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How Influencers' Facial Expression Affects Customer Behavioral Intentions

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines when and how the intensity of facial expressions of social media influencers convey warmth and affects consumers' engagement. In particular, the findings reveal that influencers' broader (vs. slighter) smiles increase customer engagement, and this effect mediated by perceived authenticity. That is, influencers' broader (vs. slighter) smiles express higher perceived warmth, thus boosting customer engagement. We further refine our theory by demonstrating that perceived warmth critically depends on the endorsement type informative (vs. entertaining). That is, influencers' broader (vs. slighter) smiles increase customer engagement when the endorsement focuses on the entertainment aspect (i.e., "hedonic fun related attributes"), compared to utilitarian performance related. Taken together, the current research contributes to emerging studies on the role of endorser's facial expressions, authenticity, and engagement.

KEYWORDS:

Authenticity, customer engagement, entertaining posts, informative posts, facial expression, perceived warmth

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media networks have become more present in people's day-to-day life, leading consumers to engage higher amounts of their time in platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Today, market specialists estimate that companies marketing budget expenditures is about 40%-65% on Instagram and from 25%-60% on TikTok, depending on the type of business (Forbes, 2021). Due to that, social media influencers as well – in a professional way – are using these platforms in a professional way to create content with their audience through photos, videos, among other types of content in their posts (Weinswig, 2016).

In the digital era, influencer marketing has grown as an important ingredient in firms' online marketing strategies (e.g., Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015; Wiedmann, & von Mettenheim, 2020; Lamberton, & Stephen, 2016). The nature of influencer marketing is more holistic than the traditional marketing because it combines both paid and earned media (Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, 2019). Therefore, it is unsurprising that global brands such as PlayStation, KFC, and National Geographic have done numerous campaigns relying on social media influencers to increase their engagement online among the community they want to build (Econsultancy, 2020).

Due to that, influencers have a crucial role in marketing nowadays, and 60% of marketers do not expect to lower their initial investment in influencers from their media plans, but to keep it or increase their investment (Social Media influencers, 2020). For instance, 34% of U.S. Instagram users made a purchasing decision based on influencers' recommendations (Civic Science, 2018). Thus, global hotel chains including, Starwood Resorts, Marriott, and the Ritz-Carlton are increasingly relying on social media influencers to leverage them (Social Tables, 2020). Companies do try to improve their customer engagement by partnering with social media influencers to increase brand awareness and

engagement (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2017; 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Siemens et al., 2020), which will allow them to generate positive reactions (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Chhabra, 2010; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). Despite growing literature on the importance of social media influencers, the marketing literature falls short in providing in-depth insights on consumers' responses the influencers facial expression (e.g., smiles) and how it affects customer engagement.

Past research suggests that social media influencers become a source of credibility when they demonstrate to gather attractive content, which is also seen as trustworthiness and as a fount of expertise (Kim, & Song, 2020). Likewise, previous research also pointed out that social media influencers impact their followers' purchasing intentions regarding authenticity (van Driel, & Dumitrica, 2020). Nevertheless, one of the major problems social media platforms are facing is how much fake content there is. As described in previews research, news, rumors, but also misinformation are polluting those networks alongside fake content from influencers (Meel, & Vishwakarma, 2020). Likewise, it has been discussed how smiling and other facial expressions can be faked to be posted into social media platforms and the problem that raises as followers might not seeing the real scenario according to what the influencer seems to be doing. Recently, a documentary from Home Box Office, Inc (HBO) pointed out the reality that social media influencers have been faking their content when it comes to post content – regarding the place where they are, but mainly how they feel (Katz, 2021).

Recent research on brand endorsers suggests that endorsers' facial expression as smile intensity (or "perceived warmth), increases the effectiveness of their brand endorsement (Chen & Wyer, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Hence, it seems intuitively that endorsers facial expression affects "warmth" and positively impact consumers' reactions to the brand (Chen & Wyer, 2020). In some cases, it might backfire as it signals lower

levels of competence (Wang et al., 2016). Based on Chen and Wyer's (2020), and Wang et al. (2016) findings', is expected that facial expressions might convey interpersonal warmth.

This research provides insight into the nature of this influence. We were particularly interested in the effect of endorsers' facial expressions on perceptions of their authenticity and their effectiveness in endorsing brand. On the other hand, facial expression effects seemed likely to depend on the product the influencer is endorsing, and whether the content is informative (vs. entertaining).

Literature remains scant on the facial expression of social media influencers. Thus, this study broadens the scope of prior studies by investigating the following:

- How facial expressions as smiling will impact the influencer's audience regarding online customer engagement?

- What is the impact of smile-enhancing the social media influencer's authenticity? And under which conditions will authenticity be reduced?

The study provides insights about a present trend that involves a relationship between social media influencers and their audience, regarding the content that the first group generates and the consumer engagement and purchase intention that will arise from there, based on a smile. Secondly, through the type of their content – which differentiates according to informative and entertaining reasons – it will be possible to understand how that can generate a greater engagement, triggering peoples' perceptions when it comes to their view of a product the influencer is endorsing. By doing so, we reveal how influencers' facial expressions might lead to positive outcomes (i.e. *engagement*, *purchasing decisions*).

2. *LITERATURE REVIEW*

2.1 Social media influencers and the impact of facial expressions on engagement

Influencers – the people who create content displaying their day-to-day life as a narrative that shapes their audiences' perceptions about specific subjects (Abidin, 2016b: 86) – use social media networks as their workspace. Through those, social media influencers can let their followers' base growing, be paid as an advertising spot used by brands, or be used on as endorsers in a marketing campaign. Even though people's engagement does not translate into purchase intention, their interaction when exposed to a social media post will be impacted by the endorsed brand (Demmers, Weltevreden, & van Dolen, 2020). Technology is a great part of peoples' lives and the time they investment on social media platforms is spent to find what they want to, engage with other people and to keep informed about particular subjects of their interest. As a result, businesses rely on social media as well to drive their marketing campaigns and to engage with customers, hoping that they will then be aware of their products and brands, and trigger their desire for purchase intentions. Users, content, and business across social media platforms are metrics that reached even higher numbers from what it was expected for 2020 and, therefore, the investment firms made on social media was also higher and, according to a study from *Advertiser Perceptions*, social media networks as a marketing channel received almost 20% of other channels' budget (Forbes, 2021).

As described previously, influencers attract followers and impact their intentions to make decisions regarding their field of expertise (Colliander, & Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017). Consequently, consumers perceive influencers content, such "photos and video", as more reliable and interesting compared to those promoted by brands. This is due to the fact that consumers feel the influencers posts and recommendations to be more

authentic (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018; Oliveira, Araujo, & Tam, 2020), since is produced by those who look like their peers (Pixlee, ND).

As social media influencers are seen as the "new brands" (Weinswig, 2016), their intentions and ability are drivers to create a relationship with consumers (Fournier, 1998). Previous studies demonstrated that companies look for an appropriate advertising spot and for social media influencers to work with them as brand endorsers, their connection to the customer, based on his/her content (Chu, & Kamal, 2008). This happens as a consequence due to the fact that influencers are viewed as closer social context "family or friends" (Stoldt, et al., 2019). Prior studies further suggest that one of the most important aspects in choosing a social media influencer as brand endorsers is associated with the content they create (Magno, & Cassia, 2018).

To this end, prior research offers limited insights on how the influencers' facial expression affects the perception of authenticity (Liu, Bogicevic, & Mattila, 2018) suggesting that individuals make social judgments on endorsers (Chen & Wyer, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) based on their smile intensity (Wang et al., 2016). For instance, it was also noted that smiles increase the endorsers' warmth but reduces competence. Similarly, Li et al. (2018) found that when providers use emojis they are judged more warm but less competent, which led to prove the impact of the caption and the message people find when looking to a social media post.

