

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in  
Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

**Sustainability in the Portuguese Swimwear Market:  
Consumer Behaviour and Buying Motivations**

Unveiling Sustainability in the Portuguese Swimwear Market: Awareness, Consumer  
Behaviour, and Corporate Responsibility

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## **Abstract**

Sustainability has been a very active topic in the fashion industry over the past few years. This research analyses consumer behaviour, awareness, perceptions, and preferences regarding sustainability in the Portuguese swimwear market. The literature review dives into its evolution from an environmental paradigm to a tripartite model. It delves into rising consumer awareness, intensified by social media, and the impact of COVID-19. The urgency for a circular economy is underscored by the impact of fashion. Analysing sustainable consumption through the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the review explores drivers like environmental concern and willingness to pay. Contrasting the harmful effects of Greenwashing, it emphasizes the pivotal role of Corporate Social Responsibility in steering towards a sustainable future.

The methodology encompassed interviews, a perceptual map analysis, and a comprehensive conjoint analysis. Specifically, Cantê, Latitud, 38 Graus, and Conscious the Label were the Portuguese swimwear brands selected for perceptual analysis. Further inquiry was directed at 38 Graus and Conscious the Label for a comparative study of their sustainability approaches. The findings indicate that consumers are still unaware of the sustainability efforts made by swimwear brands; therefore, it might be advantageous for brands to reevaluate their current communication strategies.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Consumer Behaviour, Corporate Social Responsibility, Greenwashing, Sustainable Consumption.

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## **1. Introduction**

### 1.1. Context

The Portuguese swimwear market fits into the dynamic landscape of the country's fashion industry, a landscape that expertly blends local traditions with global influences. At its heart, this industry represents the marriage of time-honoured craftsmanship and modern design sensibilities (Moda Portugal, n.d.).

Sustainability has emerged as a pivotal theme in Portugal's fashion narrative, mirroring the global fashion discourse. The growing awareness of the environmental and ethical implications of fast fashion has resulted in a significant shift towards more responsible practices. Consumers wield significant power in this paradigm, demanding transparency, and environmentally conscious solutions (BCG, Global Fashion Agenda, and Sustainable Apparel Coalition 2019). Indeed, this trend toward sustainability is spreading its roots into the field of swimwear, which presents its own set of unique challenges. Portuguese swimwear companies are actively looking for ways to align themselves with the larger sustainability narrative. This entails investigating new materials and ethical manufacturing methods (Laster 2021).

While the fashion sustainability movement has global roots, certain countries have emerged as trailblazers, providing valuable insights into effective strategies and policies (BCG, Global Fashion Agenda, and Sustainable Apparel Coalition 2019). Portugal is also actively involved in this journey, with the government launching initiatives, encouraging industry collaboration, and raising consumer awareness.

Overall, the country's distinct cultural and environmental context has a significant impact on fashion trends, particularly in swimwear. In fact, the historical and cultural ties that unite Portugal and Brazil have a significant impact on fashion preferences in both countries. As Portugal navigates the intersection of fashion, sustainability, and cultural influences, it charts

its course toward a transformed fashion landscape, attempting to reconcile style, ethics, and environmental responsibility (BCG, Global Fashion Agenda, and Sustainable Apparel Coalition 2019).

On one hand, for example, the vibrant and dynamic designs of 38 Graus are well-known. Through its swimwear collections, the brand is known for capturing the essence of Portuguese beach culture. 38 Graus offers a variety of products that cater to a diverse clientele looking for both aesthetic appeal and functionality in their swimwear, with a focus on contemporary styles (38 Graus, n.d.).

In contrast, Conscious the Label prioritizes sustainability in its business model. The brand's environmental commitment is evident in its materials and manufacturing processes. The brand incorporates environmentally friendly practices into its operations, such as the use of sustainable fabrics and ethical manufacturing techniques. Their collections are not only fashionable but also environmentally conscious, appealing to consumers who are becoming increasingly conscious of the impact of their fashion choices (Conscious the Label, n.d.).

In conclusion, the Portuguese swimwear market reflects the country's broader transformational journey as it seeks to balance style, ethics, and environmental stewardship. This evolution represents a convergence of fashion, sustainability, and cultural influences, with Portugal at the forefront of change.

## 1.2. Problem Definition and Research Questions

This Work Project aims to assess the perceptions and preferences of Portuguese consumers towards sustainable swimwear and understand how these preferences align with their purchasing behaviours and environmental consciousness. Additionally, it aims to uncover potential barriers to adopting sustainable swimwear and explore strategies for effectively

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communicating the environmental benefits of sustainable swimwear to consumers. Therefore, four main research questions will be addressed, namely:

RQ1. Are consumers aware of sustainability practices in the Portuguese swimwear market?

RQ2. Is sustainability a relevant factor in the consumer purchase decision of a swimwear piece?

RQ3. Are consumers willing to spend more on sustainable swimwear?

RQ4. Specifically, by exploring the cases of 38 Graus and Conscious the Label, how aligned are the brand's positioning and communication strategies with consumer perceptions regarding sustainability?

### 1.3. Work Project Overview

The work project focuses on comprehensively understanding Portuguese consumers' preferences and perceptions of sustainable swimwear, and its chapters are strategically organized to provide a coherent examination of diverse aspects. After providing a brief introduction that sets objectives and research questions, this project will explore the conceptual background of the swimwear market in Portugal and understand the emerging eco-friendly trends. Subsequently, the literature review chapter synthesizes existing scholarly work and industry insights related to sustainable swimwear. These two chapters enable comparisons between earlier findings and the information gathered in the sections that follow. An explanation of the methodology used, including the specific research measures used to address the study topics, follows this section. The results are the focus of the following chapter, which begins with the findings from the expert and consumer interviews. The chapter also explains the use of conjoint analysis and perceptual mapping, as well as the results of these methods. The discussion chapter will then assist in addressing the research questions and comparing the results with the previous findings of the contextual background and the literature review. The

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following section dives into the phenomenon of greenwashing within the context of sustainable swimwear. Finally, in the last chapter, the limitations encountered during the research process are addressed, and recommendations for future studies are provided.

## **2. Background**

### 2.1. Swimwear Market in Portugal

The Portuguese swimwear market exemplifies the country's fashion industry's blend of local tradition and global influence, with a strong emphasis on the integration of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary design (BCG, Global Fashion Agenda, and Sustainable Apparel Coalition 2019; Moda Portugal, n.d.).

Consumer demands for environmentally responsible practices have pushed sustainability to the forefront. This trend extends to swimwear, where Portuguese brands are experimenting with sustainable materials and ethical manufacturing methods.

In essence, Portugal's swimwear market reflects the country's commitment to merging style, ethics, and ecological responsibility, putting it at the forefront of the global fashion sustainability movement (Girão, 2020).

#### 2.1.1. Market Size and Growth

The market for swimwear in Portugal can be considered large. According to 2023 statistics, the Sports and swimwear market, which includes bikinis, generated an impressive US\$292.10 million in revenue (Statista 2023). This figure emphasizes the market's importance within the larger fashion and apparel industry.

The consistent growth trajectory of the Portuguese swimwear market is one of the most promising aspects of the market. It is expected to grow at a 6.73% annual rate (CAGR 2023-

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2028) (Statista 2023) This consistent growth indicates that swimwear products, including bikinis, are in high demand in the Portuguese consumer landscape.

Aside from revenue growth, the sports and swimwear market is expected to reach approximately 9.5 million pieces by 2028 (Statista 2023) This increase in volume indicates that consumers in Portugal continue to seek swimwear items, creating numerous opportunities for brands to gain market share.

The digital realm is also important for the growth prospects of Portuguese bikini brands. The Portuguese e-commerce market for sports and swimwear is expected to reach \$31.5 million by 2023 (Statista 2023). Notably, this segment accounts for a sizable 28.7% of the Portuguese Sports and Outdoor e-commerce market (Statista 2023). This emphasizes the significance of developing a strong online presence and effective e-commerce strategies for bikini brands seeking to thrive in the market.

Understanding Portuguese consumers' changing preferences is critical for brand success. Brands that can adapt to the changing tastes and preferences of the Portuguese population will gain a competitive advantage. This could include keeping up with design trends, materials, and sustainability concerns, all of which are becoming increasingly important to modern consumers. While the domestic market is strong, expanding into international markets may provide some growth opportunities. Portuguese bikini brands could consider exporting their products to regions with similar climates and beach cultures, leveraging Portuguese design and craftsmanship's global appeal.

In this context, the Ansoff Matrix is a useful tool for analysing market growth strategies. It provides a structured approach for brands to consider market expansion and product development options, allowing them to tailor their strategies to their specific circumstances and risk tolerance. The matrix promotes market research, product innovation, and strategic planning,

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ultimately assisting brands in gaining a competitive advantage and planning for long-term viability in a dynamic and competitive industry (Peterdy, n.d.; Ansoff Matrix, n.d.)

Market penetration in the Portuguese bikini market entails expanding the brand's current market presence. While the market may be saturated with established competitors, there is still room for growth. This can be accomplished through the execution of targeted marketing campaigns, the enhancement of customer loyalty programs, and strategic collaboration with local retailers. The primary goal here is to keep and nurture existing customers while attracting a larger share of the market's current consumer base.

This strategy has the advantage of leveraging the brand's existing recognition and customer relationships. Nonetheless, it is critical to recognize the challenges posed by stiff competition and limited room for growth within the same market.

Entering new geographical markets is a strategic path for growth, especially since Portugal remains a strong market. International expansion exposes the brand to new customer segments while necessitating a thorough understanding of the preferences and cultural nuances of these new markets. Meanwhile, working with local distributors and retailers is critical for a smooth market entry.

This strategy diversifies revenue streams and reduces reliance on a single market by providing access to new customer segments with diverse preferences. It does, however, necessitate extensive market research and the ability to overcome potential logistical challenges when entering new international markets.

Furthermore, incorporating new swimwear products or variations tailored to changing customer needs in the Portuguese market is an innovative growth strategy. Extensive market research is essential for identifying emerging swimwear trends and changing consumer preferences, but collaborations with well-known designers or influential figures have the potential to produce exclusive collections that appeal to a specific audience.

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This approach is advantageous because it addresses changing customer preferences while keeping the brand relevant. Through innovative offerings, it increases brand appeal and differentiates the brand from competitors. On the other hand, it requires a significant investment in research and development and frequently involves product innovation competition.

