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**Data-Driven Marketing**

**Understanding Unconscious and Conscious Drivers in Consumer  
Rejection of Technology Brands**

Carolina Souto Nandin da Silva Gonçalves

Master Thesis

presented as partial requirement for obtaining a Master's Degree in Data-Driven Marketing

**NOVA Information Management School**  
**Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação**

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by  
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Master Thesis presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialization in Digital Marketing & Analytics

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June, 2024

## **STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY**

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism, any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

*Lisbon, 15 of June 2024*

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis specially to friends for the joy and laughter you brought into my life, making this journey bearable. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

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## ABSTRACT

Up to 95 per cent of cognition, including decision-making processes, transpires within the unconscious mind. This thesis investigates the factors that influence brand rejection, focusing on subconscious and conscious decision-making processes. The analysis is based on 11 qualitative in-depth interviews using elicitation as a method to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding various brands, focusing mainly on technology. Findings reveal that subconscious influences play a significant role in shaping consumer preferences, often operating automatically and beyond conscious awareness. Negative emotions, often linked to past negative experiences, play a significant role in conscious brand rejection. Ethical considerations, such as sustainability and labour practices, are also crucial determinants. Brand hate can be likened to an iceberg, with visible rational reasons at the surface and deeper, hidden emotional and psychological factors beneath. Social proof and the desire for group belonging significantly influence brand choices. Effective marketing communication can trigger consumer attraction or repulsion based on the associations it creates in their minds. Despite extensive research on conscious brand avoidance, there is a less explored area of unconscious emotional brand rejection. While positive emotional bonds foster loyalty, negative experiences profoundly affect brand acceptance and rejection. Finally, this thesis presents theoretical and practical implications based on these findings, offering insights for future research and real-world applications in marketing strategies.

## KEYWORDS

Unconscious; Consumer; Brand; Rejection; Emotions; Memories; Triggers

### Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

- E.A.** Early Adopter – individuals who embrace new technology or try a new product before most others.
- M.A.** Majority Adopter - individuals who embrace new technology or try a new product at the same time most others.
- L.A.** Later Adopter - individuals who embrace new technology or try a new product after most others.
- MUPI** [FR] Mobilier Urbain Pour l'information - [ENG] Urban Furniture for Information.

## INTRODUCTION

Technology has become an integral part of our lives, making the relationship between humans and technology increasingly complex. This deep interconnection has led to a dependency that significantly impacts our decision-making, communication, and perception of reality (Turel et al., 2011). The concept of technology addiction highlights how individuals can develop a dependency on technology. This intertwined association raises questions about why consumers still subconsciously reject certain brands.

While extensive literature has explored brand avoidance as a conscious and deliberate decision, there is less focus on unconscious emotional brand rejection. Brand avoidance, a conscious form of anti-consumption, is typically categorized into experiential, identity, and moral brand avoidance. Experiential brand avoidance is driven by negative firsthand consumption experiences leading to unmet expectations. Identity avoidance occurs when a symbolic discrepancy between a brand's image and an individual's self-identity leads to conscious rejection. Moral brand avoidance is guided by ideological conflicts between a consumer's beliefs and a brand's values (Lee et al., 2009). Brand hate complements this understanding, with emotional (Kucuk, 2019) and behavioural (Zarantonello et al., 2016) dimensions aligning with the conscious choice to reject a brand. This conscious aspect of brand avoidance and hate contrasts with the subconscious influences on consumer behaviour, highlighting a significant area in consumer-brand relationship research that warrants deeper exploration. Central to this investigation is unconscious emotional rejection, where consumer decisions, preferences, and aversions are shaped mainly outside conscious awareness. Gerald Zaltman (2003) posited that up to 95 per cent of cognition, including decision-making processes, transpires within the unconscious mind. This thesis posits that such subconscious processes play a pivotal role in consumers' emotional rejection of brands.

This thesis will explore the unconscious and conscious drivers in consumer rejection delving into the complex web of human-technology interaction beyond traditional marketing research. It focuses on the less-studied area of subconscious influences on consumer behaviour, where feelings and instincts dominate. Furthering this exploration, this study stands at the intersection of consumer psychology and brand dynamics, addressing a significant research gap: the underestimation of unconscious emotions in marketing strategies. Traditional marketing research has predominantly focused on consumer behaviour's conscious, rational aspects, often overlooking the profound influence of unseen emotional undercurrents and subconscious forces (Zaltman, 2003; Woodside et al., 2012). This oversight is underscored by Alvarez et al. (2023), who reveal how profoundly emotions and subconscious factors guide consumer actions and decisions. Drawing from diverse interdisciplinary research, this study aims to shed light on these concealed aspects, building on neuromarketing insights (Woodside et al., 2012) and the work of David H. Thomson (2021), who emphasizes the crucial role of unconscious emotions in product assessment. Understanding why some technology brands fail to resonate with consumers at an emotional level has significant implications for the market. This research offers tangible insights for technology brands striving to navigate the market by uncovering the subconscious drivers of brand rejection. It seeks to foster more authentic, emotionally resonant brand strategies that align with today's complex psychological consumer landscape (Thomson & Coates, 2021).

Based on an extensive literature review, this study will incorporate qualitative, in-depth interviews to gather insights into subconscious brand rejections. Photo-elicitation, a technique that has garnered considerable attention in qualitative research (Harper, 2002; Fanning, 2011), will be utilized to elicit more genuine and subconscious responses. This method involves presenting interviewees with photographs, encouraging reflection and deeper consideration of topics they might not usually articulate. In marketing research, photographs serve as effective prompts for reliving consumption experiences and exploring place factors, yielding richer insights than verbal interviews alone (Helsley & Levy, 1991; Samuels, 2004). This approach is expected to uncover a more instinctive understanding of interviewees' attitudes and feelings towards technology brands, mainly focusing on aspects not easily articulated in conventional interview settings.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Understanding consumer behaviour, especially about technology brands, is pivotal for marketing success. This literature review delves into consumers' subconscious emotional rejection of technology brands, examining the interplay of consumer psychology and brand perception in shaping decisions beyond conscious awareness.

### 1.1.1. BRANDS

"A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers" is the definition of a brand, according to the American Marketing Association (AMA). However, this definition is minimal; brands are not just identifiers but a diverse collection of perceptions and memories in the consumers' minds. They represent an idea, an expectation, and a promise from the seller to the buyer about the quality of the product and the customer experience they provide. Brands also have emotional and cultural significance, shaping consumer expectations and experiences.

A brand is a concept that lives in consumers' memory and encompasses a range of descriptive and evaluative information related to the brand. This definition emphasizes the nature of brand knowledge. It comprehends not awareness and attributes, but benefits, images, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and experiences associated with the brand (Keller, 2003). Moreover, every possible interaction with a brand can change how consumers perceive it in their minds, their opinions, and the information they retain about it (Keller, 2003). Building on this foundation, brands in consumer culture, as discussed by Levy (1959), are not just utility providers but are also rich in symbolic meaning. They offer a way for consumers to express personal and social identities. Holt's (2002) work further elaborates on this by examining the dynamic interplay between consumers and brands in a postmodern context. This interaction is characterized by an active engagement from the consumer's side, where they do not passively consume brand meanings but actively reinterpret and reshape them (Holt, 2002).

When studying the relationships between humans and brands, there are two which are the most studied ones, "brand love" and "brand hate". A consumer can develop strong positive emotions towards a brand, characterized by deep affection and a sense of connection called "brand love" (Alvarez et al., 2023). This relationship between the brand and the consumer is characterized by a strong emotional connection (Alvarez et al., 2023), which makes the consumer more prone to accept products and have a positive outcome regarding purchasing decisions. However, as this happens, it can also occur as "brand hate", where the consumer develops negative feelings towards a brand, like hate, anger, or rage (Haase et al., 2022). This can lead to a non-identification with the brand regarding its values, morals or brand image, which makes him actively reject its products.

### 1.1.2. BRAND AVOIDANCE AND REJECTION

Brand avoidance and rejection are essential topics in consumer behaviour research. They delve into why consumers actively distance themselves from certain brands. This field's pioneering work by Lee, Motion, and Conroy (2009) and recent insights from Alvarez and

George (2023) illuminate the complexities of brand avoidance. These studies categorize brand avoidance into three main categories: experiential, identity-based, and moral Avoidance. Experiential Avoidance occurs when the consumer has had negative experiences with a brand. For example, if a product does not meet the expected criteria or a service is of poor quality, these harmful interactions can lead to a long-term aversion to the brand. This form of Avoidance is well-documented in the literature, with research suggesting that negative experiences can significantly impact consumer behaviour more than positive ones (Holloway et al., 2009).