Furthermore, this work explores how facial expression of social media influencers affect their authenticity, improving previous research regarding service employee's facial expression, knowing that, in a service context, for example, frontline employees routinely use facial expressions as a tool to engage consumers (e.g., "Service with smile", Grandy et al., 2005; Woom, & Chan, 2020). Similarly, preceding research suggests that different levels of facial expression cause distinct results on peoples' reactions, or what so called as "social judgments" of warmth and competence (Chen & Wyer, 2020; Wang et al., 2016).

For instance, intense emotional (Service with a smile – Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Woo, & Chan, 2020) is considered as key of consumers' satisfaction (Söderlund, & Rosengren, 2008), and as an affective state of happiness (Woo, & Chan, 2020), as it conveys information about individuals (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006), enabling observers to understand what others feel or intended to do (Van Kleef, 2009).

Thus, we expect that when the smile of social media influencers is genuine, they act as a positive cue which increases customers' engagement, and this effect is driven via the positive impact of perceived authenticity (Woo, & Chen, 2020).

That's one of the reasons why people identify more with influencers than they do with brands, as they express emotions through emotions they express and display into the content they create in social media (Cheng, Mukhopadhyay, & Williams, 2020). Hence, what interests and makes a difference regarding the attention of consumers about a specific post in social media is how they perceive the facial expression from the endorser, to be real or fake. On social media networks, facial expressions are a source of interest and interaction towards better understanding of the product and the opinion of the influencer. The value of this factor comes from the contagion which people experience from the engagement with a post. Therefore, from an Instagram post, influencers' facial expression indicate how pleased or not they are towards the endorsed product, and the perception of happiness perceived in a post is transmitted to those who are seeing it. Thus, social media influencers are viewed as authentic and real, whose narratives can be trusted (Thompson et at., 2006), a concept also referred by Schouten et al. (2019). Regarding that, as social media influencers have high levels of followers engaging with them, the endorsement of products is crucial to brands which want to generate the best awareness possible towards an announced or unknown product (Elberse, & Verleun, 2012). Similarly, credibility on social media platforms rises from consumers' perceptions based on attractiveness, trustworthiness, and the knowledge those they follow demonstrate to have regarding the

products they endorse or the subject they talk about (Camahort, 2016; Wiley, 2014). Previous research also demonstrates that people tend to follow advice and to make decisions based on the opinion of those influencers, regarding the wish to imitate and the sense of trust they show. Due to that, comes the concepts of warmth – which apprehends traits of friendliness and caring – and competence – linked with efficiency and skillful (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Fiske, et al., 2002; Scott, Mende, & Bolton, 2013).

Therefore, the impact of smile among social media influencers and their followers will be present and a driver to consumer engagement. That is aligned with the fact that a friendlier facial expression, displayed by the influencer's smile, impacts consumers' perceptions about the attractiveness and reliability of the endorsement that is being made.

H1: Broader (vs. slighter) influencer smile increases customer engagement.

2.2 The mediating role of warmth and competence

Warmth and Competence diverge from each other as the first one is highly associated with friendliness and sincerity and the second one with perceived ability and skill (Fiske, et al., 2007). Warmth as a concept can be defined as an "emotion triggered by directly or vicariously experiencing a romantic, family, or friendly relationship (Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986; Holbrook, & Hirschman, 1982), differing from competence – also associated with attributes such as skillfulness, intelligence, and confidence. Nevertheless, according to the stereotype model, warmth is an important dimension in judging a person which involves the intention to be good or bad towards other people, more than competence (Ponsi et al., 2016).

These two concepts have a relevant role in consumers' perceptions (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010) and their combination leads to a brighter concept of admiration that increases the willingness to behave as the followed influencer due to a greater engagement, loyalty, and connection (Fournier, 1998; Fournier, & Avery, 2010; Voorn, & Muntinga, 2017, May). Different types of behaviors will be generated after, from intergroup and stereotypes (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), into various outcomes, such as pity, contempt, envy, and admiration. Therefore, warmer judgments also carry more influence in affective and behavioral reactions as people tend to be more sensitive to warmth information than to competence information (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), as warmth is a personal attribute that attracts people psychologically closer and approachable (Fiske et al., 2002). Due to that, it was observed by previous research that smile is a key part of the content which people are faced with (Andrzejewski, & Mooney, 2016), with smile acting as a proxy regarding the possible differentiation between authentic and non-authentic scenarios. Previous research demonstrates that these two concepts are well aligned with consumers' engagement, and with the possibility to purchase a product

or service, as a consequence of their greater level of observed warmth and competence. Nevertheless, social media influencers must know what type of dimension they try to leverage and how much. As the warmth dimension is related to the type of emotions that are generated, people are more responsive on those than about competent information, which should be taken in mind as people's judgments are quicker for warmth messages (Fiske et al., 2007; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001).

Hence, warmth and competence vary asymmetrically as the first concept can change across time and space, regarding peoples' needs and challenges. Warmer behavior is more manageable than competence, as it is under personal control. The same cannot be said about competence as it is related to people's skills and abilities (Cuddy, Fiske, Glick, 2008). Although previous research introduced the concept of the "golden quadrant" as an ideal level of warmth and competence (Zawisza, & Pittard, 2015), others also extend that concept with a third variable, congruity (Fleck, & Quester, 2007; Spence, & Gallace, 2011). That drives a different conclusion, which highlights that more than the highest level of warmth and competence, advertising effectiveness is affected by the relevance of its context, depending on stereotypes which people can relate with (Fleck, & Quester, 2007).

A similar reality is generated by facial expressions and by the expectations that result from there. The approach which influencers project those expressions to their viewers will depend on their audience and consistency, having in mind the goal they want to achieve. Thus, previous research says that facial expressions trigger different perceptions of warmth and social status (Chen, & Wyer, 2020), demonstrating that smile's presence displayed in social media influencers' content causes distinct reactions that can be attributed to low or high social status, as well as warmer or competent attributes – enhanced differently according to the gender of the influencer. Prior research demonstrates that smiling has a positive effect if it is present on male endorsers, but the same might not be

said when it comes to female endorsers. Depending on the type of content that people try to promote, smiling endorsers in advertising are likely to be ineffective if the endorser is female and, smiling male endorsers are expected to be more successful. Previous research investigates smile intensity as a statement for making that content warmer and, consequently, more likable (Wang, et al., 2017). Smiles can be used by influencers as a tool to increase their followers' motivation to do something and to achieve a certain goal (Mehu, & Dunbar, 2008), encouraging people's focus and willingness to share content among their social network, regarding the presence of smile in images to generate positive reactions from viewers. Still, broader smiles are seen to be more associated with warmer scenarios, and their intensity to produce different social judgments.

Likewise, some studies also highlight the relevance of enhanced motivation that comes from facial expressions like smiling, changing people's behaviors (Barasch et al., 2014; Feinberg, Willer, & Keltner 2012; Harker & Keltner 2001; Wang et al., 2017), feelings (Ames, & Johar, 2009) and expectations (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006). Such motivation results as a cause of emotions, incentives, and information for those who observe (Cheng, Mukhopadhyay, & Williams, 2020), that will then be stronger regarding how great and truthful that smile seems to be, as a result of the goal it seems to want to achieve (Kulczynski. Ilicic, & Baxter, 2016).