Exploring completely new markets or complementary product lines is a risky strategic move. Diversification benefits from entering markets with distinct cultures and preferences, but it requires thorough research to identify appropriate markets and products. The gradual expansion into these new markets reduces the risks associated with diversification.

Diversification is an opportunity to reduce reliance on a single market or product while also opening new revenue streams and opportunities for growth. However, it carries a higher risk because new markets or products are unfamiliar.

In conclusion, the Portuguese swimwear market has significant growth potential because of consistent revenue growth, volume expansion, the influence of e-commerce, and changing consumer preferences. Strategic positioning, innovation, and a keen understanding of market dynamics will be critical for Portuguese brands in capitalizing on these growth prospects and solidifying their presence in the competitive swimwear landscape. In order to navigate this dynamic and competitive environment, the brand's future strategy should be aligned with its objectives, capabilities, and risk tolerance.

### 2.1.2. Competitive Landscape

Examining the competitive landscape of the Portuguese swimwear market reveals a diverse range of brands that cater to consumer preferences and demands. Domestic and international players alike contribute to the industry's dynamic nature.

Conscious the Label is a Portuguese eco-friendly swimwear brand that stands out for its ethical practices and dedication to sustainability. Their swimwear is carefully designed, ethically sewn in a Lisbon atelier, and made from recycled fabrics derived from ocean waste plastic. The brand

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exemplifies the trend toward environmental consciousness among Portuguese swimwear brands (Conscious the Label, n.d.).

Furthermore, with its environmentally friendly approach, the brand 38 Graus has made a significant impact. By using sustainable materials and ethical manufacturing practices, 38 Graus sets a standard for environmental responsibility in the fashion industry. Their commitment to sustainability extends beyond the products; they also participate in ocean conservation and carbon footprint reduction initiatives. This approach not only appeals to environmentally conscious consumers but also inspires other Portuguese brands to follow suit (38 Graus, n.d.).

Aside from these national brands, that present themselves as having a positive impact on the environment, others quickly come to mind as influential players. Firstly, Cantê's products are (Cantê, n.d.) known for their exclusive designs, exploring details, patterns, and colours uniquely. This creativity has helped the brand stand out in a competitive market, as it evolved from merely a swimwear brand into a lifestyle brand, offering a range of products that go beyond traditional swimwear. Additionally, Latitid's collections are inspired by different cosmopolitan cities, infusing global culture and fashion trends into swimwear. By emphasizing high-quality materials sourced from Italy and local production in Portugal, it ensures premium quality and durability in its products, appealing to consumers who value craftsmanship (Latitid, n.d.)

Both these brands' strong market presence in the Portuguese swimwear industry can be attributed to their diverse qualities. In fact, their distinct design approaches, high-quality production, diverse product lines, and environmentally friendly practices, as well as their ability to connect with their audience through innovative designs and lifestyle branding have cemented their positions as market leaders (Latitid, n.d.; Cantê, n.d.).

In summary, the Portuguese swimwear market is rich and diverse with brands with a growing emphasis on sustainability. While specific non-sustainable brands may not be named, the

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industry is shifting significantly towards eco-conscious practices in response to changing consumer preferences and growing awareness of environmental concerns. This diverse landscape emphasizes Portugal's pivotal role in the global swimwear market.

With sustainability as a critical factor in this analysis, it is clear that brands focusing on eco-friendly practices help to reduce the threat of substitute products and improve their bargaining power with environmentally conscious buyers. The competitive landscape, supplier dynamics, and buyer preferences all influence the level of competition in the Portuguese swimwear market.

Overall, the competitive landscape of the Portuguese swimwear market and the emphasis on sustainability influence the dynamics of Porter's Five Forces within the industry. Brands that effectively position themselves concerning these forces can navigate the competitive landscape more effectively and improve their market position (Porter 1979).

With the proliferation of online platforms, the swimwear market may present a relatively low barrier to entry for new players. This ease of access enables newcomers to enter the market with relative ease. Established brands, on the other hand, may benefit from consumer brand loyalty. This loyalty can make it difficult for new entrants to gain traction and market share. Furthermore, existing swimwear brands may have achieved economies of scale in their manufacturing processes. Because of their efficiency, they can produce at lower costs, potentially discouraging new entrants from competing on price.

Buyers in the swimwear market frequently have a wide range of options, which increases their bargaining power. The abundance of available options enables them to be astute consumers. Furthermore, the low switching costs make it critical for brands to meet buyer expectations consistently. The internet has ushered in an era of well-informed consumers with access to a wealth of information about products and brands. This educated consumer base can be more demanding and selective in purchasing decisions.

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Swimwear market suppliers may have varying degrees of bargaining power. If there are only a few suppliers of high-quality swimwear fabric, they may have more bargaining power than bikini manufacturers. Switching suppliers in the bikini industry may incur significant costs or pose quality variation risks, potentially giving suppliers more leverage. Furthermore, suppliers with exclusive agreements with influential swimwear brands can command higher bargaining power due to their strategic alliances.

Alternative swimwear styles, such as one-piece suits, board shorts, or resort wear, could be substitute products in the bikini market. These alternatives cater to customers looking for a variety of beachwear options. Furthermore, casual wear or beach cover-ups can replace traditional swimwear, providing versatility and comfort. The ever-changing fashion trends landscape can influence consumer preferences and lead to shifts away from traditional swimwear styles, potentially driving demand for substitute clothing items.

The bikini market is likely crowded, with both domestic and international brands competing. This plethora of players contributes to fierce competition. Fashion trends change constantly and quickly in the industry. This dynamism heightens competition as brands compete for consumer attention by anticipating or adapting to emerging trends. Furthermore, brands in the bikini market invest heavily in marketing and differentiation strategies to stand out in a crowded marketplace. It is critical to create a distinct brand identity and offer distinctive products.

Finally, the analysis conducted using Porter's Five Forces framework, and its respective strengths (Appendix 1), indicates that the bikini market has a medium to high level of competition. The industry dynamics are influenced by factors such as the constant evolution of fashion, the presence of numerous competitors, and the considerable bargaining power of buyers. To succeed in this competitive market, businesses must focus on differentiation, cultivate brand loyalty, and stay abreast of consumer preferences and industry trends (Harvard

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Business School, n.d.). Furthermore, developing strong supplier relationships and managing the threat of substitute products are critical aspects of bikini market strategic planning.

### 2.1.3. Marketing and Promotion

The bikini market is a dynamic and highly competitive segment within the more significant fashion industry. Bikini brands' success depends on effectively engaging consumers through strategic marketing and promotion efforts (Twin 2023).

At the heart of the bikini industry is the concept of product. This dimension includes the wide variety of bikini options available to consumers. Bikini brands compete in a highly competitive market where innovation and design are essential. They constantly strive to meet consumers' ever-changing preferences by creating products that vary in style, colour, materials, and functionality. The ability to cater to specific consumer needs and tastes is critical to success in this industry (Twin 2023).

Bikini product development is heavily reliant on a thorough understanding of consumer demographics. Age, gender, location, and lifestyle are all factors that brands use to segment their target audience. This segmentation informs product development and marketing strategies, resulting in the development of specific bikini lines tailored to various consumer groups. Brands, for example, create trendy and vibrant bikinis to appeal to teenagers while providing elegant and sophisticated options to more mature consumers.

Brands use a strategic mix of traditional and digital marketing channels to promote their bikini products effectively. While traditional methods such as print catalogues and in-store displays are still helpful, digital platforms have become the primary means of displaying the breadth and depth of product variety. Brands use websites, social media platforms, and e-commerce platforms to present their products visually compellingly, creating a seamless shopping experience for consumers.

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The price dimension is responsible for determining the best pricing strategy for bikini products. Brands consider various factors, such as consumer affordability, perceived value, and competitive positioning.

Pricing strategies are meticulously aligned with the target consumer base's disposable income. Luxury bikini brands strategically position themselves at higher price points, aiming to attract high-income individuals who value premium quality and exclusive designs. On the other hand, other brands cater to price-conscious customers by providing budget-friendly options that offer excellent value without sacrificing quality. These strategies are founded on a knowledge of consumer demographics and their willingness to pay for specific features and levels of quality. Indeed, pricing strategy communication requires a variety of tactics. Pricing tags, discounts, and promotional events are all important marketing tools. Pricing differentiation strategies may be used by brands to justify higher prices by emphasizing the quality and unique features of their bikinis. Alternatively, they may emphasize affordability by offering discounts and bundle deals, particularly during seasonal sales, to entice price-conscious customers.

The availability and distribution of bikini products to consumers is related to the place. Brands strategically position their products to align with their target consumers' lifestyles and preferences. Beachfront destinations and warmer climates are especially important when developing marketing strategies. Understanding their consumer base's geographic distribution enables brands to make informed decisions about store locations and distribution networks (Twin 2023).

Bikini products are sold through various channels, including physical stores, e-commerce websites, and pop-up shops at beach resorts. Brands use location-based marketing strategies to connect with consumers close to these distribution points. E-commerce platforms with user-friendly interfaces, virtual try-ons, and customer reviews improve the online shopping experience and are essential components of location strategies. Moreover, brands recognize that

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consumers seek convenience and accessibility and strategically position their products to meet these demands.

Consumer demographics are once again central to marketing strategies. It is critical to understand consumer online behaviour, preferences, and habits. With their digital marketing efforts, brands target specific demographic groups and online behaviours. These tailored strategies ensure that marketing initiatives reach and engage the intended audience.

The cornerstone of swimwear market promotion is digital marketing, mainly social media advertising. Brands showcase their products through visually appealing content on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest. High-quality imagery, videos, and user-generated content contribute to brand identity and consumer interest. Through video marketing, brands create promotional videos and tutorials to engage and inform consumers.

Influencer partnerships have emerged as a powerful force in swimwear product promotion. Influencers hold considerable power over their devoted followers, and brands recognize the value of aligning with influencers who speak to their target demographics. By sharing their personal experiences and endorsing brands through captivating content, influencers become powerful voices in promoting bikini products (Business Wire 2021).

Content marketing is another aspect of promotion. Brands create valuable content, such as blog posts on swimwear trends, care guides, and body positivity messages to engage and educate consumers. This content helps build brand authority and fosters a sense of community among customers, increasing brand loyalty.