Identity-based avoidance means consumers will consciously reject certain brands because they do not align with their self-image. For instance, if a brand's image, values, or target market does not fit how consumers perceive themselves or wish to be seen by others, they actively reject it. This can include scenarios where a brand is perceived as too luxurious or down-market, which conflicts with the consumer's desired social identity. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) explore how consumers form relationships with brands similarly to how they form relationships with others. When there is a mismatch between a brand's identity and the consumer's self-concept, it can lead to brand avoidance. This type of Avoidance highlights the importance of brand identity and image in consumer-brand relationships. Moral Avoidance stems from ethical or moral disparities between the consumer's values and those perceived by the brand. For example, if a brand is associated with environmental harm, poor labour practices, or other unethical behaviours, consumers who value ethical consumption may avoid it. This form of Avoidance is driven by a consumer's desire to align their purchases with their ethical beliefs and values. Smith (2010) discusses how consumers' ethical and moral beliefs can significantly influence their purchasing decisions, often leading them to reject brands that do not align with these values. This type of Avoidance underscores the growing importance of corporate social responsibility and ethical branding in today's market.

Understanding why people consciously reject certain brands is crucial. When consumers are aware of their dislike and can explain it, it shows they're mindful of their experiences or how the brand doesn't match their values or identity. They go through a thought process to justify their negative feelings and decision to avoid the brand. By systematically analysing these reasons, brands can take specific actions to improve, such as enhancing product quality, aligning better with consumer identities, or adopting more ethical practices. Knowing why people reject them helps brands tweak their strategies, build better relationships with customers, and stop negative word-of-mouth from spreading. Research is key in revealing these reasons, offering evidence and frameworks to grasp complex consumer behaviours. As new rejection patterns emerge, ongoing research helps refine our understanding and adapt to changing consumer attitudes, leading to stronger, more positive connections between brands and their customers.

The concept of "Brand Hate" is also deeply connected to brand rejection. According to Zarantonello (2016), there are specific antecedents to brand hate, such as service failures, negative word of mouth or ethical issues. It also categorizes the behavioural responses to brand hate into three different categories: attack, where the consumer is actively retaliating against the brand; an approach, where the consumer tries to engage with the brand to rectify the previous problems; or avoidance, which is the focus of the thesis where the consumer actively distances himself from the brand. This study also highlights the complexity of

consumer reactions to disliked brands, saying that it can significantly vary based on the underlying causes.

The concept of 'disidentification,' introduced by Woodside et al. (2012), adds a layer of complexity. It involves consumers perceiving a brand as threatening to their self-concept, leading to subconscious brand rejection. This concept deepens our understanding of the non-conscious or less articulate layers of brand rejection.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these studies predominantly focus on conscious aspects of brand rejection, where consumers know and can articulate their reasons for rejecting a brand. This rejection often stems from direct experiences or dissonance between the consumer's values and those perceived to be embodied by the brand. Lee et al. (2009) further emphasize that brand avoidance tends to be a deliberate and conscious decision, an intentional distancing from specific brands.

However, this focus on the conscious aspects of brand rejection highlights a significant gap in the literature: the unexplored realm of unconscious emotional rejection of brands. While existing studies adeptly cover the conscious decision-making processes in brand avoidance and disidentification, they often overlook the more profound, unconscious emotional undercurrents that can equally influence consumer behaviour. Such emotional rejections are less overt and less articulable, yet profoundly impactful, as they are rooted in subconscious processes. This unconscious dimension of brand rejection, particularly in its emotional aspects, is the primary focus of this thesis, highlighting a critical area that has yet to be explored in existing consumer behaviour research.

### **1.1.3. CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY AND BRAND DYNAMICS**

In exploring the intricate landscape of consumer-brand relationships, Alvarez, David, and George (2023) offer an insightful delineation of emotional connections, such as brand love, hate, and addiction. Their comprehensive review underscores the complexity of these relationships, paving the way to understanding the multifaceted nature of brand dynamics. Building upon this, Lee, Motion, and Conroy (2009) delve into brand avoidance, categorizing it into experiential, identity, and moral types.

However, the domain of consumer behaviour extends beyond the conscious horizon. Thomson and Coates (2021) introduce the transformative theory of constructed emotion, challenging the traditional linear decision-making model. This theory illuminates the often-overlooked role of subconscious processes in shaping consumer behaviours, including the nuanced phenomenon of brand rejection. Complementing this, Woodside et al. (2012) emphasize that consumer choices are frequently impulsive, shaped by deep-seated habits and unconscious forces that operate beyond immediate awareness. This insight is crucial in understanding the subconscious emotional rejection of brands, a core focus of this thesis. Gerald Zaltman's seminal work "How Consumers Think" (2003) further reinforces the pivotal role of the emotional and unconscious dimensions in consumer behaviour. Zaltman challenges the conventional marketing paradigms that have long overlooked these subconscious elements. He advocates for a more profound comprehension of the consumer's unconscious mind, an essential perspective for devising effective and resonant marketing strategies. Also, looking at Otamendi and Sutil Martín (2020) research, we can understand the power of emotional advertising in shaping consumer responses. This study reveals that emotions,

particularly positive ones like joy or excitement, significantly influence how consumers perceive and engage with advertisements, affecting their buying decisions. Meanwhile, studies on unconscious emotions like "Are Unconscious Emotions Important in Product Assessment? How Can We Access Them?" by Thomson and Coates (2021) in product assessment emphasize that these hidden emotional layers play a critical role in shaping consumer preferences and choices. This research suggests that consumer decisions are not just rational but are profoundly influenced by subconscious emotional responses. Also, these emotions can arise from various stimuli, including brand associations, past experiences, and societal influences, affecting how consumers perceive and interact with different brands.

Furthermore, according to Fitzsimons et al. (2002), non-conscious processes play a substantial role in consumer decision-making, transcending the traditional focus on conscious influences. Non-conscious processes shape several factors, such as attention, perception, goal activation, learning, memory, attitudes, and preferences. The study states that stimuli outside conscious perception and the non-conscious effects of consciously perceived stimuli and decision processes entirely beyond awareness are integral to consumer choices. This theoretical backdrop is particularly relevant to this investigation into why consumers might subconsciously emotionally reject certain technology brands. It suggests that underlying factors such as emotional conditioning, implicit attitudes, or some triggers can provoke emotions and significantly influence consumers' brand perceptions and decisions.

#### **1.1.4. THE ROLE OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS IN CONSUMER DECISIONS**

The role of unconscious processes in consumer behaviour is extensively discussed. Zaltman (2003) highlights that most consumer actions stem from the subconscious. Neuromarketing research (Morin, 2011) further supports this and underscores the limitations of traditional market research methods in capturing the complete spectrum of consumer behaviour, particularly the subconscious and emotional aspects. There is evidence in consumer behaviour (Gurgu et al., 2020) that a significant part of how people make decisions and respond emotionally to brands happens unconsciously. This means that consumers are only sometimes consciously aware of what influences their opinions, actions, and choices regarding brands. These unconscious processes involve activities that occur without our conscious knowledge. Many factors shape these processes, such as memories, conditioned responses and seated preferences or dislikes developed from past experiences, cultural influences, or inherent biases.

A critical aspect in this field is the notion of attitudes and biases discussed by Greenwald and Banaji (1995) in their research on social cognition. They argue that consumers often hold subconscious attitudes and biases that can influence their decisions in ways they are unaware of. Another significant contribution comes from Zaltman (2003), who, in his book "How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market", suggests that up to 95% of all cognition occurs in the subconscious mind. Zaltman emphasizes that this subconscious processing plays a crucial role in decision-making, particularly in how consumers perceive, interpret, and emotionally react to marketing stimuli. Approximately two-thirds of all stimuli reach the brain through the visual system, allowing us to experience these neural images visually, verbally, and through other sensory means. The stimuli leading to thought can vary greatly; for instance, the aroma of coffee during a morning walk can evoke a mental image of reading a newspaper at a coffee shop, accompanied by internal or even verbalized responses

(Zaltman, 2003). Different inputs such as sound, touch, motion, background moods, and emotions can stimulate neural activity. These neural activations can manifest in various forms, including responses to marketing stimuli like a Coke advertisement, which can stimulate specific neural activations leading to associated thoughts and emotions (Zaltman, 2003).

Lastly, Kahneman's (2011) dual-process theory in his book "Thinking, Fast and Slow," differentiates between two systems of thought: System 1, which is fast, automatic, and subconscious, and System 2, which is slower, more deliberative and conscious. Kahneman's work indicates that much of consumer decision-making is influenced by the fast, automatic judgments of System 1, which are primarily subconscious. Kahneman also discusses the Prospect Theory in his book, for which he won a Nobel Prize, challenging the traditional economic assumption of how humans use their rationality in decision thinking, assuming and suggesting that people often make irrational decisions they cannot explain, especially when dealing with losses and gains.

Neuroscientific research suggests that human thoughts originate from what are known as neural images, essentially neural representations organized in a topographical manner within the early sensory cortices (Kosslyn et al., 2001). This process is quite complex: when neurons get activated by various stimuli, such as sounds or sights, they trigger synaptic firings. These electrochemical activities in our brain can manifest as conscious thoughts (Kandel et al., 2013). There is, however, a notable distinction between the neural activity that generates a thought and our conscious perception of that thought (Dehaene, 2001). Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between the mechanism of thought generation, the initial stimulus that provoked the thought, and the subsequent expression of that thought.

