur, since the phenomenon only happens when the product is adopted by a majority. In this way, product attributes are also relevant for consumption to occur and, therefore, this is a relationship of dependence.

However, brand strategy is not a determining factor for viralization to occur since the phenomenon can happen even without brand influence. When there is a brand strategy present, that is, marketing actions and a strong identity, the phenomenon can gain strength, but the relationship is not one of dependence. Figure 3 shows the relationship between the factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products.

Figure 3 - Relationship between the main factors responsible for viralization of fashion products



Source: Elaborated by Authors (2021).

The communication element depends on the attributes of the product, since they are what will nurture the communication - in other words, they are the content of the message. There is also a relationship of dependence on the diffusers, since they are the ones who convey the message. Communication can also be part of a brand strategy in cases where this strategy is part of the phenomenon.

Consumption behavior is influenced by all factors – communication, brand strategy, product attributes, and diffusers – as these are the main elements considered in the purchase decision.

Diffusers depend on the attributes of the product to act, that is, to transmit the message. If the diffusers do not identify with the attributes, there is no communication. Diffusers can also be part of a brand strategy when the phenomenon is supported by a brand. Similarly, it applies to product attributes that are also part of a brand strategy.

Thus, the new theoretical model contributes the following factors from the initial model based on the points of convergence between authors Berger (2014) and Gladwell (2009): communication and brand strategy.

The authors emphasize the importance of specific groups in the viralization phenomenon, which was validated through the category diffusers. Specific product characteristics were corroborated with the product attributes category. Specific circumstances can be validated through the consumer behavior category.

6 CONCLUSION

The study presents how the main factors responsible for the viralization of fashion products are related. The analysis of the empirical data points out that for the fashion product viralization phenomenon to occur, four factors are essential: diffusers, communication, product attributes, and consumption behavior. Without influencers, celebrities, and the consumer's personal circle (broadcasters) driving (communication) a message (product attributes) to a receiver (consumption behavior), there is no viralization. When someone buys a fashion product, that person is being influenced by several factors, including who recommends, what they recommend, and by which means.

The attributes of the product are the content of the message. Similarly, there is no viralization without products that convey specific messages characterized by emotional and functional attributes. The brand strategy is the only element that has distinct features among the factors. It can act as a potentializer of the phenomenon, it can influence it, but it is not essential, since the phenomenon can occur without the presence of a strong brand in the segment in the case of organic viralization.

The viralization phenomenon can also start from a brand strategy and, therefore, understanding which elements are included in this process and how they relate to each other is a competitive advantage for the company.

The main contribution of this study lies in understanding how the main factors responsible for the phenomenon of viralization of fashion products are related and how brands can develop more assertive viral marketing strategies.

7 RESEARCH LIMIT AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

One research limit is related to the sample. Although they were specialists in the fashion sector, due to lack of time and resources, consumer groups were not included in the research.

For future studies, it is recommended to expand the scope of the show and validate the model with consumers to understand, from the point of view of those who consume fashion, which factors are considered when consuming products that go viral. Also, it is recommended studies with professionals from other positions in fashion and other cultures to broaden the generalizability of the results.

It is also recommended to test the proposed model and deepen the sustainability aspects related to the viralization of fashion products.



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1. Definition of research problem	X	X		
2. Development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies)	X	X		
3. Development of theoretical propositions (theoretical work)	X	X		
4. Theoretical foundation / Literature review	X			
5. Definition of methodological procedures	X	X		
6. Data collection	X			
7. Statistical analysis				
8. Analysis and interpretation of data	X	X	X	
9. Critical revision of the manuscript	X	X	X	
10. Manuscript writing	X	X	X	
11. Other (please specify)				

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