To summarize, the marketing and promotion strategies of the bikini market are a dynamic interplay of product differentiation, consumer demographics, pricing strategies, distribution channels, and digital marketing expertise. The industry's commitment to engaging consumers and building brand loyalty is demonstrated by using influencer marketing, content marketing, and targeted promotional efforts. Bikini brands that effectively use the Marketing Mix (4Ps)

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and adjust to changing consumer trends can gain a competitive advantage and establish a meaningful presence.

#### 2.1.4. Global Influences

The Portuguese bikini market is influenced by an array of global factors, which collectively shape its dynamics and consumer preferences. These global factors play an essential role in determining market direction, influencing business strategies, and defining industry trends (McKinsey & Company 2023).

The ever-changing international fashion trends have a significant global influence on the Portuguese bikini market. Fashion capitals worldwide, such as Paris, Milan, and New York, set the tone for emerging styles and design aesthetics. To cater to fashion-conscious consumers, Portuguese bikini brands closely monitor global fashion trends and incorporate them into their collections. When retro-inspired swimwear becomes popular on international runways, Portuguese brands quickly adapt their offerings to meet these global fashion tastes (McKinsey & Company 2023).

The rise of social media and influencer culture has also had a lasting impact on the Portuguese bikini market. Instagram, in particular, has become the primary platform for brands to showcase their swimwear collections to a global audience. Local and international influencers are critical in introducing international fashion trends to Portuguese consumers. This fosters a sense of global connectivity as Portuguese consumers interact with global influencers and trends (Business Wire 2021).

Another global influence that significantly impacts the bikini market is Portugal's reputation as a popular tourist destination. The country's beautiful beaches and coastal regions attract international tourists, many looking for swimwear and beach attire. Portuguese bikini brands understand the impact of international tourism and tailor their marketing strategies to this diverse consumer base, creating products that appeal to locals and tourists (Pinto 2022).

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Global trade and interconnected supply chains are also important. Materials and components for Portuguese bikini brands are sourced from various countries, and global trade agreements and partnerships influence the availability and cost of these materials. Economic developments in key trading partners can directly impact the Portuguese bikini market's overall health (Dataintel 2022).

Cultural exchanges and fashion collaborations between Portugal and other countries bring new design elements and styles to the market. These collaborations can result in collections that combine cultural influences, reflecting Portugal's historical and cultural ties with other countries (Centre for the Promotion of Imports 2020; BCG, Global Fashion Agenda, and Sustainable Apparel Coalition 2019).

Finally, well-known international swimwear brands are a constant presence in the Portuguese market. These global competitors enter Portugal, providing consumers with a diverse range of options and setting industry standards. To compete in both the domestic and international markets, Portuguese brands must constantly innovate and adapt (Centre for the Promotion of Imports 2020).

Finally, the Portuguese bikini market is intricately linked to global influences ranging from fashion trends to sustainability movements, social media, tourism, trade, and cultural exchanges. These influences put Portuguese brands under pressure to stay agile, embrace sustainability, and keep up with international developments while retaining their distinct identity in the global swimwear landscape. The ability to strike a balance between local tradition and global trends is critical to the Portuguese bikini market's success.

#### 2.1.5. Challenges to Manufacture in Portugal

When analysing the challenges in the bikini market, a SWOT analysis provides valuable insights into the industry's dynamics and areas requiring strategic attention (White and Bottorff 2022).

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The swimwear market has several advantages that contribute to its overall popularity. Among these, design innovation stands out prominently. Bikini brands consistently demonstrate a talent for creating distinctive and visually appealing swimwear styles that appeal to customers. This natural ability to stay ahead of fashion trends and offer innovative designs adds to the industry's allure (McKinsey & Company 2023).

Moreover, the market has a high level of brand diversity. It includes a diverse range of brands, from high-end labels to low-cost options. This variety translates into a wide range of options for consumers, ensuring that there is a bikini brand to suit every taste and preference (Dataintelo 2022).

Another significant strength in the bikini market is digital marketing. Brands have successfully leveraged the power of online platforms, mainly social media, to broaden their reach and increase brand awareness. Bikini brands effectively connect with a large and diverse audience by leveraging visually compelling content and engaging influencers.

While the bikini market has many advantages, it also has some disadvantages. Material sourcing is one of the most difficult challenges. In recent years, there has been a surge in demand for sustainable and eco-friendly materials. However, these materials can be in short supply, making it difficult to find a consistent source. As a result, production bottlenecks can occur, preventing brands from fully embracing sustainability (Laster 2021).

Furthermore, minimum order quantities imposed by factories are another significant weakness, particularly for small businesses in the bikini market. The high minimum order requirements can be a significant barrier for smaller brands looking to diversify their product offering or quickly adapt to changing consumer preferences.

Additionally, the market is affected by seasonal demand patterns, with peak sales occurring during the summer season. Managing inventory and cash flow during off-peak periods is a significant challenge that brands must carefully plan to navigate (Dataintelo 2022).

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The bikini market offers promising opportunities for forward-thinking brands. Among these is the growing demand for environmentally friendly swimwear. Consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious, and there can be a preference for swimwear made from environmentally friendly materials. Brands that embrace sustainability and environmentally friendly practices can distinguish themselves and align with this growing consumer preference (Girão 2020).

Another avenue with enormous potential is customization. Allowing customers to customize their bikinis in terms of design, fit, or materials creates a distinct selling point. Brands can use technology to enable customization options, resulting in a stronger connection with their customer base (Girão 2020).

Increasing online sales channels is a strategic opportunity. E-commerce continues to grow rapidly, and bikini brands can capitalize on this trend to reach a global audience. Online sales not only provide greater market access but also reduce reliance on physical retail, which is especially important during difficult times (Business Wire 2021).

The bikini market is facing several threats that must be carefully considered. The fierce competition within the industry is the most serious of these threats. With so many brands competing for consumer attention, standing out in a crowded market can be a daunting task. To maintain a competitive advantage, brands must constantly innovate and differentiate themselves. The fast fashion industry is a significant threat. Fast fashion brands can flood the market with low-cost swimwear due to their rapid production and distribution capabilities. Price-conscious consumers may choose cheaper alternatives, undermining brands that prioritize quality, sustainability, and ethical practices.

Also, global events and supply chain disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, pose another significant threat. Such disruptions can have an impact on material sourcing, manufacturing, and distribution, resulting in delays and supply shortages.

Finally, the bikini market demonstrates notable strengths in design innovation, brand diversity, and digital marketing proficiency. However, material sourcing, minimum order quantities, and seasonality continue to be issues. Brands can capitalize on opportunities in sustainability, customization, and online sales while remaining vigilant in the face of threats such as competition, fast fashion, and supply chain disruptions. Effectively adapting and strategizing in response to these SWOT factors is critical for businesses to thrive in this dynamic and fashion-forward industry (Kenton 2023).

#### 2.1.6. Sustainable Market

With the increased awareness and commitment to sustainability, Portuguese swimwear brands have been progressively incorporating sustainable practices and materials into their production processes, in a way to differentiate and gain a competitive advantage against the established brands.

Portuguese sustainable swimwear brands typically highlight the use of eco-friendly materials such as recycled plastics like recycled polyester, organic cotton, upcycled materials, and more sustainable fabrics like Econyl, a form of recycled nylon. In addition to more sustainable materials, these brands also tend to use a more sustainable manufacturing process, and eco-friendly practices and initiatives.

This way Portuguese brands like Conscious the Label and 38 Graus emerged, with a focus on providing the customer with high-quality and environmentally friendly products. Despite both brands being committed to sustainability, this matter is approached differently by the brands. For Conscious the Label, sustainability is the reason to exist and the core focus of the brand, while for 38 Graus, sustainability is a core value that influences the decision-making process.

### 2.1.6.1. Conscious the Label

Founded in 2019, Conscious the Label has rapidly positioned itself as a sustainable brand, being very vocal about its commitment to sustainability. The brand has a precise positioning: “At Conscious, we design simple & timeless pieces using recycled fabrics mainly from ocean waste plastic”, which supports their commitment to eco-friendly fashion. Moreover, the brand promises consumers high durability of its products since these are made to last.

The commitment to sustainability is instantly recognizable as Conscious the Label endures several sustainable practices. One of the strongest examples is the brand fabric choice. Conscious uses Econyl, a fabric made from regenerated nylon. This nylon is created from discarded waste from oceans and landfills worldwide, such as fishing nets, fabric scraps, and industrial plastics. It is ultimately regenerated to its original purity and can be later used to produce new products.

Regarding the manufacturing process, the brand holds strong importance in producing locally, as their products are produced in the Lisbon Atelier with a local team of seamstresses. The proximity and close relation to the team allow the brand to analyse production closely to ensure it follows the mission efficiently. Conscious concern with work ethics is evident since the brand ensures that every teammate is ethically treated and paid above minimum wage.

The concern with ethical practices extends to packaging and shipping. All boxes are as small as possible, made from recycled materials, and able to be recycled again. Inside, recycled paper tape is used instead of regular plastic tape, and all the labels are recycled and recyclable, attached to a 100 per cent biodegradable cotton rope. When shipping its products, the brand uses home-compostable bags. This way, there is no plastic involved in the process.

Conscious price reflects its commitment to sustainability. For both a top and a bottom the price lies at approximately 120€. In addition to swimwear, the brand also offers clothing items that reflect the brand’s dedication to simplicity and sustainability.

### 2.1.6.2. 38 Graus

The Portuguese brand 38 Graus was founded in 2017 to bring more fashion, boldness, and colour to the swimwear industry. The brand's positioning relies on delivering stylish and unique pieces to serve all types of bodies. 38 Graus' approach to design differentiates the brand as they value the mix of colours, textures, and patterns. Every pattern is hand-designed to create the most unique pieces.

The brand is committed to having the minimum impact on the environment as possible, making sustainability, together with uniqueness and timelessness, one of its core values. 38 Graus tries to select eco-friendly fabrics, such as recycled lycra. When choosing fabrics, the brand engages with manufacturers to understand if their values are aligned. Furthermore, the brand tries to find innovative ways to produce accessories to give new lives to materials that would go to waste. In addition, 38 Graus proudly produces in Portugal, supporting the local economy.

Recognizing that fashion waste is a concern, 38 Graus introduced the "2nd Life Project" to promote a more circular economy. Under this project, anyone who has previously bought a 38 Graus piece can send it back to the brand, where it is assured of its quality and good condition. After, the piece is allocated to the "second hand" selection on their website, where it gets a second chance to be bought. Ultimately, the seller receives a 30€ coupon that can be used in their next 38 Graus purchase.