#### **1.1.5. NEUROMARKETING AND ITS INSIGHTS INTO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

Neuromarketing, a discipline composed of neuroscience and marketing, has provided valuable insights into consumer behaviour that surpass traditional marketing techniques. This interdisciplinary approach has received attention from researchers such as Morin, Woodside, Megehee, and Sood (2011). Their notable contributions include Morin's book "Neuromarketing: The New Science of Consumer Behavior" (2011) and the research conducted by Woodside et al. in 2011 and 2012. These studies emphasize the role of neuromarketing in unravelling the complexities of consumers' subconscious responses. Understanding how consumers make decisions relies heavily on these responses, influenced by brain functions operating beneath conscious awareness. Morin (2011) and Woodside et al. (2011, 2012) highlight the impact of the brain on these decision-making processes. Neuromarketing's ability to understand how these subconscious processes work offers a fresh perspective on comprehending even better consumer behaviour and emotional processes towards brand rejection or acceptance.

The essence of neuromarketing lies in its capacity to monitor signals and brain activity, yielding insights into consumer motivations, preferences, and choices. This methodology has revolutionized aspects of marketing such as advertising, product development and pricing strategies. One approach used in neuromarketing involves monitoring physiological responses such as eye movements and other related activities, as well as examining brain activity through scanning techniques. These methods offer insight into how consumers respond, as

discussed in the literature review "Neuromarketing; What You Need to Know" by Harvard Business Review, published in 2019.

Neuromarketing emerges as a crucial field in understanding subconscious consumer responses. Woodside, Megehee, and Sood (2011) demonstrate the application of neuromarketing in improving brand strategies and understanding consumer needs beyond conscious processing. Morin (2011) further elucidates how neuromarketing can bypass traditional marketing limitations by delving into subconscious processes and emotional responses. As a result, neuromarketing emerges not just as a tool for understanding consumer behaviour but as a transformative tool in the marketing landscape, reshaping how brands interact with and respond to their consumers.

### **1.1.6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

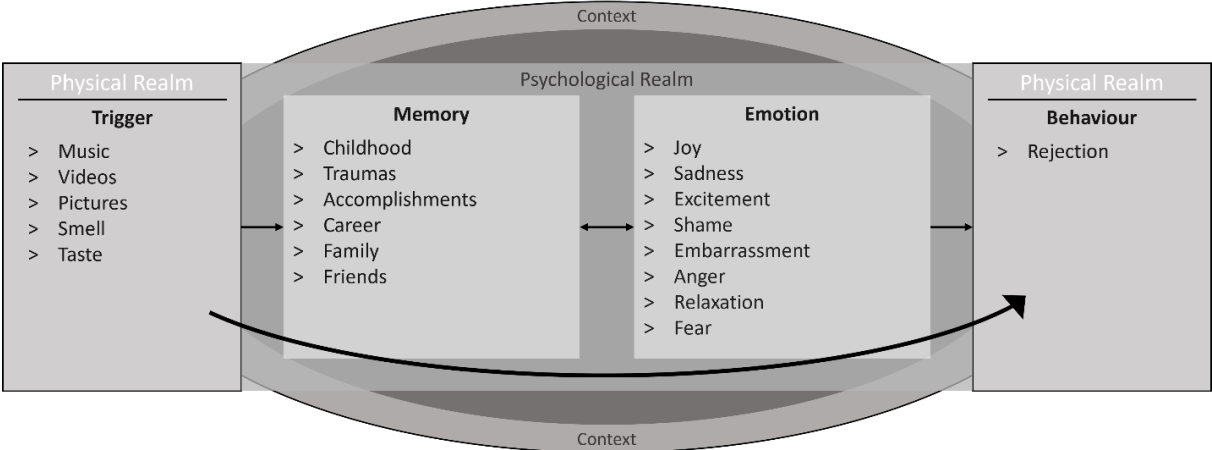
Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, published in 2011, states that the consumer decision-making process consists of two different processes: conscious and subconscious. System 2 is slower, more deliberative, and more logical, while System 1, the fast and automatic one, is often unconscious. It requires effort from the consumer and more thoughtful decision-making. In this realm, consumers are often unaware of the factors driving their brand acceptance or rejection, including the triggers and the underlying process (Shleifer, 2012). This thesis adopts a theoretical framework that examines how a trigger activates a memory, eliciting an emotional response and behaviour. This sequence starts with a trigger that may be a sound, song, smell, image, or phrase that evokes an emotion unconsciously in the consumer, resulting in a behavioural outcome.

This progression is not only shaped by the individual's core effect but is also subject to the influence of external contextual factors. The reinforcement mechanism may strengthen the link between object stimuli and emotional responses, thereby altering future interactions with the stimulus. This conceptual framework explains how emotional reactions to products can profoundly impact purchasing choices and brand loyalty. Our framework meticulously maps out this progression, illustrating how these subconscious emotional reactions to products or brand-related stimuli can profoundly influence consumer behaviour. This includes but is not limited to, impacts on purchasing decisions, brand perception, and loyalty. The thesis aims to unravel the complexities of these emotional underpinnings, offering a nuanced understanding of the subconscious influences in consumer-brand dynamics.

In the proposed theoretical framework, the consumer's interaction with a trigger — such as a sound, image, or text — is central. This trigger activates a positive or negative memory, eliciting an emotional or sentimental response in the consumer. The nature of this emotion, be it joy, sadness, or excitement, directly influences the consumer's subsequent behaviour. This emotional response plays a pivotal role in shaping the consumer's perception of a brand, ultimately leading them to embrace or reject it. This framework highlights the intricate relationship between sensory triggers, emotional responses, and consumer behaviour, underscoring the significance of emotional factors in brand perception. As shown in the figure below, the process starts in the physical realm where the trigger happens, and this trigger may happen in any situation day to day. When the consumer faces it, it automatically activates a memory that may be a story, a trauma or related to a previous experience; once this memory is present, it unconsciously evokes emotions in the consumer. Primary emotions are essential

because Izard suggests each is associated with distinct subjective experiences, specific expressions, and unique neurophysiological patterns (Lazarus & Izard, 1989). Those emotions are fear, anger, shame, contempt, disgust, guilt, suffering, interest, surprise, and joy, which can have a positive or negative impact on the individual, contributing to a behaviour. This study focused on the negative behaviour that occurs in the physical realm and is related to the avoidance or rejection of the brand.

Figure 0.1 – Theoretical Framework



## METHODOLOGY

Traditional methodologies in market research have predominantly depended on self-reported data to gauge consumer feelings and preferences. However, these approaches are limited by the presumption that individuals can precisely express their cognitive and emotional experiences. This presumption is often disputed, considering numerous cognitive processes operate subconsciously, eluding conscious articulation (Greenwald et al., 1995). Acknowledging these limitations is critical to understanding the proper drivers of consumer behaviour. In response to the recognized limitations of traditional market research techniques, this study proposes the employment of concept profiling, with an emphasis on non-valence concepts, as a potent strategy to unearth subconscious emotions and influences during product evaluation (Zaltman, 2003). Human behaviour is greatly influenced by conceptualizations associated with everyday things; these conceptual associations trigger emotional outcomes that may be either positive or negative and contribute to continuing, ceasing, or attenuating an interaction (Thomson, 2016).

Furthermore, photo-elicitation is identified as an instrumental approach for obtaining deeper consumer insights, specifically helpful in probing the subconscious aspects of brand relationships, as recommended by Fanning (2011). The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) is another qualitative method highlighted for its efficacy. When applied within in-depth interviews, ZMET facilitates a richer, more nuanced understanding of consumer perspectives by encouraging participants to express their intrinsic thoughts and feelings, circumventing the necessity for rationalization or conscious acknowledgement of their reasons for product rejection (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). To apply these theoretical perspectives, this research conducted in-depth interviews grounded in a framework attentive to the subconscious processes that consumers might be unaware of, but that sway their purchase decisions. Various stimuli, such as auditory cues, olfactory signals, or visual images, can trigger memories and provoke emotional responses. Whether positive or negative, these responses influence consumer behaviour (Shleifer, 2012). By using photo elicitation and incorporating several photos into our research methodology, we aim to capture the undercurrents of consumer decision-making, offering a more authentic, honest, and comprehensive view of the interviewees' interactions and perceptions of brands and products.

Intending to understand the nuanced dynamics that influence consumer behaviour, this research explores the complex interplay of subconscious processes that significantly affect purchasing decisions. The foundation of this study rests on the premise that specific triggers evoke memories and elicit emotional reactions, which, in turn, whether manifesting as positive or negative emotions, have a profound impact on how consumers interact with brands and products. Drawing upon the insights of Kahneman (2011), who highlights the intricate relationship between emotional responses and consumer behaviour, this research adopts photo elicitation as a critical methodological tool. By integrating a series of carefully selected photographs into our research design, we aim to unearth the underlying currents that shape consumer decision-making processes. This approach offers a more genuine, insightful, and comprehensive understanding of how individuals perceive and relate to various brands and products.

The methodological framework used in this thesis was based on qualitative data gathered from 11 (eleven) in-depth interviews. The demographic scope of our participants includes male and female Portuguese individuals ranging in age from 21 to 55 years. All of the participants have different jobs and backgrounds. The choice to conduct these interviews in person is deliberate, as it facilitates a more nuanced interpretation of the responses and fosters a stronger connection between the interviewer and interviewee. The structured questionnaire designed for this study is segmented into four distinct phases, each targeting different aspects of consumer behaviour and perception.