Consequently, the present work predicts that smile can impact warm perceptions on individuals. Through smile, social media influencers trigger warmer observations among their audience. Smile automatically enhances contagion to their followers, as the act of smiling let them to feel a greater sense of familiarity and proximity, characteristics that, according to previous research, are aligned with warmth insights. Smile improves social connection, acting as a signal influencers use when they intent to generate engagement, but also to keep interpersonal communication towards friendliness and

trustworthiness, preserving the relationship between them.

Furthermore, prior research noted that broader smiles increase influencer's warmth but reduces their perception of competence (Zhang et al., 2020), and that slighter smiles increases the influencer's increase perceived competence.

Therefore, we expect a broad smile to be a driver of warmth as it implies a sensation of closeness and impact the familiarity that the influencer has among his/her followers, and that a neutral facial expression makes the social media influencer to look more competence, more informed and more expert in a particular area (Chen, & Wyer, 2020). Hence, the broader the smile is, the warmer the social media influencer will be perceived and that will mediate consumer engagement.

H2a – The broader (vs. slighter) influencer smile increases perceived warmth.

H2b – The broader (vs. slighter) influencer smile reduces perceived competence.

2.3 The mediating effect of perceived authenticity

Social media influencers and the authenticity they present among their followers is based on their intrinsic motivations (Wiedmann, & Mettenheim, 2020), enhancing perceptions of genuineness and trustworthiness. Likewise, smiling acts as a major factor of engagement and likability of those who display it on social media, even if it is present in an image. Consumers will be able to review it and to evaluate that content as sincere or fake, and to judge it as a source of authenticity (Ansfield, 2007; LaFrance et al., 2003).

Previous research demonstrates that authenticity is well connected with interactivity between the influencer and his/her audience (Moulard et al., 2016), being one of the main reasons why influencers can be more engaging and effective than brands as the first group is capable of interacting with their followers, be more authentic, and human (Audrezet et al., 2018). Hence, that's why micro influencers are emerging even more than the others with greater dimensions, as those are closer to their audiences and, therefore, they feel more authentic and reachable (Au-Yong-Oliveira, et al., 2019).

Influencer's authenticity impacts the emotional attachment consumers have with him/her and enhance the audience perceptions regarding how motivated the social media influencer is to endorse a product or brand on those online networks (Jun, & Yi, 2020). People observe how motivated the influencer is and where that motivation comes from, which will then impact their own motivations. Previous research demonstrates that passion and a truthful interest from social media influencers are recognized by the audience and a key to evaluate how authentic they are (Zehir et al., 2011). Trough those drivers, the endorsed content will be more engaging and will generate more interest among followers, who trust the influencer's opinion and the good intentions and values he/she shares. Higher demonstrations of authenticity are, then, related to positive impressions and familiarity (Doney, & Cannon, 1997).

That can be said about the sincerity and enthusiasm influencers create their own content. It will be positively related to the influencer trust when the content is not viewed as expecting external compensation or being manipulated.

The sense of authenticity on social media platforms is well connected with what people are sharing with their followers and how engaging they are (Ilicic, Kulczynski, & Baxter, 2016). Intrinsic motivation leads to authentic behavior's perceptions as people look into the content shared by the social media influencers as truthful, expressing their honest and personal opinion (Jun, & Yi, 2020). Also, the openness of influencers though their everyday life will also enhance what people think about them concerning authenticity.

Nevertheless, authenticity in digital environments is capable of being manipulated and shaped. Social media influencers can act consciously to share some singular and private moments of their lives to connect deeper with their audiences, enhancing the idea of familiarity. Those minimal touches make influencers and consumers lives more relatable to each other, keeping them close and engaged, which is the main goal the influencer wants to achieve (Kay et al., 2020).

Previously, research also suggests that the end of online creators as social media influencers is being authentic or, at least, being recognized as that, being then trustworthiness and credible (Liao, & Ma, 2009; Napoli et al., 2016).

The principle of authenticity in content generated by social media influencers do imply that followers appreciate their style, image and the content shared by them. It is also a matter of transparency, regarding the disclosure of active partnerships and sponsored content. Therefore, even if sponsorship is involved, influencers still can be authentic to their audience letting them know that they are endorsing a product or a brand from a partnership perspective. The emergence of partnerships between brands and social media influencers has led to the necessity of approaching the best practices about the way influencers interact with

their audience (AlFarraj, et al., 2021). Examining the impact of influencers' credibility dimensions: attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise on the purchase intention in the aesthetic dermatology industry. Consequently, previous research demonstrate that authenticity enhances engagement and the consideration of people to follow social media influencers and to follow them recommendations.

Authenticity appears on social media platforms in the moment influencers expose the backstage of their personal lives with those who follow them. Hence, influencers can show what is happening towards their personal life and what comes with it – romantic life, health and family concerns, and job-related topics (Wellman, et al., 2020).

Previous studies express that authenticity is displayed by nonverbal behavior regarding emotional contagion (Woo, & Chan, 2020). According to those, the first judgement people do recalls on their perceptions towards nonverbal ways to act, and the intension they give to something that is happening during a specific moment, which is affected by facial expressions like smile, reflected by their state of mind and positive interest among others (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011).

Thus, authenticity is key for social media influencers as a main factor to level engagement rates among their audiences. The more human those influencers seem, the more authentic people perceive them, being a major reason of relevance to influencers and to their business strategy. Nevertheless, that sense of authenticity can be affected by the frequency social media influencers collaborate with brands, which should be the most transparent possible among their followers. However, effective persuasiveness happens if the transmitted message is congruent and consistent with the influencer's way to act and to be (Bergkvist, & Zhou, 2016; Ilicic, Baxter, & Kulczynski, 2016), which will outline people's purchase intentions (Zhang, Zheng, & Zhang, 2020). Once warmth is, as said before, very correlated to friendliness and trustworthiness (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), it will be

important to understand if the impact of smile – which leads to greater warmth perceptions – will be able to trigger social presence and enhance authenticity, which is seen as relevant as a source of customer engagement and purchase intention.

Consequently, the presence of a sincere smile and the perception that it translates into transparency, do let the influencer to be seen authentic which is a main source of consumer engagement online among social media networks.

H3: Authenticity mediates the relationship between the influencer's smile and online consumer engagement.

2.4 The moderating effect of endorsement type: Informative (vs. Entertaining)

Following that, we further suggest that the endorsement type informative (vs. entertaining endorsement– Overby, & Lee, 2006; Tamir, Chiu, & Gross, 2007) might affect the facial expression of social media influencers and, consequently, consumer engagement. This distinction of endorsement type is similar to the typology's functional vs. informational advertising (Rossiter, & Percy, 1997). We propose that influencers that generate perceptions of high warmth (vs. low warmth) are more effective when the endorsement type is entertaining (vs. informative).

The focus of entertaining or informative content has been discussed in prior studies using similar terminology. For instance, studies on mobile apps shows that the mobile app can provide informational benefits such as functional facilities or entertaining attributes, such as experiential content related to fun or experiential outcomes (Bellman et al., 2011). That distinction has also been discussed in advertising research (e.g., Das et al., 2019; Drolet, Williams, & Lau-Gesk, 2007; Klein, & Melnyk, 2016). For instance, Das et al. (2019) found that when the ads are entreating using the "presence of emoji", increase consumers' purchase intentions when the advertisements are being driven for hedonic products.

Our idea holds that smiling is more effective when the endorsement focuses on entertaining aspect of the products, rather than the informative. Prior research on brand endorsers is likely to customize their expressions based on the type of the product that they are endorsing. Displaying smile for enjoyable or fun products is more effective as there is a congruity and a match between the nature of the product they promote, and their facial expression (e.g., Chen, & Wyer, 2020). Similarly. we expect that displaying a smile is more effective when the social media influencer's endorsement is tailored as entertaining, which will increase consumers' engagement.