The brand's pricing, around 100€ per set, reflects 38 Graus' efforts to offer unique and sustainable pieces that vary in several categories, such as swimwear, clothing, and accessories.

## 2.2. Emerging Trends on Eco-Friendly Swimwear

To this day, most swimsuits are made from synthetic fibres due to their performance quality which gives swimsuits stretch, durability, and resistance. Nonetheless, these fabrics

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significantly impact the environment due to the number of resources necessary for their production.

Synthetic fibres were created to fulfil the desire for a more mass-producible and cost-effective alternative to natural fibres. The benefits of these types of materials are undisputable, as these provide excellent elasticity, increase durability, and are often a much less costly choice (Triplett 2021). Despite the benefits, these fabrics raise several environmental concerns. Fabrics such as polyester and nylon are mainly composed of plastic. Unfortunately for our planet, plastic is not biodegradable. This way, it never decomposes. Instead, it stands in landfills and oceans, contributing to the tons of plastic already burdening the earth (Segran 2019). Another primary concern related to synthetic fibres is the release of microfibrils into our oceans, which ultimately contributes to the global plastic pollution crises and harms sea life (Koraru 2022). Beyond the problem associated with the fabric itself, the dyeing process is another environmental concern. Since it can be challenging to colour synthetic fibres, manufacturers use synthetic dyes to penetrate them. These dyes are highly resistant to light and heat but, at the same time, are highly toxic to sea life and the environment (Shah 2023).

Nowadays, the swimwear industry features new trends that are not only fashionable but also environmentally friendly, going from sustainable fabrics to sustainable business concerns. These trends reflect the increasing awareness of the brands and consumers of the fashion industry's impact on the environment and mirror the commitment to make more responsible choices along the supply chain.

### 2.2.1. Sustainable Fabrics

Luckily, several eco-friendly fabric trends are emerging in the market. These can replace traditional synthetic fibres and provide swimsuits with the same performance quality while

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being much more sustainable. This way, the use of natural fibres and upcycled fibres is a leading trend in sustainable swimwear.

#### 2.2.1.1. Natural Fibres

Hemp and organic cotton are two examples of natural fibres that have been gaining strength in the swimwear market. Despite the undeniable benefits of these fibres, there are still challenges to the use of these fabrics.

Hemp is one of the most environmentally friendly fabrics available on the market since it takes only one-quarter of the water it takes to grow cotton and produces 250 per cent more fibre (Tatham 2020). This means that Hemp is a high-yield crop, so farmers get more fibre from the same area than other crops. Despite the advantages, Hemp faces regulatory challenges. Hemp fabric comes from the stems of the cannabis plant, and while it only contains a low concentration of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the cause of psychoactive effects, it remains illegal to grow in many places (Venkat 2022). In order to unlock the full potential of this fibre it is critical to overcome these regulatory challenges. In turn, because organic cotton is a natural fibre grown without harmful pesticides, fertilizers or insecticides, the products will not release any toxins into the water nor will any microplastics be shed into the ocean. In addition, growing organic cotton requires much less water than growing conventional cotton fields (BeFashionable 2023). This fibre is also hypoallergenic, ideally for sensitive skin, and the lack of chemicals prevents fibre from weakening making the products more durable. While fibre presents several advantages, there are still challenges to its production. Growing organic cotton produces a lower yield, so it requires more land to grow than conventional cotton. In addition, transitioning to organic farming and obtaining certifications is a long and costly process (Or & Zon 2023).

### 2.2.1.2. Upcycled Fibres

Regarding upcycled fabrics, several fibres are emerging to the market such as Econyl, recycled polyester, and Amni Soul Eco.

Econyl is a form of regenerated nylon sourced from the waste from landfills and oceans, that reduces the global warming impact of nylon as it avoids the emission of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This material is known for its strength and durability since it is resistant to exposure to chlorine, and UV radiation. Econyl guarantees consumers its safety and compliance with strict environmental standards according to its certification by the Oeko-Tex Standard 100. However, this material still presents challenges. Econyl is highly flammable, has poor thermal stability, and is not biodegradable. Furthermore, it is often more costly than other materials due to the expense of treating recycled resources (Dugarco 2023).

Recycled polyester, also known as rPET, is a fibre made from recycled plastic bottles that contain high-performance qualities such as thermal regulation, moisture-wicking, and resistance (Made Trade 2023). This is another form of upcycled fabric that creates less than 75 per cent of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than virgin polyester (Tatham 2020). In addition, producing recycled polyester requires less energy and water when compared to producing conventional polyester. Nevertheless, despite being produced in sophisticated manufacturing facilities which reduce the impact on the environment, the production of recycled polyester still requires chemical processes (Cariki 2023).

Lastly, Amni Soul Eco adds an extra layer of sustainability to upcycled fabrics as it is the first recyclable and biodegradable fabric in the world. After 5 years, this fabric will biodegrade into organic matter, 10 times faster than other synthetic materials (Made Trade 2023). Like, Econyl, this fabric is Oeko-Tex Standard 100 certified. However, since Amni Soul Eco is a polyamide made from crude oil, the problem of shedding microplastics into the oceans remains (Astoul

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2023). Each of these fabrics represents a step forward in sustainability matters but also shows that innovation is still needed.

### 2.2.2. Local Production

Alongside the new trends in eco-friendly fibres, there are also emerging trends in practices that aim to respect both the planet and people.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, global supply chains have suffered several disruptions that ultimately slowed the manufacturing process. The rising trend of producing locally emerged as a more sustainable way that undertake this problem.

Producing locally means shortening the supply chain and protecting businesses from international liabilities. Along with this, local production allows businesses to reduce lead times and make their operations more efficient. This trend largely contributes to the goal of sustainability, as local manufacturing reduces carbon emissions and transport costs associated with international logistics. Furthermore, proximity increases quality control and safeguards that products and suppliers meet sustainable standards.

Beyond benefits for the business, local manufacturing supports local economies through the creation of job positions that assure fair labour practices (Newton 2023).

### 2.2.3. Ethically Made

In a world progressively more aware of its impact, ethically made products have been increasing in importance. This trend goes beyond the choice of materials used to produce a specific product and dives into labour practices.

This way, as discussed before, sustainable swimwear starts with choosing more eco-friendly fabrics that assure minimal environmental impact. Along with this, at the centre of ethically made swimwear is the assurance of fair labour practices. More than ever, it is critical to

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prioritize the well-being of workers, provide them fair wages, and guarantee safe working conditions throughout the supply chain.

Brands embracing this trend are transparent and open about their supply chain, manufacturing processes, and labour conditions. This transparency allows consumers to make decisions aligned with their values and foster a positive brand image (Simpson and McDaniel 2023).

#### 2.2.4. Circular Economy: Second-Hand

The rise of upcycled fibres and the adoption of vintage or second-hand swimwear are indicators of the fashion industry's shift towards a circular economy. By repurposing existent materials and garments, designers are championing circularity. The move from synthetic fibres to upcycled fibres leads to the reduction of waste and the conservation of resources.

Vintage swimwear and second-hand pieces are gaining traction in the eco-friendly swimwear market, as consumers are more drawn to these options. The increasing awareness and concern about pollution, climate change, and unethical labour practices are the driving forces behind the desire to embrace second-hand fashion (Mckay 2023). By giving a second chance to these pieces, the ecological footprint associated with new product manufacturing is diminished, waste is reduced, and consumers contribute to a more circular economy (BeFashionable 2023). Along with the benefits to our planet, buying second-hand pieces cuts down spending for consumers. The appeal of vintage and second-hand swimwear goes beyond style, as it is a symbol of ethical, resourceful, and sustainable consumption.

#### 2.2.5. Certifications

With the increased concern about making sustainable choices, certifications on sustainability are vital for the consumer when making decisions. These certifications are a trust symbol, indicating a brand's commitment to eco-friendly choices and practices. This way, sustainability certifications boost consumer trust and allow them to make choices aligned with their values.

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In addition, with the increase in greenwashing practices, these certifications provide brands with an extra layer of credibility. Nowadays, there are several sustainable certification labels. Platforms like *Good on You* are essential to guide consumers' conscious choices. This platform provides trusted brand ratings that make it easy to understand the impact of a brand. The Portuguese brand Conscious the Label is rated as a 4 (good) by the *Good on You* platform on a scale from 1 (we avoid) to 5 (great) (Good on You 2023). The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) is a worldwide leading standard for organic fibres that provides credible assurance of responsible manufacturing with minimal chemical inputs. This platform ultimately ensures that the end consumer receives quality organic fabric (GOTS 2023).

One of the most recognizable labels for textiles tested for harmful substances is the OEKO-TEX® STANDARD 100. This label assures consumers that a product meets rigorous safety standards for human health and the environment (Oeko-Tex 2023).

In the textile business, the Bluesign® standard establishes the highest standards for environmental and safety requirements. Products with the Bluesign approved label follow the Bluesign criteria, reducing their production process's negative effects on the environment (Bluesign 2023).

Sustainability certifications are becoming more and more popular. They not only act as standards for ethical brands but also enable customers to make decisions that align with their values and principles.

### **3. Literature Review**

In this section, we will explore relevant literature within the context of this project. We will start with a comprehensive exploration of sustainability, deeply looking at its definition, consumer awareness, and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the shift towards sustainability. Subsequently, we will explore the impact of fashion on the environment, and dive into the key factors driving sustainable consumption, focusing on consumer behaviour. Furthermore, this chapter tackles Corporate Social Responsibility, including an assessment of greenwashing practices and the drivers behind these misleading practices.

#### 3.1. Sustainability

Exploring the definition of sustainability and assessing consumer awareness is of great importance in the ambit of this project. With growing environmental concerns and an increased focus on sustainable practices, it is important to understand these fundamental concepts.

##### 3.1.1. Definition

The concept of sustainability has evolved significantly over time, with key milestones shaping its definition. Previous sustainability efforts have focused primarily on environmental issues. However, the decisive moment in the development of this concept occurred in 1987 when the United Nations published the Brundtland Report. The report, entitled "Our Common Future", states that "Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future" (United Nations 1987).

Over the years this definition has undergone several changes, as a shift from environmental focus to a broader perspective occurred. The new perspective incorporated the economic and social dimensions into the definition, emphasizing the interconnectivity between the 3 factors: environmental, economic, and social. This way, the triple bottom line approach rises. In the scope of this approach, ecological sustainability emphasizes responsible natural resource use,

economic sustainability highlights long-term economic viability, and social sustainability prioritizes just societal outcomes. This new multi-layered comprehension of sustainability has become a fundamental framework for addressing global challenges and encouraging a more balanced relationship between the environment and society (Moore, et al. 2017).