Table 3.1 – Interviewees Characterization Table

#	Name	Age	Gender	Job Title	Level of education	Innovation adoption level
1	Joana G.	23	M	Data Analyst	Masters	M.A.
2	Marta M.	21	M	Consultant	Bachelors	M.A.
3	Margarida L.	29	M	Banking Analyst	Masters	L.A.
4	Afonso O.	30	H	Business Analyst	Bachelors	M.A.
5	João F.	27	H	Consultant	Masters	E.A.
6	Catarina D.	23	M	Unemployed	Masters	M.A.
7	Miguel Q.	28	H	Designer	Masters	M.A.
8	Pedro G.	55	H	Business Manager	MBA	M.A.
9	Francisco F.	29	H	Financial Analyst	Masters	M.A.
10	António R.	49	H	Manager	Masters	E.A.
11	Madalena M.	23	M	IT Governance Controller	Masters	E.A.

In-depth interviews were conducted to address the main research question of this study: "Understanding Unconscious and Conscious Drivers in Consumer Rejection of Technology Brands?" and uncover the subconscious elements that influence a consumer to reject a brand. A qualitative approach was adopted; therefore, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of consumers representing various age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were carefully selected to ensure a broad representation of experiences and perspectives, improving the richness of the data collected. Implementing this method facilitated an in-depth exploration of conscious and unconscious factors affecting brand rejection. The interview structure was designed to prompt discussions on conscious versus unconscious brand rejections, allowing for spontaneous revelations of subconscious triggers. Data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Key themes emerged around the awareness of rejection processes, the impact of subconscious influences, and specific emotional triggers linked to brand avoidance.

#### Objective 1: Distinguishing Between Conscious and Unconscious Rejections

The initial phase of the interview focuses on the concept of rejection, associated with the first objective: understanding the interviewees' general perceptions of brand rejection. Participants were presented with two images that symbolize rejection or avoidance, followed by a series of questions related to these images. The aim was to explore the emotional responses elicited by these visuals that were used as a trigger and to assess whether these

feelings were linked to the rejection of certain brands. This objective sought to determine whether consumers distinguish between conscious and unconscious rejection. Understanding this differentiation is vital, as our primary aim is to delve into the subconscious factors influencing consumers' aversion to specific technology brands. During interviews, participants must comprehend these differences to reflect more accurately on their decision-making processes. We aim to explore whether consumers use conscious and unconscious reasoning when avoiding a brand and to understand how participants feel when rejecting a brand and what memories accompany that association. Besides that, in this initial phase the aim is to see whether the two images shown act as a trigger for the interviewee to talk about bad experiences they have had and to see if there are more triggers related to brand rejection.

#### Objective 2: Evaluating the Impact of Subconscious Processes

The second phase shifts the spotlight to technology products, with participants being shown two images in this category. The focus was to understand any unconscious triggers or influences that might evoke positive or negative memories in the interviewees and affect their choices, even if the consumer remains unaware. The objective here was to identify the brands that come to mind upon viewing these images and to probe the memories associated with these brands. This phase sought to understand which emotional connections were attributed to each brand and uncover any specific memories linked to these emotions. By presenting the images, we aimed to elicit authentic and genuine responses without second thoughts, focusing on the underlying memories associated with these brands. This involves examining whether subconscious elements significantly sway the consumer's decision-making. We aim to identify any unconscious triggers or influences that might affect these choices by enabling memories from the past, even if the consumer remains unaware. By understanding these subconscious influences, we can better comprehend how they contribute to the overall perception and rejection of brands. The thesis looked for past experiences, traumas, or stories that emotionally impacted the interviewee and how these past events have contributed to their unconscious decisions, ultimately evaluating the importance of unconscious processes in avoiding certain brands and influencing purchasing decisions.

#### Objective 3: Identifying Key Subconscious Emotional Triggers

In the third segment, the focus narrows to the unconscious rejection of technology brands. Participants were shown photographs depicting individuals who appear unsatisfied and disinterested in using technology products, such as computers and mobile phones. The aim was to induce associations with technology brands that evoke feelings of rejection, relying on the premise that the images will serve as a subconscious stimulus, prompting responses that reveal underlying brand associations. This part of the interview connects with the third specific objective: identifying and determining the critical subconscious emotional triggers that lead to the avoidance of certain technology brands among consumers. The focus was on emotions, negative experiences with the brand or products, and traumas that may occur. This involves probing into the participants' emotions linked to specific brands to elicit responses that reveal subconscious biases—moments when consumers might not realize that their rejections are not fully conscious. Through careful questioning, we intended to uncover the emotional underpinnings that prompt consumers to avoid some brands, providing deeper insights into subconscious brand rejection. This section also explored the participant's discomfort when discussing their reasons for rejecting a brand, often resulting in physical discomfort and vague responses, highlighting the emotional nature of this process.

#### Objective 4: Identifying Factors for Conscious Brand Rejection

The fourth phase addresses the final part of the process, which is the behaviour, leading to conscious rejection, asking participants why they avoid certain technology brands. This part of the interview is designed to understand the factors that lead to the deliberate rejection of these brands. We directly asked the interviewees about their reasons for rejection and brand avoidance, aiming to uncover what consciously leads them to reject those technological brands. In addition to these objectives, the interview included questions about brand avoidance to ascertain critical factors that drive consumers to reject technology brands consciously. Although these responses were more conscious and reflective, they were vital for a comprehensive understanding of brand rejection behaviour. They were an essential complement to the explored subconscious elements, offering a holistic view of the factors influencing consumer behaviour towards technology brands. Although the interview was divided into specific objectives related to the four pillars of the theoretical framework—Trigger, Memory, Emotion, and Behaviour—it was anticipated that all these components would be discussed in each part of the interview. Given the subconscious nature of these processes, each component is inherently interconnected and a consequence of the preceding one. It is not possible for instance to discuss emotions in isolation, they are inevitably linked to the trigger that prompted a memory, which then led the interviewee to feel a certain way and consequently exhibit a behaviour of acceptance or rejection.

The last part of the interview was dedicated to gathering demographic information about the participants, including their age, sex, nationality, and city of residence, and asking if there was anything they would like to add. Participants were also asked if they consider themselves early adopters, majority adopters, or late adopters regarding technology. This question intended to explore if there was an association between the level of technology adoption and unconscious rejection. This last section of the interview aimed to characterize our sample.

Through this research methodology, this thesis aspires to provide valuable insights into the subconscious influences on consumer behaviour. By exploring the conscious and unconscious factors that shape brand perceptions and purchasing decisions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex mechanisms in the consumer marketplace.

The following questions during the interview were asked:

Table 3.2 – Interview Questionnaire

<u>Question</u>	<u>Context of the Framework</u>	<u>Section of the Interview</u>
Which feelings do you have when seeing these images? / How do you feel when seeing these images?	Trigger	First
How do you relate with these pictures?		
What do you think of when seeing these pictures?		
Speaking of brand rejection what comes to your mind when looking at these images?		
Looking at these pictures which brands came to your mind? Why?	Memory	Second
Which memories and emotions did you feel when thinking of those brands?		
When thinking of how you perceive the brand or experiences that you have had is there anything that disputed that situation?		
Looking at these pictures which brands came to your mind?	Emotion	Third
Which memories come to you when thinking in those brands?		
Is there any feeling associated with those memories?		
Consciously do you reject any brand? Why?	Behaviour	Forth
Do you hate any brand?		
What makes you reject a brand?		
Is there anything you would like to add?		
Do you consider yourself an early adopter, early majority or later adopter regarding technology?	-	Fifth
Where do you live?		
How old are you?		
What is your nationality?		
Which gender do you identify with?		

To analyse the data, each interview was transcribed to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness. Following transcription, the data was examined individually, and responses were organized by critical topics and findings. This process involved deep analysis of the data to be able to identify recurring themes and patterns. These themes were then categorized under the pillars of the theoretical framework: Trigger, Memory, Emotion, and Behaviour. Each finding was scrutinized to derive conclusions and lines of thought, ensuring that each interview's insights were integrated into the overall analysis. This systematic approach enabled a thorough understanding of the subconscious influences and behavioural patterns discussed in the interviews, aligning the findings with the research objectives. Patterns and behaviours stood out after conducting the 11 (eleven) interviews. There was a subconscious influence that individuals could not explain and were often unaware of. It was immediate, fast, and happened outside of conscious awareness, associated with System 1 mentioned in the dual-process theory (Shleifer, 2012) The results were presented according to the structure of Table 3.2, which related the pillars of the theoretical framework – Trigger, Memory, Emotion, and Behaviour – with each phase of the interview and consequently with the defined specific objectives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having in mind the first component of the theoretical framework – **Trigger** – associated with the first specific objective: Distinguishing between Conscious and Unconscious Rejections the answers were very homogeneous throughout the interviews.