People's motives regarding their choices when it comes to buy a product are

influenced by entertaining and informative aspects of the product they're purchasing. Previous research points out that utilitarian value is linked with the functional benefits and sacrifices that the product has, and that make it valuable to the buyer (Zeithaml, 1988). In contrast, hedonic value is connected to entertainment and relaxation people might want to please with the acquisition of a product that acts as an experience (Babin et al., 1994). According to previous research, online engagement also differs according to the experience they have when buying on the Internet (Evans et al., 2001) – which varies as those who are not that close to online shopping, do it to achieve social purposes and, therefore, do it for entertaining reasons (Liang & Huang, 1998).

Nevertheless, due to the raise of social media networks and the will of share content online, companies have been developing their products enhancing their aesthetics. Consequently, although consumers might want to find a product for its utilitarian value, companies want them to be influenced by the aesthetic of those products as it may be determinant to choose the product they are searching for, manipulating consumers perceptions (Creusen, & Schoormans, 2005).

Previous research points out that when it comes to choose between functionality and aesthetics, consumers do follow the usefulness of the product, considering its performance more crucial than their style (Hoegg, Alba, & Dahl, 2010). However, if when a product has met both aspects, what matters the most to consumers are the entertaining attributes (Chitturi et al., 2007).

Consequently, peoples' choices regarding content online – from engagement and purchasing points of view – are influenced by the hedonic and utilitarian aspects of the product they're searching for. It will different regarding the reason why they seek for the proper outcome and ease-of-use of the product or, on the other hand, for the experience and enjoyment of that purchase (Wolfinbarger, & Guilly, 2001). The presence and authenticity

driven by social media influencers will then be impactful to the final experience and engagement of their followers and purchase intentions (Picot-Coupey, et al., 2021).
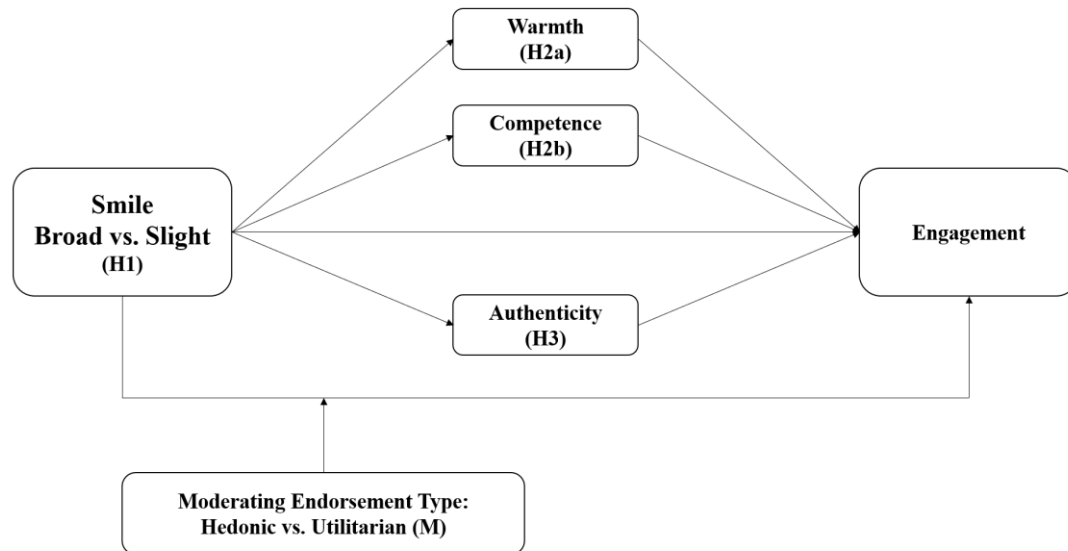

Fig. 1 – Conceptual Model

Firstly, as Fig. 1 suggests, the conceptual framework shows the argument that influencer's smile will have an impact on consumer engagement, as the first hypothesis suggests. However, the present study also suggests that smiles can differ from broader to slight and that will affect people's engagement online.

Secondly, the smile of the social media influencer will then make it appear warmer and triggers emotive observations among those who follow him/her. Although previous research focusses its findings on warmth and the difference between this concept and competence, few have linked the importance of smile to improve warm perceptions towards user-generated content, leading to different levels of authenticity of the influencer.

The conceptual model places smile as a driver of social presence which affects the perception of social interaction and enhances the proximity between parts (Ye et al., 2019). Thus, social presence enriches the perception of authenticity. In this model, as the third

hypothesis points, the more authentic the influencer is, more credible and trustworthy he/she becomes, and therefore, the more people will be willing to engage with influencers according to their suggestions and recommendations.

Finally, informative, and entertaining types of endorsement will serve as a moderator to the social media influencer's followers base as they will influence their engagement online.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

Two studies were conducted to test our predictions. *Study 1* uses one factorial design to test whether the influencers' facial expression neutral (vs. smile) (1) increases customer engagement with the post, and (2) increases purchasing intentions for the endorsed product. *Study 2* tests the smile intensity, and further advances our theory by examining the moderating effect of endorsement type, primed as informative (vs. entertaining) focus.

The first study is based on how people reacted differently according to the perceived attributes in an Instagram post, and the associations to the content they are exposed to, confirming the effect of smile into the social media influencer's warmth and competence, as well as the authenticity linked to him/her. Hence, the hypothesis advanced how facial expressions such as smile impacts the endorser's audience regarding customer engagement. This study is focused on how those facial expressions – smiling vs. neutral as independent variable. Respondents were faced with one out of four images – randomly chosen – which differ from each other regarding the facial expression and the product the social media influencer is showing.

The second study introduces the moderation effect of informative (vs. entertaining) motives that impact the customer engagement online, and enhances the impact seen in the first study regarding authenticity and social presence among the use of different facial expressions when creating content.

Peoples' perceptions impacted by smile seemed to be different according to the entertaining vs. informative motivator that they were faced with. The third hypothesis enhances that, as referred before, on how warm or competent the facial expression will be viewed as. On the other hand, people admire an influencer regarding what he/she demonstrates through his/her content, as a consequence of the sense of trustfulness viewers

do seem to see when looking to the picture, a feeling of authenticity. Once warmth is perceived more easily than competence (Fisk, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), visible high-warm attributes as authenticity may become a source of admiration and credibility, leading to an increased customer engagement more easily than not. To achieve this, participants were presented to a brief introduction of a current scenario on their lives, that consists of browsing content on Instagram.

STUDY 1

Study 1 aimed to improve previous research and to develop a proposed conceptual framework. The main objective was to test the described predictions of the current study, in order to affirm which photo was perceived to be warmer, according to some of the perceptions and attributes that previous literature linked with the concept of warmth and test them on a 7 point scale (*1. Not warm at all* to *7. Totally warm*).

The results demonstrated that respondents seem to find friendlier and warmer attributes, as well as a higher sense of confidence, when they look to a photograph where the endorser is smiling, rather than not. Thus, the influencer looked more approachable and closer to the audience, according to respondents, demonstrating that facial expressions matter as a source of non-verbal communication usually present on social media platforms where content is published as an image or a group of images. Consequently, it was possible to link warmer attributes with smile regarding this pretest, confirming what was proposed initially in this paper as the strong connection between warmth, and smile expression.

Then, it was possible to drive the first of two studies and to enrich the main one which tried to prove how smile enhances consumer engagement and the perception of warm attributes displayed in real life scenarios where the endorser is smiling, comparing to those where he/she is not.