### 3.1.2. Awareness

There is evidence to suggest that consumers are becoming more conscious of sustainability. There has been a discernible shift in consumer behaviour and attitudes toward more socially and environmentally conscious choices over the last few years.

In 2022, Deloitte conducted a survey on consumer attitudes and behaviours concerning sustainability highlighting the increasing concern of consumers towards living a more sustainable life. From 2021 to 2022, there has been a notable increase in the number of individuals adopting sustainable lifestyles as consumers are more aware of their choice's impact on the environment. More than ever, consumers are giving more importance to buying only what they need, shifting towards more mindful consumption. At the same time, consumers opt to choose brands with ethical and environmental concerns and practices, avoiding buying from brands that do not align with their sustainable values. Consumers are also reassessing their shopping habits by limiting single-use plastic consumption, reducing purchases of new products, and opting for seasonal items, indicating a growing consciousness regarding sustainable practices.

Regarding sustainable product attributes, consumers first associate sustainability with products that are biodegradable, or made from recycled materials. Consumers also prioritize responsibly sourced products, with minimal packaging. However, when considering a purchase, consumers still value durability over recyclability.

The study reveals an increase in consumer awareness and commitment to sustainability, influencing several aspects of the consumers' lives, including their choices in swimwear

products and brands. This increase is having a big impact on the growth of the number of sustainable swimwear brands as consumers request more ethical and sustainable options (Archer, Cromwell e Fenech 2022).

The growing consumer awareness regarding sustainability was largely impacted by the internet and social media. More than ever, people are concerned about making sustainable decisions because of growing awareness of environmental issues, such as pollution, and climate change. Social media dramatically impacted the way consumers and marketers interact, since it is a very effective tool for predicting consumer behaviour and is incorporated into consumer's daily lives. Several research has shown that there is a strong correlation between social media use and eco-friendly product purchases. In fact, social media is a very potent and successful tool for influencing consumer decisions and has largely contributed to pro-environmental attitudes and green purchase intentions (Xie e Madni 2023).

The answer to RQ1: "Are consumers aware of sustainability practices in the Portuguese swimwear market?" cannot be fully provided by this investigation, but the findings clearly show that generally, customer commitment to sustainability and awareness has increased, as customers are changing the way they make purchases. This involves choosing brands that align with their ideals and values and placing more focus on reflective consumption. It is also clear that social media and the internet have a significant influence on the increasing consciousness among consumers. They are crucial in influencing consumer attitudes and generating demand for more sustainable and ethical options, particularly in the swimwear industry. Further study is required to determine whether consumers are aware of sustainability methods in the swimwear industry particularly, and as a result, a perceptual map will be developed.

#### 3.1.2.1. Covid-19 Impact on the Shift Towards Sustainability

Sustainable consumption practices, social responsibility, and environmental awareness have all undergone significant changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to a period of

quarantine, social isolation, and health crisis. Research has shown that the pandemic, a major public health concern worldwide, has led to a positive impact on several sustainability factors, such as environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and ultimately on people's quality of life (Severo, De Guimarães e Dellarmelin 2021).

The pandemic led to an increase in environmental consciousness among people. This increased knowledge was crucial in changing perceptions, attitudes, and subjective norms related to sustainable practices. Studies showed that the pandemic positively impacted people's standards by highlighting the importance of acting in an ecologically responsible manner. Furthermore, perceived behavioural control was also affected by the pandemic. Individuals' perception of power over their actions and behaviours was affected by the pandemic, which made them more conscious of the need to match their actions with sustainable choices. This way, the relationship between intention and pro-environmental conduct is strengthened.

Moreover, research shows that this health crisis forced a collective understanding of our common future and the shared responsibility for environmental protection. Pro-environmental behaviours were stimulated and reinforced by this collective understanding, which was fuelled by information and knowledge acquired during this crisis. People were more likely to adopt ethical behaviours because they understood the impact of their actions on creating a sustainable future (Zebardast e Radaei 2022).

The pandemic's effects on social responsibility, sustainable consumption, and environmental awareness were crucial in creating a society that is more conscious and aware of its surroundings.

### 3.2. Impact of Fashion on the Environment

Fashion is a vigorous industry that represents high revenues and generates millions of work positions. However, from an early age, clothing items are seen as non-reusable. In fact, the fashion industry is a sector with a high environmental and social impact, since it involves an

extremely long and complicated supply chain and has become substantially globalized where products are designed in one country, manufactured in another, and sold at a fast pace (Jacometti 2019).

The effects of fashion on the environment are vast and have devastating consequences. This industry alone is responsible for 15.83 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions per year, contributing substantially to climate change. In addition, this industry has a significant impact on the world's water resources, utilizing 93 billion metric tons of clean water per year. Moreover, in order to feed the need for wood pulp necessary to create fabrics such as viscose, 70 million tons of trees are cut down each year driving deforestation, and 1.2 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> are produced annually. Fashion deeply contributes to the waste challenge since less than 1 per cent of clothing items are recycled to make a new product. In addition, fashion is a major contributor to the issue of plastic entering the ocean, since that is estimated that 35 per cent of the microplastics in the ocean come from the fashion industry (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017).

According to Nikolay Anguelov, the author of the book "The dirty side of the garment industry: Fast fashion and its negative impact on environment and society" the fast fashion model has several detrimental effects both on the environment and society. This book delves into the environmental consequences associated with fast fashion from resource depletion to pollution and waste generation. Fast fashion highly contributes to overconsumption and depletion of resources that impact ecosystems and the communities from where the resources are extracted. At the same time, the fashion industry processes involve several chemicals and dyes that contribute to water pollution and ultimately harm aquatic life. The fast fashion emphasis on rapid and high turnover rates leads to high volumes of textile waste, a large portion of which is disposed of in landfills aggravating environmental issues even more. Furthermore, the author of the book also discusses the complexities of the global supply chain of the fast fashion

industry. Transparency is frequently hampered by the fashion industry's global supply chain. It can be difficult for businesses to track the origins of their materials or keep an eye on the conditions in which clothing is made, which makes it difficult to guarantee moral and environmentally friendly practices. In addition, the production process involves a high number of intermediaries, making it challenging to hold particular parties accountable for unethical or unsustainable behaviour (Anguelov 2015).

With consumer awareness and commitment to sustainability increasing it is time for the fashion industry to change, and deliver better environmental, economic, and social effects. This way is important to meet circular economy principles where clothes are reintegrated into the economy after use and don't contribute to waste.

### 3.3. Sustainable Consumption

Nowadays, considering the environmental challenges faced, companies across several industries are prioritizing sustainable practices as we can see happening in the swimwear industry. Organizations are incorporating sustainable policies and practices along their supply chain, in order to offer more sustainable products and to reduce their impact on the environment. Most of the world's largest firms now issue a sustainability report and set sustainable goals (Winston 2021).

However, the conversation on sustainability should not be solely the responsibility of companies. In fact, consumers have a crucial role in encouraging sustainable results. With every purchase, consumers have the opportunity to make a positive environmental impact. Despite that, there are several factors influencing non-green purchasing decisions. From simplistic attitudes toward green products by consumers, to the perceived high prices of eco-friendly products. Additionally, uncertainties surrounding the quality of green products contribute significantly to consumer reluctance, with many unwilling to take the risk of purchasing items

whose quality remains uncertain. A lack of expertise and general ignorance about environmentally friendly alternatives further compounded these barriers (Gleim, et al. 2013).

This way understanding the motivations and constraints that drive a consumer to engage in a sustainable action is key to reaching a more sustainable future.

### 3.3.1. Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is defined as the conduct and actions that consumers exhibit in the search for purchasing, using, evaluating, and discarding a specific product or service that they believe will fulfil their needs and wants. This way, consumer behaviour focuses on understanding how consumers decide to spend their available resources on consumption goods, evaluating what, why, when, where, and how they buy (Schiffman, et al. 2013).

The traditional model of the consumer decision-making process consists of five different stages that consumers navigate when buying a product or service: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase behaviour (Stankevich 2017). Initially, the consumers recognize a need or problem that can be satisfied through a purchase, and after beginning to search for information to address it. Afterwards, the consumer considers and evaluates different options to fulfil their need or solve their problem and, ultimately, makes a decision and selects a product or service to purchase. After completing the purchase, the consumer evaluates their decision and the product's performance.

Sustainable consumer behaviour incorporates environmental and ethical concerns into the 5 stages of the consumer decision-making process. Eco-friendly consumers tend to make choices that reflect their commitment to reduce their consumption environmental impact. Despite that, several individual-related and situational factors influence sustainable behaviour. Environmental concern, knowledge about environmental problems, and perceived consumer effectiveness are individual-related factors that influence an individual's sustainable behaviour since they together shape the foundation of an individual's commitment to environmentally

responsible choices and actions. Situational factors, such as availability and access to sustainable resources, price considerations, and the perceived severity of environmental issues, play an important role in sustainable consumer behaviour, as they create conditions that can either facilitate or hold back an individual's capacity to make environmentally responsible choices. Studies have demonstrated that a higher price may overcome environmental and ethical considerations (Kostadinova 2016).

Considering the growing awareness of sustainable consumption, it is key to understand what factors influence and encourage sustainable consumer behaviour.

### 3.3.1.1. Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour developed by Icek Ajzen in 1985 is a psychological theory that seeks to understand how individuals make decisions. This framework is built on the premise that an individual's intention to participate in a specific behaviour is a predictor of whether they will engage in that behaviour – “the stronger the intention, the more likely it is that the behaviour will follow” (Ajzen e Schmidt 2020).

This theory is composed of three different stages. Firstly, human behaviour is influenced by three main factors: behaviour beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs. Behaviour beliefs refer to beliefs about the probable outcome of the behaviour producing an attitude (favourable or unfavourable) towards the behaviour; normative beliefs are concerned with the likelihood that important others would approve or disapprove of behaviour resulting in perceived social pressure; and control beliefs reflect the degree to which an individual believes that he has control over their intellectual competence necessary to bring about desired outcomes that lead to perceived behavioural control. Secondly, regarding intention, an individual's intention, and motivation to behave in a specific way are analysed. Thirdly, the last stage of this model relates to the behaviour alone, which is the response to a precise intention and motivation (Bosnjak, Ajzen e Schmidt 2020).