In every interview the candidate mentioned negative emotions when looking at the first two images that were shown as a visual trigger (Annex A), the ones that occurred the most were: repulsion, avoidance, discomfort, and denial. These negative emotions lead the interviewees to remember past unpleasant experiences and memories. Also, the interviewees were able to easily distinguish between conscious and unconscious rejection, when talking about conscious rejection or brand avoidance it was mainly connected to an experience, a trauma, or specific reasons like characteristics of the product, price or quality. For instance, when interviewing João F. (#5) and seeing those pictures, they acted as a trigger that allowed him to associate with the emotion of repulsion. It came immediately to mind a trauma that he had during his childhood with Nesquik, "I used to go to Sporting swimming with my parents, with my mum in fact, and after training, my mum would always give us a packet of chocolate milk. Once, the packet was spoilt, and I threw up. And then, for years until now, I can't drink chocolate milk from Nesquik". This experience contributed to a continuous and conscious rejection of the brand Nesquik. As soon as the participant sees the logo of the brand, it is enough to act like a trigger; he immediately feels disgusted, and his mind travels to that day, "I think about it, and the taste of sour comes, like, I'm talking about this, and the taste of sour is coming into my mouth now".

As previously mentioned, there are three main categories that lead consumers to avoid a brand being one of them moral avoidance (Lee et al., 2009). More than 80% of the interviewees stated that values such as ethics, sustainability, and labor practices were strong triggers that caused them to reject these brands. Some examples that came out during the interview related to this were Shein and Temu, "I don't want to be associated with this brand, I judge who buys, and I don't want to be part of it." – Catarina D. (#6) said during her interview. She also mentioned that Temu was created by PDD Holdings Inc. a company that created another application called Pinduoduo that was suspended by Google in 2023 for being suspected of malware. "How can we trust in such a company. I don't even know how this can be legal?". Margarida L. (#3) also felt the same way about Shein, it is a brand she refuses to buy from after being triggered by an article she read - "I saw clothes from Shein, and the people who made the clothes put requests for help on the labels. And I've honestly stopped buying since then." The ethical and trust concerns raised by these consumers are significant and should not be taken lightly.

When exploring brand rejection, during interviews it was discovered that the decision to reject a brand is frequently preceded by an initial feeling of brand hate, connecting deeply both concepts (Zarantonello et al., 2016). This indicates that negative emotions towards a brand often develop first, leading to the eventual choice to avoid or reject the brand. This dislike may be due to a clash with the brand's values, moral concerns, or political disagreements. While these reasons are complex and deeply rooted, it appears that at a basic level, the main driver of conscious rejection is simply brand hate. This shows how strong initial negative impressions can act as triggers and influence consumer attitudes and decisions about brands.

For instance, when interviewing Pedro G. (#8) he showed identity-based avoidance (Lee et al., 2009) by having total disinterest with Apple, saying that it was a brand that it was directly related to pure consumerism and status, “The brand carries more weight than the functionality of the mobile phone itself”. He even stated that most of the people who bought an iPhone wanted to feel that they are part of something, because without an iPhone you may feel that you are excluded or aside, which means on the other hand that consumers may reject a brand if it does not fit in with how they want to be seen by others. (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). “The mobile phone is no longer just a means of communication. It has become an accessory. People like to carry their mobile phones around with them, but it's because they have the apple, and the apple gives people visibility, notoriety and status. But not Samsung, you look at a Samsung and it's got nothing. Now, I think people go more for the status itself than for the functionality of the item.”.

With this conversation, it was clear that Pedro G. (#8) feels repugnance and hate towards the brand; he even said, “I consider myself anti-Apple. I don't identify with the consumerism that brands bring to us in terms of price either, I think you can get the same product for less.”, which makes him consciously avoid this brand and consequently actively accept Samsung. Those feelings of brand hate, anger and rage make Pedro detach from the brand (Haase et al., 2022). On the other hand, when looking at the majority of consumers that don't feel this resentment towards the brand (Apple), we can see that there is an unconscious acceptance of Apple because unconsciously, the consumer associates it with power and status and creates an emotional connection with the brand which in consequence leads to a rejection of other technology brands without being aware of it. During the interviews, when participants were asked about brand rejection and the negative connotations associated with certain brands, a noticeable distinction emerged between responses that were consciously versus unconsciously derived. When rejection was rationalized, the responses tended to be more articulate and justified. Conversely, when individuals were unable to explain the reasons behind their aversion to a brand, it suggested a significant influence of subconscious factors, where sometimes the decisions were impulsive and consequence of habits (Woodside et al., 2012). Across the discussions, all eleven interviewees acknowledged that they actively rejected certain brands, providing specific examples. The easiest rejections to recall and discuss were those backed by logical and rational reasons. In contrast, unconscious rejections were often accompanied by statements such as, "I'm not quite sure how to explain it...". This pattern underscores the complex interplay between conscious awareness and subconscious influences in shaping consumer attitudes towards brands. Such insights highlight the deeper, often unarticulated psychological factors that can deter consumer affinity, beyond overtly negative experiences or logical evaluations.

With this being said we can acknowledge that consumers are aware of the difference between the two concepts of unconscious and conscious brands rejection. However, the conscious rejection is more present in the human mind, meaning that there are more examples of these situations, and the answer is easily said and explained. This makes total sense and can be justified since the system that is being used in these situations is System Sure, please provide the text selection for review.2 (Shleifer, 2012), which is slower, more deliberative, and conscious giving the possibility to the consumer enumerate the reasons why he avoids certain brand and to justify his behaviour.

When thinking of the unconscious rejection associated with System 1 (Shleifer, 2012) characterized for being fast, automatic, and subconscious there is an uncertainty in the participant and in most of the times there was not a concrete and logic answer, but a mixture of feelings and emotions. It was also possible to conclude that both systems and types or rejection might occur when making the final decision of acceptance or rejection towards a brand. During the interview with Afonso O. (#4) he said that a brand that he avoids consciously is Nestlé specifically in ice creams, “I had always loved and felt an empathy with Nestlé because I have always eaten a lot of chocolate. But when thinking of ice creams, I get an instantly ick just by thinking of it, it feels like a cheap imitation of Olá. The colours, the design, it’s all messy. In this example, it’s a combination of both systems because Afonso O. (#4) actively and rationally chooses to reject Nestlé’s ice creams due to his conscious preference for the taste of the competitor brand Olá’s ice creams. However, on an unconscious level, he also associates Nestlé’s ice creams with low quality because of their marketing, brand image, and design. Also, once again we can see that associated with a brand rejection there is a brand acceptance almost occurring at the same time.

With this first section of the interview, we have:

Triggers – something that happens or the consumer sees and evokes a memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logo</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Smell</li> <li>• Conversations with friends</li> <li>• Marketing</li> <li>• Brand’s values and politics</li> <li>• Pictures / Videos</li> </ul>
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Regarding the second pillar of the theoretical framework – **Memory** – related to the second objective that it was purposed to answer, which was evaluating the impact of the subconscious in the decision-making process it was clear that although some participants were not fully aware of this influence in their behaviour, it was present. This means that consumers aren’t always consciously aware of what shapes their opinions, actions, and choices about brands. Often, these influences operate below the surface, without them even realizing it. Factors like memories, conditioned responses, deeply rooted preferences or dislikes from past experiences, play a major role in these unconscious processes. (Gurgu et al., 2020). During some conversations it was mentioned “I can’t explain, I don’t know why I just don’t even think about this brand” – Miguel Q. (#7), “Is unconscious and I can’t explain why I avoid that brand, it just doesn’t catch my eye” – Marta M. (#2).

It was also noticed that, in general, individuals often make unconscious purchasing decisions based on brand visibility and a desire to belong or align with specific groups. An example of this is illustrated in Joana’s interview, where she shared, “I found myself leaning towards Garmin without really thinking about it, probably because I remembered that the biggest athletes at my gym and my friends who run don’t use Fitbit—they prefer brands like Garmin or Apple Watch. I didn’t choose Apple because it seems like most people with an Apple Watch don’t even run, but whenever I see someone with a Garmin, they’re almost always a serious runner.” Joana G. (#1) unconsciously rejected Apple and Fitbit, even though Fitbit is one of the top companies for fitness smartwatches. She unconsciously recalls memories from Garmin,

where the brand is linked to serious runners and great athletes. She wanted to be part of that community, so she went with Garmin instead of the other brands. This really shows how much social influence and the desire to fit in can shape our buying habits and decisions. When we see people, we admire or look up to using a particular brand, we're more likely to choose that brand to feel like we belong to the same group. For Joana, remembering athletes she respected using Garmin made her associate Garmin with being a serious runner. This association was strong enough to sway her decision, even if the other brands had similar or better features, the way people develop relationship with brands its similar to how they form relationships with persons, when there is a mismatch between how a consumer perceives their identity and how they perceive the brand's identity, it can lead to brand avoidance and the other way around (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

This example shows how consumers are influenced by what a product can do and the image and identity they want to project. Wanting to be part of a particular group or being seen in a certain way can significantly impact what brands we choose or reject. This also highlights how important marketing and brand positioning are. Brands that can successfully align themselves with a desirable or aspirational group and make their customers remember them can attract customers who want to be seen as part of that group. The way how emotional advertising influences the mood of the consumer and evokes emotions like excitement or joy can easily sway their decision of accepting or rejecting a brand (Otamendi & Sutil Martín, 2020). In the crowded market of fitness smartwatches, where many products have similar features, these social and psychological factors can be vital in making a brand stand out. It's not just about the product itself but also about the story it tells and the community it represents.