One hundred US consumers were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), for an exchange for financial compensation (29% Female, M_{age}=34.53, SD=8.98).

MTurk is an online survey platform that is widely recognized by researchers (e.g., Umashankar, Ward, & Dahl, 2017). Seven respondents were dropped from further analysis for failing attention checks. The final sample size was 93. Participants were randomly assigned into two conditions Smile (n=47 versus non-Smile (n=46) social media influencers.

Hence, participants were asked to imagine the following:

"*While you are browsing on Social Media, you came across this post by a Social Media Influencer.*". The image itself shows an Instagram post with the same number of likes and caption – "*The iPhone 12 is worth buying just for this blue color. Also, the cameras, battery life, performance & more! Nicely done @Apple!*".

Figure 2 – Images used to show both conditions of the study.
Non-smile (left) and Smile (right).

Then, participants responded to our measures. Five items on perceived warmth adapted from Fiske et al. (2002), i.e., testing what is the perception of the Influencer as "warm", "friendly", and "sincere". The same regarding four items on perceived authenticity and social presence of the social media influencer – i.e., consumer engagement, and purchase intention by the Influencer's follower base, through Likert Scales from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Finally, participants filled out a short demographic survey.

MANIPULATION CHECK

The use of manipulation checks worked as intended, participates under the Smile condition, respondents indicated that the influencer was smiling compared to its counterpart in the non-smiling condition (M_{smile}=5.83 vs. $M_{non-smile}$=4.61; $t_{(93)}$=-3.395, p<0.001). For realism checks of both conditions, participants also perceived the post as realistic (M_{smile}=5.62 vs. $M_{non-smile}$=5.61; $t_{(93)}$=-0.033, p=0.974), validating the initial intention of generating this manipulation check.

RESULTS

Results of Warmth

Participants perceived the smiling influencers (vs. none) higher in *warmth* (M=5.62, SD=0.97) than non-smile condition (M=5.04, SD=1.19). Hence, results indicated the relevance of smile's presence ($t_{(93)}$=-2.574, p=0.012) for those who have looked to the Instagram post, which seemed warmer when the influencer was smiling rather than not.
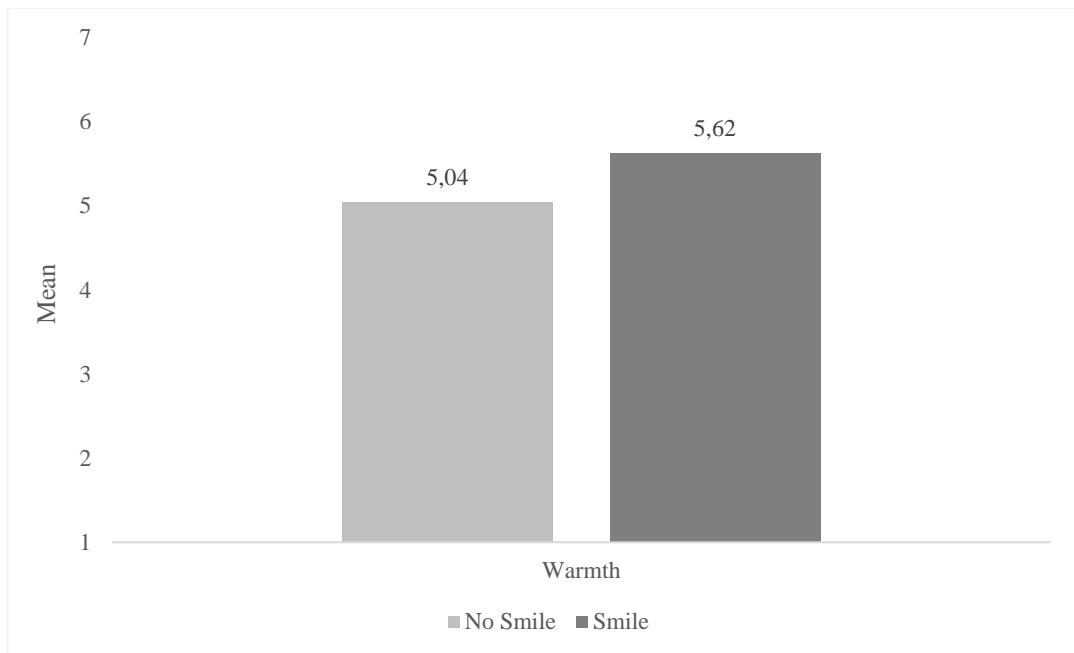

Figure 3 – The impact of smile on warmth.

Results of Authenticity

People found image with the condition of smile to be more *authentic* than the non-smiling picture (M_{smile}=4.70 vs. $M_{non\text{-}smile}$=4.13; SD_{smile}=0.972 vs. $SD_{non\text{-}smile}$=1.194; $t_{(93)}$=-2.482, p=0.015). The driven study also demonstrates the impact of smile on *positive emotion*, according to the respondents' view (M_{smile}=5.60 vs. $M_{non\text{-}smile}$=4.67; SD_{smile}=1.455 vs. $SD_{non\text{-}smile}$=1.661; $t_{(93)}$=-2.849, p=0.005). In other words, excitement, happiness, and delight were enhanced by the image where the social media influencer was smiling, being aligned with what was predicted initially.
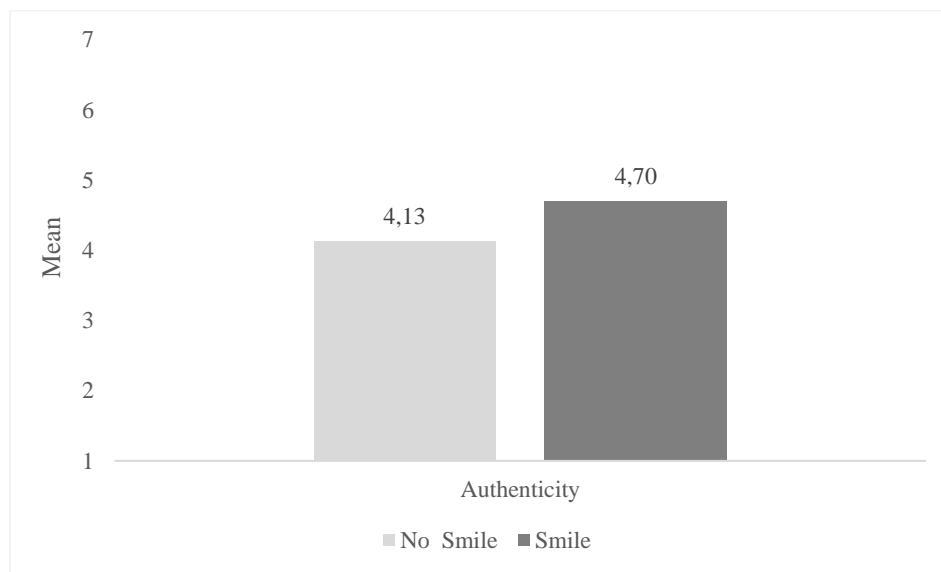

Figure 4 – The impact of smile on authenticity.

Results of Consumer Engagement

People observed the smiling influencer as more emotive and authentic, the same tendency was also visible when respondents were asked about their *consumer engagement* (M_{smile}=5.22 vs. $M_{non\text{-}smile}$=4.47; SD_{smile}=1.577 vs. $SD_{non\text{-}smile}$=1.657; $t_{(93)}$=-2.254, p=0.027).