This way, the TPB is crucial to understanding and identifying the key factors that influence people to engage in sustainable behaviours since buying sustainably suggests a conscious action.

#### 3.3.1.2. Environmental Concern

Environmental concern is a fundamental factor that influences sustainable consumer behaviour. The degree of environmental concern an individual possesses comes from several sources their values, norms, and knowledge. Environmental concern is defined as an individual's evaluation or attitude toward facts, his or her actions, or the actions of other people that affect the environment, expressing the emotional and intellectual dimensions of an individual's connection with the environment.

Research has shown that an individual's level of concern can be a significant factor and predictor of environmental-conscious behaviours. In fact, environmentally involved individuals are more likely to engage in practices such as recycling or purchasing eco-friendly products. Moreover, these individuals are expected to purchase products or services that have a perceived positive impact on the environment, as they know environmental problems and possible solutions.

Nevertheless, while environmental concern plays an important part in leading sustainable behaviour, it is not always directly related to an individual's willingness to pay more for green products, as we will observe later on.

#### 3.3.1.3. Willingness to Pay

Consumer behaviour towards sustainable consumption does not depend only on an individual's values and motivations. Complex aspects such as price and product attributes can motivate or limit environmental behaviours (Kostadinova 2016).

Willingness to pay encompassed an individual's maximum willingness to pay for a particular service or product. This reflects the extra value that consumers are disposed to pay when investing in a product or service with environmental and ethical attributes (Biswas e Roy 2016). Several studies on willingness to pay for sustainable products have shown interesting insights. In fact, it is known that consumers are willing to pay an extra 5 per cent for eco-friendly products as they are committed to sustainability. Nonetheless, other studies have shown that a higher price may overcome ethical considerations, and consumers can choose a more affordable alternative overpaying extra for an eco-friendly product.

Research shows that consumers are less keen to buy green products if they are not familiar with the brand, highlighting the importance of brand recognition and trust in consumer choices. This trust can be built with eco-labelling that assures that a specific product was manufactured in a sustainable way (Kostadinova 2016).

This way, although consumers may express a strong will to make sustainable choices, the price of green products remains a key factor that can influence their final choices.

This analysis significantly contributes to addressing RQ2: "Is sustainability a relevant factor in the consumer purchase decision of a swimwear piece?" by demonstrating how multifaceted customer behaviour is. It underscores the significance of sustainability in shaping customer decisions while also highlighting the critical role played by elements like cost, trust, and brand awareness. Although there is a clear customer preference for environmentally friendly products and lifestyles, this analysis clarifies the many nuances of consumer behaviour. It illustrates how ethical considerations frequently take precedence over financial ones when making decisions about environmentally friendly items, clarifying the complex interactions between many decision-making factors.

In response to RQ3: "Are consumers willing to spend more on sustainable swimwear?", this analysis navigates the nuanced landscape of consumer sustainability preferences. It indicates

that people are notably willing to spend extra money on eco-friendly products and services. The research does, however, highlight the fact that this willingness may be constrained by several factors, most notably the need to find a balance between cost and ethical principles. It emphasizes how important brand familiarity and trust are to consumers' decisions, and it confirms that although sustainability is very important, price is still a key factor in final purchasing decisions.

### 3.4. Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a central concept that has gained projection in the business world as a means of reassuring ethical and responsible corporate behaviour. However, there is no clear and agreed definition of CSR. According to the EU Commission, CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and their interaction with their stakeholders voluntarily (European Union 2002).

Since it is difficult to define CSR, it is important to analyse the three basic principles that together embrace all CSR activity: accountability, transparency, and sustainability.

The first principle, accountability, revolves around an organization's recognition that its actions affect and have an impact on the external environment. CSR asks corporations to understand their role in shaping these external factors, and, therefore, assume responsibility for the effects of its actions. Transparency highlights that the external impact of the actions of the organization should be open, honest, and accessible to stakeholders and the public. This means that relevant information must not be hidden or disguised within an organization's reporting. Lastly, sustainability in CSR is concerned with the effect that actions taken in the present have consequences for the future. This principle suggests that society should use resources in a way that ensures they can be regenerated (Aras e Crowther 2008).

Summing up, CSR encourages businesses to operate in a way that goes beyond creating profit and shareholder value. This concept reflects a commitment to conduct business ethically and responsibly, recognizing the impact of a business on society and the environment.

Regarding RQ4: “Specifically, by exploring the cases of 38 Graus and Conscious, how aligned are the brand’s positioning and communication strategies with consumer perceptions regarding sustainability?”, from the findings in the sustainable market chapter of the background section and the analysis of literature on corporate social responsibility, we cannot give a complete answer without further evaluation but initial observations suggest strong alignments between the brand strategies of 38 Graus and Conscious and consumer perceptions of sustainability. Conscious the Label emphasizes sustainability as its core, transparently communicating its eco-friendly practices, ethical production, and commitment to durable, recycled materials. On the other hand, 38 Graus integrates sustainability as a fundamental value, showcasing efforts in material sourcing, local production, and an innovative “2nd Life Project” to promote circularity. However, to comprehensively assess the alignment between brand strategies and consumer perceptions of sustainability, a deeper evaluation is necessary, and a Perceptual Map will be developed.

#### 3.4.1. Corporate Social Irresponsibility: Greenwashing

The term greenwashing first emerged in 1986, by Jay Westerveld, an activist who observed misleading communication from organizations regarding its environmental efforts. Since then, the concept of greenwashing has evolved and been discussed by several researchers from different areas such as Business, Economy, Environmental Management, and Law. Because of this multidisciplinary nature, there is no universally accepted definition of the term greenwashing. This way, researchers have presented different perspectives on this topic, some exclusively consider environmental issues, and others view greenwashing as a social and environmental phenomenon (Netto, et al. 2020).

Delmas and Burbano define greenwashing as the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of an organization (firm-level) or the environmental benefits of a product or service (product/service-level) (Delmas e Burbano 2011). For Lyon and Maxwell, greenwashing is defined as the selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance without full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions, to create an overly positive corporate image (Lyon e Maxwell 2011). These definitions mirror the central concept of greenwashing, whereby organizations make misleading claims about their environmental or social responsibilities to seem more environmentally friendly and socially conscious than reality.

This way, greenwashing can be seen as the dark side of CSR as it dishonestly portrays companies as socially and environmentally responsible, often to the harm of genuine CSR practices. These misleading practices damage trust and can take away attention from actual sustainable and ethical actions.

#### 3.4.2. Drivers of Greenwashing

Greenwashing preys on perceptions of environmental responsibility and often misrepresents a company's steadfast commitment to sustainability. The drivers of greenwashing are diverse and driven by various factors in the corporate and regulatory environment.

For instance, governmental policies can influence and drive greenwashing practices. Weak or unclear environmental regulations can create opportunities for greenwashing and enable deceptive practices. In the case where clear regulations and strict rules are in place, inconsistent enforcement by regulators can create an environment in which companies take liberties with their sustainability claims. Additionally, often governments offer incentives for eco-friendly practices, leading companies to exaggerate their sustainable practices to maximize these benefits.

Competitive pressure is another factor that can lead to greenwashing practices since in competitive markets the race to appear more environmentally friendly can lead to companies engaging in dishonest practices. To keep up with competitors who market their products or services as eco-friendly, companies may inflate claims regarding their green efforts. Furthermore, several market opportunities can lead to misleading actions. With the increasing consumer awareness and demand for sustainable products and services, companies may leverage greenwashing to attract and retain consumers and increase their overall reputation (Yang, et al. 2020).

## **4. Conjoint Analysis**

To get consumers' insights through different product attributes and alternatives, we conducted a Conjoint Analysis via the Conjoint.ly platform by creating 7 different attributes within several levels. Below are the details of our survey and key findings:

### 4.1 Survey Construction

#### 4.1.1 Attributes Settings

According to the inspiration mentioned in the former methodology part, the chosen attributes and levels aim to gauge the significance of sustainability in people's purchasing decisions and whether they are willing to invest more in sustainable swimwear. Additionally, characteristics of the brands Conscious the Label and 38 Graus were incorporated to assess the effectiveness of their communication of sustainable practices/products.

The survey was initially designed with eight attributes, which were later streamlined to seven distinct and independent attributes. This reduction is aimed at enhancing respondent friendliness and eliminating any elements deemed irrelevant to the analysis and avoiding excessive subjectivity. Below, we present a comprehensive overview of the attributes and their corresponding levels, including those excluded and added during the survey development.

- *Price* is an imperative attribute to analyse. Indeed, during all the preliminary interviews, literature interviews, and expert interviews, we found that price is a great barrier for consumers in making purchase decisions. Six price levels were set based on the average prices of the two investigated brands, 38 Graus (65€ on average) and Conscious the Label (125€ on average). A compromise value of 95€ was established to address the broad price range. An additional 4€ was allocated to each price as the assumed cost of green packaging and delivery to gauge consumers' willingness to pay for sustainable services. To avoid complexity, we merged the prices of the two attributes into one.

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- *Style* is another attribute mentioned in our preliminary interview by our respondents. Most of them care about the style of the swimwear but there is a difference in the preference of the style, some of them prefer minimalism while others prefer unique style. The purpose of setting this attribute is first to test people's choice in general --- more minimalism or unique, to offer managerial advice for the two brands, since 38 Graus is specially focused on colourful and unique style and Conscious the Label is specialised in minimalism. We also attached two pictures from each brand to demonstrate the level of "solid colour and minimalism" and "colourful and unique". Secondly, according to the 38 Graus is targeting clients based on their personalities, we also set an additional question in the second, together with this attribute to test if it is the right choice to target that way.
- *Quality* is also inspired by the preliminary interview. Due to its subjective nature, to ensure objectivity, the concept of "lifespan" was introduced as a substitute for quality, with attribute levels set as "half a year," "one year," and "more than 2 years.", which is a relatively objective measure.
- The attribute *Packaging* is derived from the expert interview with 38 Graus. While Conscious the Label offers a fully sustainable experience, as a small business, 38 Graus is hesitating to execute this strategy because the concerns regarding the choice of materials and suppliers as well as the minimum quantities required by factories. To see if sustainable packaging is an important factor, we add this attribute with one sustainable level "tiny bag made from recycled material" and one unsustainable level "plastic bag" with pricing implications integrated into the "price" attribute to see people's preference and willingness to pay.
- The decision to include the "*Shipping*" attribute was influenced by insights from expert interviews, focusing on understanding consumers' willingness to pay and their

perceptions of sustainable versus standard delivery methods. According to experts from 38 Graus, some brands let consumers choose between a pricier, greener delivery option and a more affordable standard one, while others provide only one choice. The levels are two of the products of the famous delivery company DHL which are DHL Standard and DHL Go Green.