Also, there is still a major influence regarding status and the sense of belonging and being associated with a higher level of economic power. "That's why luxury brands, or any brand that opts for a more premium vibe and really pushes that through their marketing, do so well. People are just naturally showy. They love to flaunt what they've got. It feels good to own something you know is hot on the market, and that kind of pull can make you subconsciously chase after that brand and ditch others, even if they've got similar stuff. Marketing seriously holds a ton of sway in what consumers end up choosing." – Madalena M. (#12). On the other hand, the rejection of a brand is evident when it is associated with a specific group that individuals do not wish to be affiliated with (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). This leads to an unconscious rejection of the brand, even if the products offered are of high quality. Such decisions are driven by the subconscious associations formed with the group in question. When interviewees discussed their reasons for rejecting a brand tied to a particular group, they frequently exhibited physical discomfort and notable changes in facial expressions. This observation underscores the impact of social identity on consumer choices. The aversion to a brand based on its association with a certain group highlights the significant role that social perception and identity play in shaping purchasing decisions.

As an example of how deeply embedded social and psychological factors can influence consumer behaviour, often beyond the immediate appeal of the product itself, while interviewing Miguel Q. (#7) it was clear that he avoided Fila as a brand, he couldn't exactly explain why "...because I can't explain it. I look at it and it doesn't seem like a quality scene. And I even believe it could be, but I don't know why but I reject it and I've never tried it." –

Miguel Q. (#7), but he was able to remember that in the back of his mind it was an association between the brand and distinct socio-economic groups he didn't want to be affiliated with. In addition, during discussions about technology brands, approximately 70% of participants indicated that they would unconsciously avoid Xiaomi, citing that the name itself of the brand was trigger enough to make its status as a Chinese brand and associating it with the perceived lower quality of products from this market, since all their memories with Chinese products were not pleasant. Negative sentiments were also expressed toward Xiaomi due to political disagreements with China, it led to a non-identification with the brand (Haase et al., 2022). In contrast, although Samsung is also linked to the Asian market, its marketing and positioning strategies are crafted to project an American image. Conversely, Xiaomi is clearly recognized by consumers as a Chinese brand, with elements such as the logo and even the name acting as triggers for negative associations. These observations highlight the profound impact of a brand's marketing strategy on consumer perceptions and behaviours. The way a brand is marketed not only influences how it is perceived in terms of quality and value but also shapes its cultural and political categorization by consumers when they recall memories related to the brand.

When talking in specific about technological brands, Apple is observed as a centrifugal force in consumer decisions to either reject or accept brands. Those who accept Apple tend to categorize all other brands under the Android umbrella, leading to their automatic rejection. Conversely, those who reject Apple often possess greater knowledge about various brands and display more distinct preferences. For Apple enthusiasts, once they commit to the brand, they rarely switch, we can see a deep affection and a sense of connection with the brand, "Brand Love" (Alvarez et al., 2023). However, those who reject it often do so with considerable force, bordering on animosity towards the brand. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that among all participants who reject Android and are loyal to Apple, despite justifying their choice with design, ecosystem, and sometimes status, they could not rationally justify their active and loyal choice of Apple, even in light of negative experiences, past memories or policies that do not align with their values. This points to almost a blind loyalty towards the brand. Emotional connections with brands are formed when a brand resonates with a consumer on a deeper, emotional level beyond mere functionality or utility. These connections often develop through consistent positive interactions, meaningful experiences, and the personal significance a brand holds for an individual. When a brand evokes positive emotions such as happiness, nostalgia, trust, or a sense of belonging, and the customer can remember it consciously or unconsciously, it creates a bond that influences consumer behaviour in powerful ways. On the flip side, if there is no emotional connection with a brand, consumers tend to reject it unconsciously. Without an emotional anchor, or by remembering any positive experience, the brand fails to stand out or resonate on a personal level, making it easier for consumers to dismiss it in favour of brands that do evoke an emotional response. This unconscious rejection is not always based on rational analysis but rather on the lack of emotional significance the brand holds.

Therefore, consumers are more likely to accept and remain loyal to brands with which they have formed an emotional bond. This connection can lead to a preference for the brand that goes beyond logical reasoning about product quality or features. It becomes part of the consumer's identity and personal narrative, influencing their choices in subtle yet profound ways. The emotional attachment makes the brand more memorable and significant in the

consumer's mind, fostering a sense of loyalty and preference that is resistant to change. During Pedro's G. (#8) interview when talking about unconscious rejection stated that he unconsciously rejected every watch brand excluding TAG despite the expensive price of these watches. He said "When I was younger, I once saw a MUPI add with my idol using a beautiful TAG watch, I immediately fell in love. This add made me feel that having that watch made me feel more like him, so I travelled across all of Portugal in search of the watch, and when I saw it, I did not hesitate and bought it. It was a fortune at the time. And now, I just have an emotional connection with the brand. I wouldn't mind giving 5,000€ for a TAG watch, I wouldn't mind that. Now I find it hard to give 100€ for a pair of trainers. But what's the difference? It's the taste and the relationship I have with the brand and the way I constantly remember it."

The impact of an emotional connection with a brand on consumer behaviour is significant. According to Fitzsimons et al. (2002), unconscious processes affect various elements, including attention, perception, goal activation, learning, memory, attitudes, and preferences. Stimulus outside of conscious perception, impact of consciously perceived stimuli, and entirely unaware decision processes are crucial in shaping consumer choices. Even as competing brands evolve and incorporate technological advancements, consumers often remain loyal to brands with which they share positive memories and emotional. An example of this is, "Our televisions at home have always been LG, and this might sound ridiculous, but it's because my father's name is Luis Gonçalves. Initially, it started as a joke, but then it kind of became a tradition," explained Joana G. (#1), laughing. Her family unconsciously avoids other technology brands when buying televisions because they have developed an emotional connection and a sense of empathy with LG. Conversely, negative experiences can also deeply influence consumer choices. As observed in interviews, various triggers can evoke memories, traumas, and bad experiences that indelibly change consumer behaviour. Often, consumers may unconsciously avoid certain brands, driven by a deep-seated inclination to reject them, operating below the level of conscious awareness. Additionally, it was noticeable that negative experiences had a greater impact on consumers' minds and decisions than positive ones. This phenomenon, known as the negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), occurs because negative events are typically more emotionally intense and memorable than positive ones. As a result, negative experiences lead to a stronger and more decisive avoidance of certain brands, sometimes even resulting in brand hate. Therefore, negative experiences are more influential in making consumers reject some brands than positive experiences are in encouraging brand acceptance or developing brand love, which is well documented in the literature (Holloway et al., 2009).

This stood out during Francisco F. (#9) interview when he said "You know, I've never really clicked with Xbox, and I can't understand why. I've tried other consoles, but whenever Xbox comes up, it's like... meh, not for me. I think it goes back to my friends in high school. They were all PlayStation fanatics and used to clown on Xbox all the time. I guess that the message just went inside my head and just got stuck with me, even though I've never had a real problem with it." When talking about videogames or seeing an ad of a new game he immediately recalls the memory of high school and the negative feelings he felt with Xbox and unconsciously avoids those type of games.

With this we can categorize memories as:

<p>Memories – a past experience that the consumer remembers and influences his behaviour (accepting or rejecting a brand)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traumas</li> <li>• Bad past experiences</li> <li>• Traditions</li> <li>• Youth and Childhood</li> <li>• Daily life</li> <li>• Work life</li> </ul>
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Related to the third pillar – **Emotions** – specific objective defined, which was to identify key subconscious emotional triggers, after conducting the interviews it was noticeable that anything could act as a trigger, a slogan, a photo, an image, a smell, a video, a song or even the lights and ambient of the store. All these factors that can act as triggers are a bridge to the emotions that the consumer feels, which lead them to accept or reject a brand. It is important to mention that emotions in consumers are always provoked by a trigger. As João F. (#5) said during his interview “A trigger for me can be anything that you associate with a past experience and immediately evokes emotions and sensations in you.”. There is a major influence in all that you see, as Zaltman (2003) mentioned approximately two-thirds of all stimuli are reached by the brain visually “In fact, I feel that all rejection ends up being visual, it's the first impact it has, I'd say. Marketing makes you accept or reject brands, it's the first impact on the consumer and I truly believe it can act as trigger. Marketing has the power of allowing the consumer do dream and feel emotions.” – Miguel Q. (#7). Which is also associated with the power of emotional advertising and how it sways consumers decisions (Otamendi & Sutil Martín, 2020). When the consumer is faced with a trigger there are small and intuitive associations that the consumer does without being aware of it which consequently evokes memories and emotions, these associations happen unconsciously so in the majority of the times the consumer is not aware that is happening (Gurgu et al., 2020) “I think that any reaction you have is based on past experiences that bring always emotions with. And so, from the moment there's a trigger, there will be an association in your head with those past experiences. I'm going to compare these two situations and if I see that there's a similarity, I'm going to reject it because I'm assuming that if the first thing went wrong or I didn't like it and didn't feel good about it, I'm going to reject it.” - João F. (#5). These associations were also emphasized in the study “Are Unconscious Emotions Important in Product Assessment? How Can We Access Them?” by Thomson and Coates (2021). Additionally, consumers often seek brands that offer comfort and a sense of security, particularly gravitating towards those with which they are familiar or have had positive previous experiences. This unconscious loyalty is rooted in a desire for trust and confidence in their choices.