The current study expresses that *purchase intentions* do not differ statistically significantly to the respondents ($t_{(93)}$=-1.66, p=0.1). Nevertheless, it was possible to observe some differences between the outputs from the displayed facial expression (M_{smile}=5.35 vs. $M_{non\text{-}smile}$=4.88; SD_{smile}=1.276 vs. $SD_{non\text{-}smile}$=1.451) and that the social media influencer's facial expression.
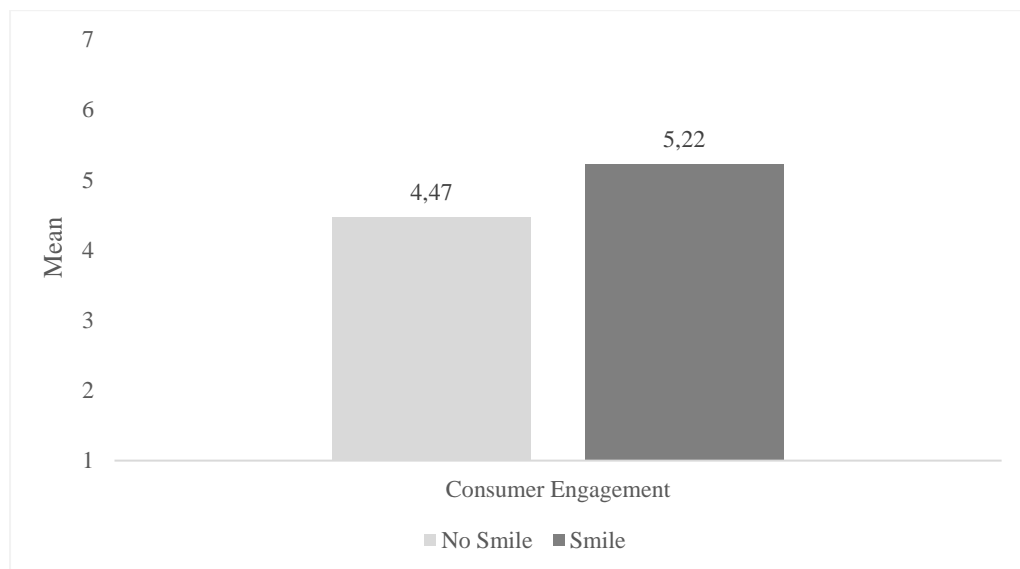

Figure 5 – The impact of smile on consumer engagement.

A second analysis was conducted through Hayes (2017) mediation process numbers 4 and 6. This analysis aimed to test H2a, H2b, and H3. I predicted that perceived warmth mediates the effect between the smile and consumer engagement. Additionally, the same prediction is expected to be seen according to perceived authenticity as a mediating effect between smile and consumer engagement.

Following a bootstrapping analysis of mediation (PROCESS, Model 4; Hayes 2017) with 5,000 samples tested, Warmth (M) also mediates the effect of smile vs. no-smile endorsers on consumer engagement. A significant effect of Smile Expression on Warmth (b=0.581, SE=0.226, p<0.012), and Warmth positively and significantly impacted consumer engagement (b=1.060, SE=0.11, $t_{(90)}$=9.65, p<0.001). Its indirect effect suggests the endorser's smile had a positive effect on consumer engagement indirectly through warmth (b=0.616, SE=0.242, 95% CI=[0.155, 1.105]).

Similarly, a mediation analysis using influencers' facial expression as independent variable, Authenticity as a mediator (M) and consumer's engagement (dependent measure) was also conducted with 5,000 samples tested, demonstrates that Authenticity also mediates the effect of smile vs. no-smile endorsers on consumer engagement. Authenticity positively and significantly impacted consumer engagement (b=0.575, SE=0.232, $t_{(90)}$=2.482, p<0.001), and a significant effect of Smile Expression on Authenticity (b=1.194, SE=0.086, p<0.001) can be seen as well. Hence, its indirect effect suggests the endorser's smile had a positive effect on consumer engagement indirectly through authenticity (b=0.687, SE=0.266, 95% CI=[0.133, 1.2]).

Regarding the conceptual framework presented above, a bootstrapping analysis of mediation with 5,000 samples tested whether Social Presence (M) mediated the effect of smile vs. no-smile endorsers on consumer engagement as well. Findings suggest a significant effect of Smile Expression (0 = *No Smile*; 1 = *Smile*) on Social Presence (b=0.695, SE=0.256, p<0.001), and that Social Presence positively and significantly impacted consumer

engagement (b=0.994, SE=0.09, $t_{(90)}$=11.041, p<0.001). Regarding its indirect effect, the endorser's smile has a positive indirect effect on consumer via how much social presence the social media influencers appears to be (b=0.418, SE=0.144, 95% CI=[0.127, 0.694]).

To follow that, a mediation analysis also displays the indirect effect through warmth and authenticity as mediators of smile expression on consumer engagement (b=0.287, SE=0.119, 95% CI=[0.069, 0.531]). Finally, a similar analysis also demonstrates the indirect effect of the smile expression enhancing warmth and social presence, as mediators simultaneously, on consumer engagement (b=0.2, SE=0.134, 95% CI=[0.029, 0.531]).

DISCUSSION

In Study 1, I found that smile (vs. neutral) increases customer's engagement, and this effect was driven by two key mediators, warmth, and authenticity. Furthermore, our findings reveal that smile intensity impacts perceptions of warmth differently, letting the influencer appear more warmer when displaying a smile rather than having a neutral one. Hence, the presence of smile and its impact on warmth enhanced connection and proximity, leading to greater engagement (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). The same effect of mediation occurs with perceived authenticity, which impacts the reachability and the emotional attachment people had with the social media influencer when she was smiling (Au-Yong-Oliveira, et al., 2019).

The findings of this study demonstrate that engagement levels are higher when the influencer is smiling rather than not, mainly on social media platforms. Those can be observed by the different levels of positive emotions from one image to another. Respondents proved to feel more excited, delighted, and happier looking into a post where an influencer is smiling. Consequently, that factor also impacts how authentic the influencer

looks and the level of social presence, which are both higher regarding the different facial expression that can be seen in both images. Similarly, the current study also demonstrates that people's engagement is well aligned with warmth attributes that are indirect influenced by a facial expression such as smile (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010). Hence, people are not only more engaged with the post itself as a consequence of the smile's presence, but they are also opened to share the post because of that, to interact further as they rely on the content they are seeing, more authentic, and which spreads a better impression of closeness.

Therefore, our findings suggest that those two mediators play a key role regarding the relation between the social media influencer and its followers, driving to a better customer engagement due to the fact social media influencers seem more emotional and trustworthy.

STUDY 2 – The Moderating Role of Post type Informative (vs. Entertaining)

This study was based on 275 US consumers that were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), for an exchange for financial compensation (44,5% Female, M_{age}=37.88, *SD*=10.98). MTurk is an online survey platform that is widely recognized by researchers (e.g., Umashankar, Ward, & Dahl, 2017). Seven respondents were dropped from further analysis for failing attention checks. The final sample size was 268.

This study kept a similar structure to the previous one, adding the effect of the moderator (informative vs. entertaining) in the caption of the Instagram post. As it can be found below, the present study used 4 different images to demonstrate the effects we were trying to get. The difference between them is on the intensity of the smile broader (vs. slighter) raised by the social media influencer, as well as the purpose of use of the product informative (vs. entertaining).

Figure 6 – Images used to show both conditions of the study, alongside the moderator's effect.