- *Fabric Origin* is another important attribute because it reveals our definition of sustainability – sustainable fabric. After researching various sustainable swimwear brands on Google and their websites, we identified three fabric origin levels. One is Econyl, a type of fabric made from recycled materials and used by Conscious the Label, we also added an explanation for someone who doesn't know this term. Followed by Organic hemp and cotton and normal nylon and polyester, we would like to see the consumer perception of sustainable materials and how they impact people's purchase behaviour if they would like to pay more.
- *Sustainable Label* was chosen because of the background and literature interview because there is an increase in greenwashing practices, therefore a sustainable may seem to be a symbol of trust. We set two levels, one is the label, and the other is not to check it is vital for the consumer at the time of making decisions.
- *Comfort* is another attribute highly mentioned in our preliminary interview and it should be included in the Perceptual Map, however, due to our research market being so niche that many respondents may have not even bought one piece, it would be hard for them to evaluate the comfort. Thus, we first integrated it into the attribute list, however, it is a subjective attribute no matter how we strived to polish and interpret our statement, so instead, we added one scale at the end of the survey separately for them to evaluate the importance of comfort by themselves from 1 to 5.

#### 4.1.2. Additional Questions

Besides completing the twelve choice screens, participants also need to answer a set of questions. To build a profile and better target based on the demographic information, we included the gender and age, as well as their salary to explore the relation between the willingness to pay. Additionally, we inquired about whether participants had purchased sustainable items to understand overall buying patterns for sustainable bikinis and the differences in behaviour between those who had already made such purchases and those who hadn't. To test if it is effective to target by personality, we added a question to let them evaluate their personality and find out the relation between the personality and the style they choose. In the end, to compensate for the excluded attributes, two scales were included for participants to evaluate the importance of sustainable attributes (which are also used to answer our second research question) and comfort.

#### 4.1.3. Exclusion Rules

As for the Price attribute level, as mentioned before, we added 4€ to each of the original prices as the packaging and shipping fee, therefore, those prices cannot appear with unsustainable packaging and shipping choices. Thanks to the "Prohibited pairs of levels" function, we could prevent these specific combinations of levels from showing on the same alternative. Meanwhile the Conjoint.ly platform automatically excludes those low-quality responses, which are those whose respondent did not look through all alternatives or moves little mouse as well as the duration on some conjoint sets were too short, ensuring the quality and accuracy of the survey.

## **5. Discussion**

We will use the data from each portion of this thesis, comparing the outcomes of the quantitative and qualitative analysis, to summarise and elaborate on other conclusions in this chapter, considering that every research topic was also addressed throughout the analysis of the results.

### Research question 1: Are consumers aware of sustainability practices in the swimwear market?

In the Literature review chapter, we covered the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which explains how behaviours start as attitudes, which develop into intentions that shape those actions. As attitudes and intentions form the basis of behaviour, before we address the reality of the behaviours and actions of Portuguese women in the context of the sustainable swimwear market, for us to later evaluate that behaviour and possible changes deemed necessary, we first must address how the consumers are positioned in terms of attitudes and intentions. Here enters the subject of how aware the consumers are of the sustainability practices in the Portuguese swimwear market.

The more sustainable mindset about shopping will always be a "buy less, wear more" attitude and limit consumption. On the results from the consumer interviews, we mentioned how some consumers did not have this mindset, and the problem started here. A portion of the sample expressed the desire to acquire new swimwear every year, not because they needed a new item, but to have something new and trendy. Furthermore, even when making apparel purchases from sustainable brands, the most sustainable option will be one that will have a long-lasting value and perhaps one that will be timeless and never be considered to go out of style (Tonti 2023).

Using our results from the preliminary interviews and the perceptual map survey, we can evaluate how aware the consumers were of the brands and practices of Portuguese swimwear. In the preliminary interviews, all respondents, except for one, could name at least one sustainable swimwear company. In terms of the mentioned brands, as previously mentioned, Conscious the Label and 38 Graus, the brands on which we focus in this dissertation, were both

cited by the participants as sustainable brands, the first more so than the latter. This result was to be expected since 38 Graus, despite its dedication to sustainability, did not enter the market to provide a sustainable product, and Conscious the Label is, from the beginning, fundamentally a sustainable brand. Moreover, when asked what the participants would add or change about the swimwear market in Portugal, one of the most common arguments was a desire for more sustainable brands and initiatives. The results of the Perceptual Map survey also showed that these brands are less present in consumers' minds than expected. When we asked participants on the Perceptual Map survey if they knew brands with sustainability practices, more than half could not name any brand (55%). Nonetheless, the most recalled brand by the Perceptual Map survey respondents was Conscious the Label, just as in the preliminary consumer interviews. Furthermore, in that same survey, when asked why the respondent considered a brand sustainable, fabric source was the most mentioned reason, when in fact, there are many more processes where sustainability could be impacted. These may be delivery options, production processes, community impact, circular economy, and so forth. Even if Portugal is not the most developed country in this matter, there are several sustainable offers in the market. So, from our sample of consumers, although there was a general awareness of one or another sustainable brand, consumers showed they were somewhat unaware of where the market stands. This result also aligns with the brands' viewpoint about consumer awareness of sustainable practices. Namely, during our interview, Inês, the expert at 38 Graus, acknowledged that although the feedback on their second-hand swimsuit initiative, the "2nd Life Project", has been very positive, many people are still unaware of this project. They have been trying to pass and communicate the message, but they feel they still need some patience and time to get where we want to be.

As Portuguese consumers might not be aware of sustainable practices and why they are so critical, the question of whether they need education on sustainability topics can then be raised.

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It has been established that there is an overall elevated demand for more sustainable products and services. However, in the specific case of the swimwear market in Portugal, that might be more complicated. In fact, there may also be a problem with those who claim to be knowledgeable about sustainability issues but are entirely uneducated. They may have only persuaded themselves that they should lead more sustainable lives because that is what society and people around them say they should be doing, but they may need to understand why. For that type of consumer, it will be unlikely for them to follow through with their goals and actions if the logic behind them, their knowledge of the subject and their attitudes are superficial or misguided. Long-term behavioural changes will not occur if people follow sustainability trends mindlessly without question or do not understand the motivation behind their actions. Should their actions lack a solid foundation, the outcomes they may be producing for the environment could be fleeting and transitory. In this sense, Portuguese consumers might need some education about the swimwear industry, which can be a self-motivated practice. However, it can also be a brand initiative. The consumer interviews also provided some insights in this regard. When asked what they would add or change about the sustainable swimwear market in Portugal, the most common arguments made were for brands to have a better and more active approach to marketing and publicity to bring more awareness to this issue, for more brands and initiatives to be offered and for brands to be more forthcoming and transparent about what sustainability means for them and their practices. As a degree of unawareness was revealed, brands were encouraged to approach the consumers differently in a way that could raise sustainability awareness.

When we talked with 38 Graus and addressed this subject, if brands have a role in educating the consumers and awakening consciousness, the expert put that responsibility on both parties. She said that as a brand, in today's world, they have a responsibility to face sustainability, consider it a value, and do everything to educate the consumer. However, she also added that

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simultaneously, she believes that as generations move forward, the care for sustainability and the demand is increasing and that if brands want to survive in the market, they will have to react and answer to their demand. Regarding the interview with Conscious the Label, the expert took this matter to her opinion that it transcends swimwear, that there is a deeper issue of hyper-consumerism, and that consumers need to be educated in a general way about sustainability in every aspect of their lives, and that cannot come only from swimwear brands.

Overall, we believe that the answer to this research question is no. More brands are moving towards opening sustainability chapters in their journeys, and the industry is showing signs of moving towards a more sustainable direction. However, consumers are still unaware of what is happening in the market and can discern which brands have sustainable practices.

Research question 2: Is sustainability a relevant factor in the consumer purchase decision of a swimwear piece?

We gathered valuable insights from the consumer interviews that help answer this research question. For the respondents, sustainability did not seem to be a factor they considered when buying swimwear: it was never mentioned in the question about the critical factors they consider when buying a swimwear piece nor in the questions about the attributes that made them purchase their most recent swimwear costume. Moreover, all participants, aside from one, had never purchased swimwear from a sustainable brand.

According to Joana Silva from Conscious the Label, sustainability is not a key factor for consumers in Portugal at the moment. In her interview, she explained how she believes it is a plus for many consumers but that most would buy their preferred pieces even if the brand were not sustainable. The northern European market was referred to as a market where the purchase decision is much more based on the sustainability factor, where the purchases are much more of a conscious choice. However, here in Portugal, she confirmed what the consumer interviews revealed, that people buy thinking first about other attributes, such as the design, and that

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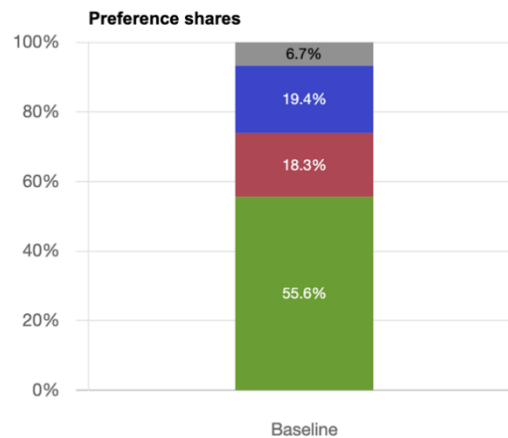
sustainability is just a bonus. Even our one participant who acknowledged having purchased a piece from a swimwear company, 38 Graus, even said that "sustainability was a plus. The choice came from the design itself."

In line with the first research question's discussion, there is concern that the process of purchasing swimwear should be based on adhering to a sustainability trend rather than making an urgent and necessary shift in consumption habits, even for those who may express some concern for sustainable purchases and consider that. Given that this industry is still lagging in sustainability, it would be encouraging to see more consumers making morally and environmentally conscious purchasing choices. However, for this industry to see long-term improvement, sustainability must be taken seriously and supported by the appropriate mindset while making swimsuit purchases.