Two participants, Pedro G. (#8) and António R. (#11), shared insights into their decision-making processes when shopping for technology products in a mall. Despite the presence of multiple options, they consistently chose Fnac over Worten. Their preference was not based on explicit differences in product quality but seemed influenced by subtler aspects of brand presentation and perceived value. They explained that Fnac's use of paper bags, as opposed to Worten's plastic bags, and the overall aesthetic and ambiance of Fnac's stores conveyed a higher status and more appealing shopping environment. These elements contributed to their perception of Fnac as offering a more premium service, which significantly influenced their

choice, because when they think about Fnac they feel good about themselves, even though the actual products sold by Fnac and Worten were largely similar and Fnac was occasionally more expensive. This behaviour underscores the significant role of brand image and consumer perception in purchasing decisions. The interviews suggest that even minor details in a brand's presentation can have a profound impact on customer loyalty and preference, highlighting the importance of consistent, value-aligned branding in attracting and retaining customers. This is exemplified by the meticulous and strategic way in which Apple works on its brand, where every element, from product development to communication and marketing, is designed to reflect its core values of innovation and elegance. As a result, customers feel more connected and emotional towards the brand, seeing it as a reflection of their own identity and the way they want to be seen.

This pattern of consumer behaviour is particularly pronounced in the technology sector, where brand perception plays a critical role in influencing decisions. A striking example of this phenomenon emerged during the interviews, where every participant, when asked to name a top-of-mind technology brand, immediately mentioned Apple. Although the specific reasons for Apple's prominence varied among individuals, the brand consistently occupies a significant position in consumer consciousness, whether the association is positive or negative. Apple's image is intrinsically linked with status and a sense of belonging. Its ecosystem, encompassing a range of interconnected products, is highly valued by consumers, "Apple makes me feel good, it's a brand that evokes joy in me." – Catarina D. (#6). On a personal note, during the interviews, I recalled a common situation during music festival when my friends that don't have Apple ask for an iPhone to take the group picture since it looks better with an iPhone. Yet, many find it challenging to fully articulate why they prefer Apple over other brands. Some interviewees acknowledged that comparable products could be obtained from competitors at a lower price. However, they still gravitated towards Apple, drawn by an allure that they described as almost magical. The emblematic Apple symbol embodies more than just a brand, it represents a distinct choice in lifestyle and technology. For many consumers, the market appears dichotomized into two main options: Apple or Android. "When I think of Samsung, I mean... I say Samsung, but I'm really thinking about Android. And when I think of Android, I'm putting everything in the same bag. For me, it's everything..." – João F. (#5).

This binary perception underscores the powerful psychological imprint of Apple, which transcends rational analysis. The brand's ability to evoke such a strong and often inexplicable loyalty suggests a deep-seated emotional engagement that other brands aspire to achieve but rarely attain. This engagement is not merely about the physical products but the identity and status they confer on their users, illustrating the profound impact of branding in the technology sector. Moreover, Apple acts as a centrifugal force within the industry, consistently pushing the boundaries of innovation, design, and market expectations. Its introduction of groundbreaking technologies and its integrated ecosystem strategy compel competitors to innovate and adapt. Apple's influence extends to shaping consumer behaviour, setting industry trends, and even influencing regulatory standards, especially concerning user privacy and data security. As such, Apple not only leads in market share and consumer preference but also in setting the pace and direction of the entire tech industry. "I think that Apple works like a centrifugal force, which means that either you are an Apple customer and consciously reject everything, or you refuse to buy Apple because you associate it with toxins and consumerism and don't want to be part of that group." – Madalena M. (#12).

An interesting fact about technological brands that stood out during interviews was that individuals who already work with some technological brands tend to avoid these brands outside of work. This avoidance is primarily due to the stressful situations they encounter at work, often associated with their laptops. For instance, Antonio R. (#10) shared his experience: "In the consulting firm where I work, we are stuck with those things (DELL computers), and it is a headache. They are like magnets for problems. I remember one time, we had a big client presentation, and the laptop decided to throw a tantrum. It made us look bad, so since then, I've been all about running away from Dell." Similarly, Francisco F. (#9), a financial analyst, shared that he never recommends HP when asked about new laptops. He associates HP with emotions like anxiety, stress and late nights, finding their computers slow and prone to crashes. Francisco F. (#9) said, "I don't know if it is the worst one in terms of capabilities and technical characteristics, but for me, it's tied to work, pressure, and time I don't enjoy, so I can't recommend it.". Because the interviewee has used an HP laptop for work and it carries a significant negative emotional weight for him, he avoids the brand. He admits that he uses the equipment heavily and acknowledges that his views might be a generalization. Nonetheless, his negative experiences have strongly influenced his opinion.

These negative experiences often stem from high-pressure environments where any malfunction or delay can have significant consequences. The frustration and stress associated with these situations tend to overshadow the potential benefits or positive attributes of technology. Moreover, the emotional impact of these experiences can be profound. The anxiety of anticipating potential issues, the frustration of dealing with them in real-time, and the professional embarrassment of technical failures during critical moments can leave a lasting impression. This emotional baggage carries over into personal life, leading individuals to seek alternatives they perceive as more reliable or less stressful. Brands that can effectively address and mitigate these stress points may find greater success in retaining loyalty both within and outside the workplace.

Main emotions that came out of the interviews that influenced the brand perception:

<p>Emotions – how the consumer felt which consequently influenced his behaviour</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disgusted</li> <li>• Attracted</li> <li>• Emotional</li> <li>• Stressed</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Frustrated</li> </ul>
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Considering the fourth and final component – **Behaviour** – objective of the study, it was aimed to identify the factors that lead consumers to reject a brand. These factors primarily include the price of the products, their characteristics, and consumers' past experiences with the brand. When talking about price, the cost of a product is a critical factor in consumer decisions. If a product is perceived as too expensive relative to its perceived value, consumers may reject the brand. Conversely, prices that are suspiciously low can also lead to rejection, as they may raise concerns about product quality or ethical production practices. For example, when Afonso O. (#4) was asked if there were any technology brands he consciously rejected, he mentioned HiSense. He explained that their products were priced too low compared to other brands offering similar products, which made him suspicious. He stated, "It makes me

uncomfortable that the prices are so low. When something seems too good to be true, it probably is." This means that the unusually low price was a reason for him to reject the brand, as it raised doubts about the quality of the products. On the other hand, a higher price can often be perceived as an indicator of good quality. Consumers frequently associate cost with quality, operating under the assumption that if something is expensive, it must be due to superior craftsmanship, materials, or technological innovation, "If the brand is expensive it is because it has components that are good and the brand has invested in it, therefore, unconsciously I look at the price too, in a way it will help me a little to decide whether to buy a technological product or not." – Margarida L. (#3). This perception is rooted in the belief that high costs are justified by enhanced product features, durability, and overall performance. Brands that position their products at a higher price point may be leveraging this psychological connection to attract consumers who are willing to pay a premium for the assurance of quality. Furthermore, this strategy can also contribute to the brand's prestige, making their products not just purchases, but status symbols as well. Thus, a higher price not only reflects perceived quality but can also enhance the desirability of a product in the eyes of the consumer.

The second factor the interviewees mentioned the most was the characteristics of the product. Features and quality play a significant role in brand rejection. Products that fail to meet consumer expectations in terms of functionality, durability, or aesthetic appeal can lead to negative perceptions of the brand. For example, design holds considerable weight in consumer decision-making. As Marta M. (#2) pointed out, "You don't want to buy something that looks ugly or old. It can have the best features, but if it is not aesthetically pleasing, you won't buy it." This sentiment underscores the importance of visual appeal in product selection. No matter how advanced the features are, if a product doesn't look good, it is likely to be rejected. Joana G. (#1) shared the same perspective as Marta, emphasizing the role of design in consumer choices. She remarked, "I think it is deeply related to visibility and showing, but my two first considerations are price and design. I won't buy something that does not look good. I believe this is also connected to the brand image that the marketing of the brand wants to convey." Her comments highlight the interconnectedness of product design, pricing, and brand image. The aesthetic aspect is not just about personal preference but also relates to how the brand is perceived publicly.

Furthermore, functionality and durability are critical factors. A product that fails to perform reliably or does not last as long as expected can quickly tarnish a brand's reputation. Consumers expect their purchases to work efficiently and withstand regular use without frequent breakdowns. When these expectations are not met, it leads to dissatisfaction and a likelihood of rejecting the brand in the future. Additionally, the aesthetic appeal of a product is often linked to its perceived value. Products that look modern and stylish are more likely to be associated with higher quality and innovation. On the other hand, products with outdated or unattractive designs may be perceived as inferior, regardless of their actual performance capabilities. This perception can significantly impact consumer choices and brand loyalty. Another important aspect is the overall user experience, which includes how easy the product is to use, its ergonomic design, and how naturally it functions. A well-designed product that's user-friendly can really boost customer satisfaction and create positive feelings towards the brand. For instance, when talking about Apple, every interviewee who liked the brand

mentioned the ecosystem as a key reason for their choice. In contrast, products that are complicated or uncomfortable to use can lead to frustration and negative views of the brand. In summary, regarding the last specific objective which was identifying what makes a consumer consciously reject a brand we can see that the characteristics of the product, particularly its design, functionality, and durability, play a pivotal role in brand rejection. Consumers are not only looking for products that perform well but also those that meet their aesthetic preferences and offer a pleasant user experience. Brands that can balance these elements effectively are more likely to gain and retain consumer trust and loyalty.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The analysis of the 11 interviews reveals several key insights into how people decide which brands they like or reject. Firstly, subconscious influences play a big role in shaping our preferences, often without us even realizing it. These influences are immediate, automatic, and happen outside of our conscious awareness, affecting decisions in subtle yet profound ways. This kind of unconscious rejection cuts across various types of products, whether it's clothing, technology, or other items.