Results of Authenticity

A two-way variance was conducted regarding the impact of an independent variable (smile) on consumer engagement online, moderated by the motivations of authenticity – i.e., informative, or entertaining. Smile can be displayed in two distinct ways, broader or slighter, and its influence generates various results online. The main effect for smile type yielded a F ratio of $F(1, 268) = 0.145$, $p = 0.704$, which means there is a significant difference between broad smiles ($M = 5.031$, SD = 0.998) and slight smiles ($M = 5.024$, $SD = 1.099$). The interaction effect was significant, $F(1, 268) = 3.574$, $p = 0.06$.
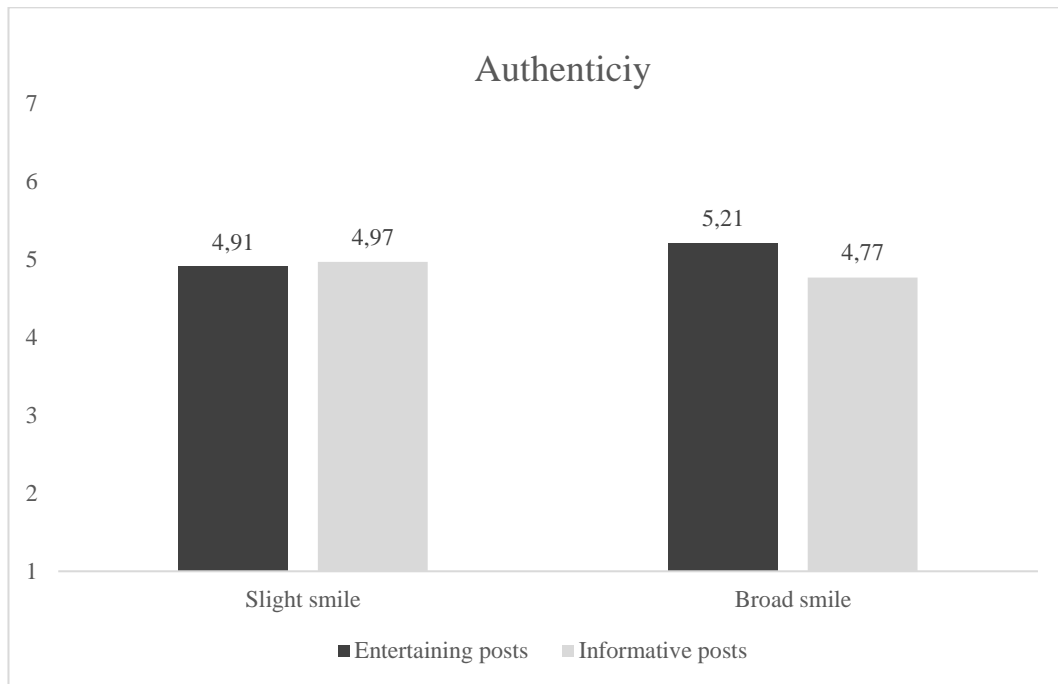

Figure 7 – The impact of smile and the moderation effect of informative and entertaining posts on authenticity.

Results of Purchase Intention

Alongside the results above, a factorial ANOVA was conducted in order to compare the main effect of smile in social media and the difference between informative and entertaining motives to purchase products in online engagement.

A two-way variance was conducted regarding the influence of an independent variable (smile) on purchase intention, moderated by the motivations of the potential purchase – i.e., utilitarian, or hedonic. Smile can be displayed in two distinct ways, broader or slighter, and its influence generates various results online. The main effect for smile type yielded a F ratio of $F(1, 268) = 0.320$, $p = 0.573$, which means there is a significant difference between broad smiles ($M = 5.185$, $SD = 1.479$) and slight smiles ($M = 5.041$, $SD = 1.585$). The interaction effect was significant, $F(1, 268) = 3.5$, $p = 0.06$.
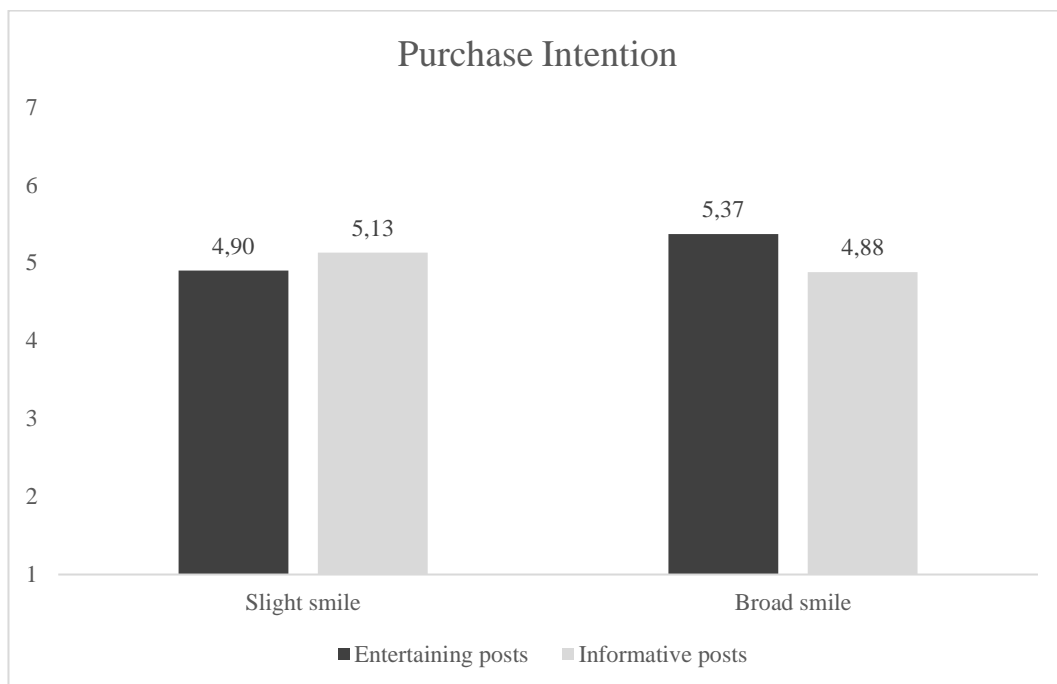

Figure 8 – The impact of smile and the moderation effect of informative and entertaining posts on purchase intention.

Results of Customer Engagement

A two-way variance was conducted regarding the influence of an independent variable (smile) on consumer engagement online, moderated by the motivations of customer engagement – i.e., informative, or entertaining. Smile can be displayed in two distinct ways, broader or slighter, and its influence generates various results online. The main effect for smile type yielded a F ratio of $F(1, 268) = 0.05$, $p = 0.824$, which means there is a significant difference between broad smiles ($M = 4.798$, $SD = 1.835$) and slight smiles ($M = 4.807$, $SD = 1.736$). The interaction effect was significant, $F(1, 268) = 1.628$, $p = 0.203$.
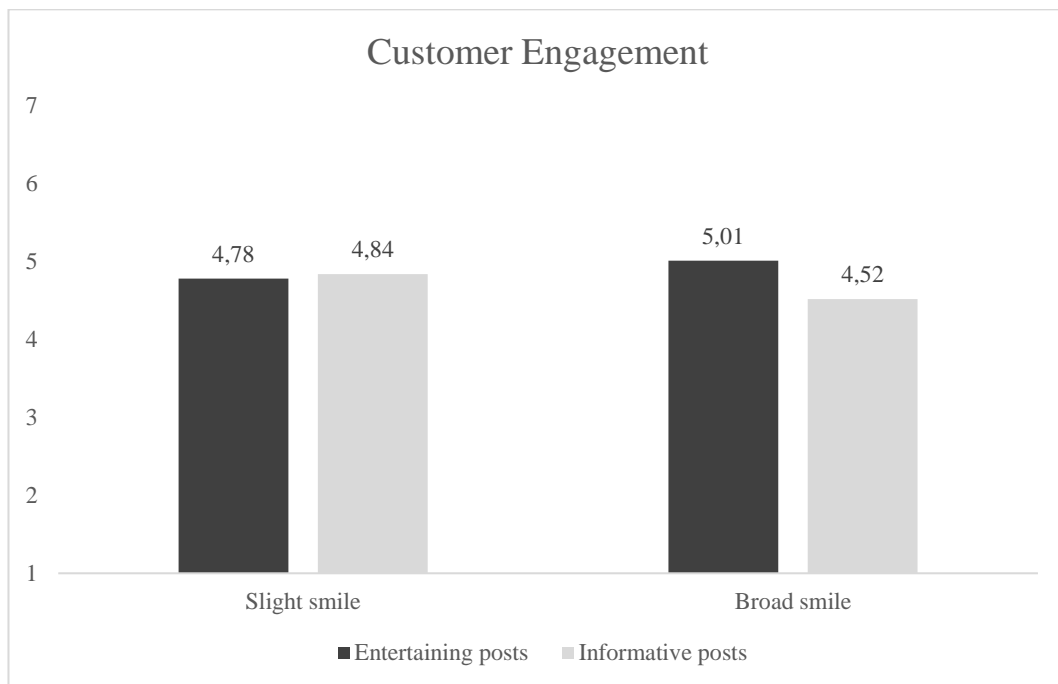

Figure 9 – The impact of smile and the moderation effect of informative and entertaining posts on consumer engagement.

DISCUSSION

The first study has focused on the *smile* by social media influencers and expanded that concept from previous research by exploring how relevant it can be regarding warmth, authenticity, and customer engagement, among others.

The second study adds the moderation effect of entertaining and informative motives to engage online while searching for a product to purchase. According to the results displayed above, smile does have a different effect depending on the context the product is being promoted and used (Liang, & Huang, 1998). Results showed the use of utilitarian caption to be more engaging when the social media influencer does not express a broad smile as her facial expression. However, the contrary happens when the context is related to entertaining motives to purchase a product and to engage with the influencer, as it is possible to observe that the levels of engagement are higher when he/she has a broader smile rather than not. Therefore, those results match with the revised literature regarding the fact that people who search for some product according to its utilitarian value (Hoffman, & Novak, 1996) engage more with a serious image and caption – enhancing the influencer's competence on that matter. Likewise, followers look into the experience that the product concede when linked its buying to entertaining motives (Babin et al., 1994) and, consequently, engage more with the content they find online when this looks friendlier and warmer (Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986; Holbrook, & Hirschman, 1982).

4. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Previous research had already shown that warmth attributes improve emotional value but also purchase intentions (Kolbl, et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the current study enriches that phenomenon by highlighting that warmer and emotive content, powered by the smile, also rises engagement levels and the willingness to share a post with others on their social media network. Percent research also explained the differences of warmth and competence from a concept perspective (Liu, Bogicevic, & Mattila, 2018), alongside their differences affecting customer engagement and behavior. Notably, the present research provides a more holistic view about the relevance of those and their connection with a smile, demonstrating that observers evaluate it. Warmth attributes can be enhanced by a smile, elevating perceptions of friendliness, sincereness, and reliability, as this study proved. Those are some of the main consequences towards the higher consumer engagement, as influencers look closer to the people who follow them. Likewise, the conducted study reveals authenticity as an attribute with a distinct outcome towards the endorser's smile expression. Authenticity levels were much higher for those who are faced displaying smile rather than the others, complementing previous research on that and how important for social media influencers their smile can be when creating generated content. Thus, as seen before, the influencer's smile will boost their social presence among those who follow them, improving and encouraging purchasing behavior (Hassanein et al., 2009). Following that, there are also other variables influenced by smile, contributing to previous theories. The smile enriches the influencer's social presence – as they seem more approachable to their audience – but also affects emotion, as consumers seem more pleased and delighted by seeing a social media post with an influencer smiling.

On the other hand, the present study enriches previous theory linking facial expression such as smile while promoting a product on social media together with

informative (vs. entertaining) posts – which demonstrated to cause different results on engagement. Hence, the moderation effect was possible to be observed and to be impactful.

Lastly, the findings of this study go beyond prior regarding what has been pointed earlier by overtaking some their limitations, combining the image with a "caption" and a tag on the brand represented there, enhancing the post differently, making it more realistic and reliable (Ye, et al., 2019). Equally, this study also moves ahead preceding ones by using a entertaining post to understand the involvement of the participants. Similarly, the present study also contributes to previous literature regarding the perceptions people have when faced with a female influencer endorsing a technologic product and the effects it has depending on her facial expression and the use of the product (informative vs. entertaining).

5. *MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS*

Lastly, this study has important implications for companies and social media influencers, contributing to previous research.

From the influencer's perspective, perhaps the most important finding of the current study is related to the critical role of the smile on consumers' engagement – defined as the number of interactions people have on a post on social media (Oh, Nwankpa, & Hu, 2017). To achieve a better performance across social media networks which have image as their main source of content – which happens with Instagram –, influencers will benefit from higher rates of engagement as they display a smile rather than not. Therefore, social media influencers should manage the content according to their goals and having in mind these findings. Hence, the higher engagement rates originated by the smile have a very relevant value for companies that want to drive marketing campaigns on social media networks, boosting their results as they close a partnership with influencers who have better engagement metrics. As described previously, the main goal of brands, marketeers, and the campaigns they run is not awareness, but consideration and conversion (Hassanein et al., 2009). These two metrics are the ones which have a real impact regarding product sales through their marketing channels, as it happens with social media. Nevertheless, brands will then try to drive marketing campaigns with the better engagement rates – linked to higher performance outcomes and sales profitability.

Similarly, the more engaging social media influencers are, the more researched for potential brand collaboration there is and, consequently, the more notorious can they become not only among their community but among other audiences as well. The smile effect proves itself to be relevant when endorsing for entertaining reasons, supplementing previous research that studied a parallel effect on utilitarian products.

6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations from the current study are related to the data collection procedure. From a demographic perspective, data collection was based on a sample from just one country, and it would have been great to achieve more robust results if the data had been collected from people across multiple regions. On the other hand, the sample was not as great as it was supposed to for Study 1A. Similarly, respondents were faced with one photograph that was demonstrating a female person for both studies. To enrich the study and to be able to evaluate the impact of an influencer's smile towards gender, future studies should have that in consideration and, therefore, analyze the impact smile might have on consumers male and female endorsers, as the effects caused regarding the moderator effect might be affected by that.

This study only focused on female influencers. Future studies should consider the role of gender. We expect that smile would affect social perceptions of warmth and competence between males and females (Chen & Wyer, 2020).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the presence and impact of smile on consumer engagement, this study explored how effective can be for the social media influencers the use of smile in their marketing activities. As our findings suggest, a simple way to improve consumers' engagement is by focusing on the smile, which should be used according to the message the influencer wants to share, and the value behind the endorsed product. This research further evaluates the important effect of smile on authenticity, warmth, and competence, as a key when it comes to social media influencers who want to engage more with their followers and to look genuine, rather than not (Hunter, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2010), as well as friendly, or more expert about it. Therefore, an effective marketing solution regarding the consumers that brands want to target goes through the presence of smile expressions while influencers are endorsing products, as nonverbal behaviors are rich on feelings, they are able to transmit. Otherwise, social media influencers should express themselves in a neutral way, not so expressive, and then impact the perceptions of competence their followers will have on that regard.

Therefore, influencers' levels of consumer engagement differ considerably depending on the content they are promoting and how they communicate it with their followers (Magno, & Cassia, 2018). This must be considered when creating content and working with partners as the goals of those campaigns should consider the type of endorsement.

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