When looking at how people distinguish between conscious and unconscious brand rejection, a clear pattern emerged. Everyone interviewed mentioned feeling negative emotions like repulsion, avoidance, discomfort, and denial when shown certain brand images. These feelings are often linked to unpleasant past experiences. Conscious rejection usually comes from specific negative experiences, traumas, or clear reasons related to a product's features, price, or quality. Ethical considerations, including a company's values about sustainability and labour practices, are also major reasons for consciously rejecting a brand. Often, a strong feeling of brand hate comes before the decision to reject a brand. After conducting all the interviews, one of the major conclusions was that brand hate can be seen like an iceberg (Figure 6.1). On the surface, we have the logical reasons why a consumer might avoid a brand, such as misaligned moral values, political positioning, and product quality. These are factors that interviewees could easily list and use to justify their avoidance. But beneath the surface, there's a hidden layer of unconscious rejection influenced by deeper emotional and psychological factors, traumas and associations that the consumer does automatically without being aware of it. Also, social proof and the desire to fit in with admired communities or groups significantly influence our brand choices.

We tend to choose brands that are favoured by people we respect or groups we want to belong to. This unconscious rejection often goes hand-in-hand with the acceptance of other brands, as we subconsciously look for alternatives that better match our values and identities. By considering both the logical surface reasons and the deeper emotional factors, we can gain a better understanding of why consumers develop such strong negative feelings towards certain brands.

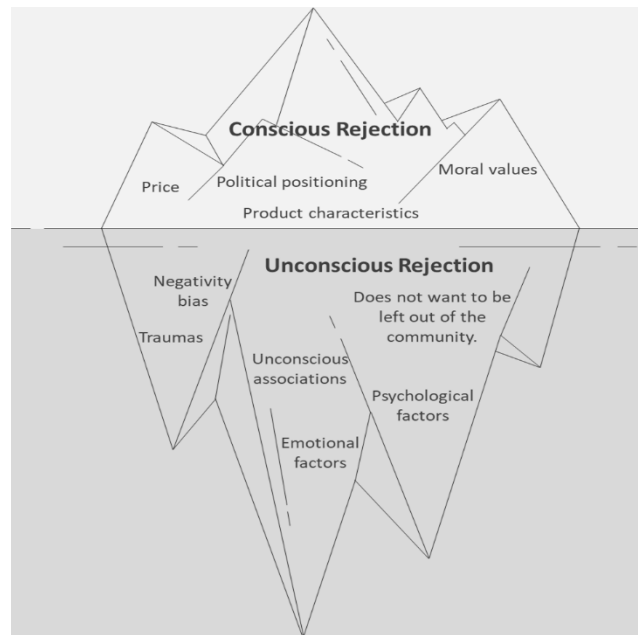


Figure 6.1 – The Iceberg Metaphor

Emotional and psychological factors add another layer of complexity to brand rejection. Triggers like logos, slogans, or store designs evoke memories and emotions, influencing our behaviour. These triggers can include anything from the visual appeal of a brand’s logo to the ambiance of a store, instantly bringing up past experiences, whether good or bad. For example, a particular colour scheme or a familiar jingle might remind us of a past negative experience, leading us to immediately and unconsciously reject the brand. On the flip side, positive triggers can reinforce our loyalty and acceptance. Effective communication plays a crucial role in creating these triggers, acting as a stimulus that can either attract or repel us based on the associations it creates. Effective marketing can align a brand with desirable attributes or social groups, making it more appealing to those who want to be associated with those qualities. Conversely, marketing that triggers negative associations can lead to brand rejection.

It was also possible to conclude that consumers often look for comfort and security, gravitating towards brands we’ve had positive experiences with before. Even small details in a brand’s presentation can significantly affect our preferences, highlighting the importance of perceived value and status. For example, things like the choice of packaging materials, the design of store interiors, and the type of customer service provided can all influence our perceptions and decisions. Price perception is critical; both high and low prices can lead to brand rejection depending on how they align with our expectations of quality and value. It was agreed among participants that larger purchases lead to more rationalized decisions, increasing the influence of conscious thought in either accepting or rejecting a brand. Negative experiences at work with certain technology brands can also carry over into personal choices, making us avoid those brands outside of work. Technology brands, in particular, evoke strong reactions. Apple acts as a polarizing force, either attracting or strongly repelling people. Those who like Apple often reject all other brands, even putting them under the umbrella of Android, while those who reject Apple do so with strong feelings, reflecting deep emotional engagement and loyalty. Visual and intuitive associations formed through past experiences

play a crucial role in unconscious brand rejection or acceptance. Marketing that aligns brands with desirable social groups can attract us, while negative associations with certain groups lead to brand rejection. The desire for status and belonging to a higher economic class also drives our preferences, particularly for luxury or premium brands.

Traumatic experiences and negative encounters can permanently shape our perceptions and lead to brand rejection. This is especially true for emotional connections with brands, which significantly influence whether we accept or reject them. Positive emotional bonds can lead to unwavering loyalty, while negative experiences can result in lasting aversion. Overall, our attitudes towards brands are shaped by a complex mix of conscious and subconscious factors, past experiences, social influences, emotional connections, and brand presentation. Brands that can effectively navigate these areas are more likely to gain and keep our loyalty. The key is understanding both the visible and hidden elements of our behaviour, using marketing to create positive triggers, and building strong, positive emotional connections with us as consumers.

Future research should explore several areas to build on these findings. First, conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in brand perception and rejection over time could provide insights into how long these subconscious influences last and how they evolve. It would also be valuable to investigate how cultural differences impact unconscious and conscious brand rejection, highlighting variations in consumer behaviour across different regions and societies. Another promising direction is to use neuroscientific methods to study the brain's response to brand-related stimuli. This could offer a more precise understanding of the subconscious processes involved in brand rejection and acceptance. Examining the specific role of digital marketing and social media in shaping brand associations and triggers is also important, especially given the growing influence of online platforms on consumer behaviour.

Additionally, researching effective strategies for brands to recover from negative associations and rebuild trust and loyalty could provide practical guidance for marketers. It would be helpful to explore in more detail how the level of investment in a purchase affects the balance between conscious and subconscious decision-making, aiding brands in tailoring their marketing strategies for different types of products. Further investigation into specific emotional triggers that strengthen brand loyalty and how brands can cultivate these connections would be beneficial. Given the strong emphasis on ethical considerations, future research could also investigate the impact of sustainability and corporate social responsibility initiatives on brand perception and consumer loyalty. By addressing these areas, future research can give us a better understanding of the complex factors driving brand rejection and acceptance, ultimately helping brands connect more effectively with their consumers.

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## APPENDIX A

Slide 1

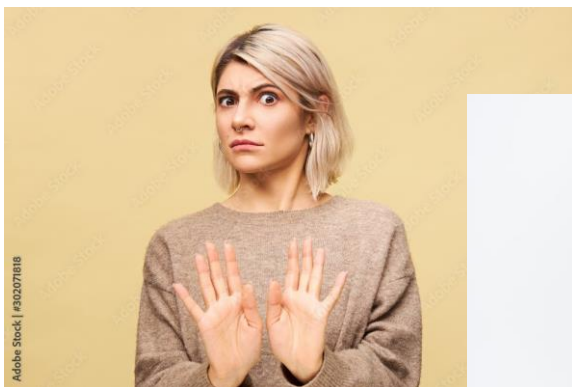


# Understanding Unconscious and Conscious Drivers in Consumer Rejection of Technology Brands

Carolina Souto Nandin da Silva Gonçalves

Slide 2

## Reações



Slide 3

## Tecnologia



Slide 4

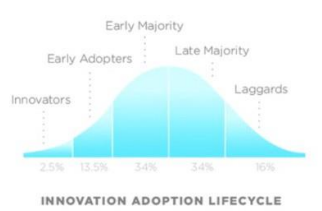
## Rejeição Inconsciente & Tecnologia



## Slide 5

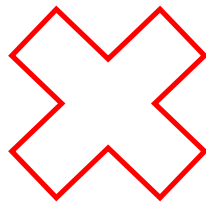
### Caracterização

- Como é que te classificas em relação ao consumo de tecnologia?
  - Early adopter
  - Early Majority
  - Later adopter
- Idade
- Sexo
- Cidade onde vive
- Nacionalidade
- Nome



## Slide 6

### Rejeição Consciente





**NOVA Information Management School**  
**Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação**

Universidade Nova de Lisboa