The Conjoint Analysis also reveals a similar trend with the interviews. Among all the 88 respondents, 77.3% have never bought a sustainable piece. Meanwhile, we also conducted a simulation with 3 different concepts: we only included the three hypothesised fabrics indicating three different levels of sustainability, with the rise of the extent of sustainability, the price corresponds to 65€, 95€ and 125€ respectively, since, in the current swimwear market, the more sustainable the piece is, the more expensive it will be. The bar table below demonstrates the outcomes: more than half of the people would choose the least sustainable and cheapest one, from the least sustainable to the second sustainable one, people's preference dropped sharply, indicating that, if integrating the price with the level of sustainability, people tend to choose a cheaper and not sustainable piece, instead of pursuing a more sustainable one. Nevertheless, there is no significant distinction between the second sustainable option and the priciest, most sustainable alternative. The preference for the latter doesn't diminish even with the increase in price and sustainability level, albeit slightly higher. This observation suggests that while a small segment of consumers highly values sustainability and is willing to pay a premium, they remain

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a minority within the broader market. It implies that most consumers, while expressing a preference for sustainability, may not prioritise it to the extent of choosing the most sustainable option, irrespective of the price.



*Figure 1: Preference Shares of the Products with Different Sustainable Levels*

However, sustainable attributes can be the “cherry on the cake”. From our level preference study in the conjoint analysis part, when people face a sustainable and non-sustainable option, if they are at the same price or the price is within their acceptable range, they will prefer the eco-friendly one. In a nutshell, sustainability is not consumers’ main priority. However, if there is no barrier such as price, they will positively contribute to the purchase behaviour.

### Research question 3: Are consumers willing to spend more on sustainable swimwear?

The consumer interviews also proved helpful in gathering insights that contribute to answering this research question. First, price was revealed to be an influential concern for consumers during their purchasing decision process. Throughout the interviews, the participants seemed concerned with swimwear price points, which appeared to outweigh others, especially sustainability, and be an obstacle for certain purchases. Price was mentioned by almost half of the respondents as an important factor they consider when purchasing swimwear, and when they were asked about which attributes made them choose the last swimwear piece they had

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bought, 30,77% of the sample also mentioned the price point. From our sample of consumers, 23,08% also wanted to see more affordable options in the swimwear Market in Portugal. Furthermore, when asked specifically about Portuguese sustainable swimwear brands, 84,62% of the consumers mentioned price as an obstacle preventing them from buying more items from those brands, and 61,54% of the respondents also acknowledged that they would opt to buy more from sustainable brands if they offered more affordable prices.

Finding an affordable piece was a priority when we talked with the consumers, while sustainability was not. There was no indication from any consumers who participated in the preliminary interviews that they were willing to pay a premium price for a sustainable swimwear item.

From the result of the conjoint analysis in 5.3.5. Willingness to Pay and 5.3.7. People's Awareness of Sustainability and Its Influence, we can directly conclude that in ideal circumstances without any barriers, people are willing to pay more for a more sustainable option at all levels. Even though the Level Importance study suggests that people prefer a standard, which may result from high perceived value or lack of personal experience in the shipping process, they are still willing to pay more for a more sustainable shipping method.

According to Figure 8 in the Level Importance, for the packaging and shipping, at the price range of 60€+ and 90€+, people prefer to spend 69€ and 99€ (which are set to be with a more sustainable packaging and shipping costing 4€) rather than 65€ and 95€ (Standard and non-eco-friendly service). However, in the level of 120€+, the preference through the 129€ option is lower than the 125€ option, which means that for packaging and shipping, with a specific acceptable range, people are willing to pay more for a more sustainable service. Still, if the total price surpasses a benchmark, a more sustainable and expensive service will create a consumer burden, resulting in less purchase willingness.

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As for fabric origin, as discussed in “5.3.7.3. The Influence of Sustainable Elements on Purchase Decision”, with the rise of the price, people tend to favour less of the given two options (one with sustainable packaging and shipping while the other not) in each price range. The more sustainable the fabric origin is, the more expensive it will become, and the lower the percentage of people who will choose the pre-set options.

In summary, people are willing to pay more for sustainable attributes within the same or close price range. Nevertheless, with the total price increasing, more people switch to other options, which proves the total price is a barrier and corresponds to the initial findings in the literature review: "Several other studies have demonstrated that a higher price may prevail over ethical considerations and purchase probability for green products decreases as the price premium increases" (Kostadinova 2016). People are willing to pay more if the total price doesn't increase substantially regarding sustainable packaging and shipping service options. In contrast, the willingness for more sustainable fabrics decreases with the increase in the total price.

Research question 4: Specifically exploring the cases of 38 Graus and Conscious, how aligned are the brand's positioning and communication strategies with consumer perceptions regarding sustainability?

In the context of this research question, it is essential to understand that these two brands have different market positionings, targets and approaches to sustainability and that all these factors influence consumer perception.

As the expert, Inês, from 38 Graus, pointed out during our interview, when a brand defines what it is, it puts a label on it. Moreover, they attract and talk to a specific market section when they have a particular label. Within that target, the consumer pool will be very defined. She mentioned that a business must think of what they are and with what consumers they are trying to talk to. Some brands may decide to pursue a strategy where, knowing precisely what their

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purpose is and where they stand in the market, they have a very assertive message for a particular consumer concerned with sustainability. As a result, they may reach fewer consumers, targeting specific sustainable-oriented consumer types (resulting in higher conversion rates). During our conversation, the expert mentioned that perhaps with the message Conscious communicates, they might end up excluding some consumers that, even though they do not practice sustainability in every choice and purchase they make, might still be open to being more responsible and open to a greener industry with better practices and initiatives. Furthermore, in the end, it is a choice a brand makes when they launch their business. In the case of 38 Graus, they see sustainability as a value influencing their decision-making process, a brand responsibility in this industry. In this sense, they pursue a broader audience, which may include people who do not usually make conscious purchase decisions in their everyday lives. Inês noted that they are not a "sustainable swimwear company through and through" and that it is not their reason to exist. Their consumer is not entirely focused on making a sustainable purchase before coming to them. As pointed out during our interview, 38 Graus' market positioning is centred around solving a woman's problem: to feel confident and beautiful so they can enjoy their summer and beach days the way they are supposed to. And while they try to solve that problem, they try to have sustainable operations and initiatives. We can then make a case that whereas Conscious the Label targets a specific consumer type that already makes more sustainable choices, brands that appeal to other consumers, like 38 Graus, have opportunities to influence consumers to make more conscious decisions alongside the brands they like.

With a better understanding of the brand's perspective, we can then compare it with the consumer perceptions and insights we were able to collect during our consumer interviews, as well as with the perceptual map and conjoint analysis. Before addressing that, it should be noted that both brands were recognised as sustainable in the preliminary interviews. However, as

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almost every participant mentioned Conscious the Label, 38 Graus was not cited as much. Even when some talked about the brand, they admitted to not being entirely sure to what extent it was sustainable. This also ties back to our first research question.

Regarding the communication strategy of 38 Graus, as previously discussed in the expert interview, they are positioning themselves as a brand for extroverted, bold girls, offering more colourful and unique designs (and even when their products have a single colour, they will always have a unique touch). Therefore, in our conjoint analysis, we ran a correlation between personality and style to see if more outgoing people tend to choose a more colourful option. The result demonstrated that there is a slightly positive correlation between them; the more extroverted they are, the more they tend to choose a more colourful piece. People generally prefer colourful and unique designs rather than single-colour and minimalist styles. Regarding their reselling project of pre-owned 38 Graus bikinis, the "2nd Life Project", which is their main impact in terms of sustainability, as previously discussed, the results from the expert interviews confirmed what the preliminary interviews revealed that consumers are still not recognising the project as the brand would like. Although this initiative has received positive feedback, consumers are still not very aware of it and, therefore, aware of how 38 Graus is working on its sustainability chapter. The project's communication is to be worked on and improved for the consumer's perception of how the brand is an active player in the sustainable sector of this market. In the end, although 38 Graus' consumers' perception of the brand as a brand with trendy designs meets the brand's positioning, there is still a significant level of unawareness about the values and active sustainability practices of the brand. During the preliminary consumer interviews, as previously mentioned, Conscious was well-acknowledged by its sustainability efforts. This small group of consumers claimed that just by the name of the brand they could tell that sustainability was its focus. But on a larger group, as seen in the survey, the brand is not as recognizable since it's also the most recent brand among all four (launched in 2019). As

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Conscious targets consumers that already have positive daily attitudes related to sustainability, people that are already very lean to sustainable practices, these results confirm the argument previously made about them having a narrower target and about them not being as present in the minds of a larger customer base. Different reasonings can explain why Conscious was not the most associated brand to sustainability among all others, looking back to the perception map. Since the majority of respondents are unaware of sustainable practices in the market and don't even consider sustainability to be an important attribute to their swimwear purchasing choices, Conscious ends up being less present in their searching process. When a brand fully targets sustainably responsible consumers and communicates its impact and sustainability practices, it automatically pushes the brand away from the mass consumers who don't value sustainability as much. And, of course, the fact that consumers are unaware of the type of sustainable practices and their impact on the planet doesn't help the brands because the work they are putting into practice is not being validated or appreciated accordingly. This work of educating consumers regarding sustainability needs to be considered by the brands, because the word itself is just the tip of the iceberg and not self-explanatory.

In addressing this last research question, we can examine the brand's stance about consumer perception both inside the target market and across the entire Portuguese swimwear consumer base. Looking at 38 Graus, there are more discrepancies. Although they are one of the Portuguese brands in this industry that take sustainability seriously and that act on such values, their intentions and efforts are not being recognized either by their customer base, the people who buy from them, or by the general public of swimwear buyers. Talking about Conscious may not be as straightforward as initially expected. Even if Conscious the Label is actively communicating and being vocal about their actions, it still doesn't get as much attention and doesn't reflect what we have seen on the perceptual map. The first reason why this happens is because consumers are not aware of the existence of the brand, and the ones that know and buy

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products from the brand belong to that focused target that Conscious has already mentioned above. This conclusion is consistent with the observation made in the literature study that consumers are less inclined to buy "green products" if they are not familiar with the brand, underscoring the significance of brand awareness and consumer confidence in purchasing decisions (Kostadinova 2016).

In summary, while the audience's perception within their target market is very much in line with the brand's message and intended market presence, when we extend the interpretation to a larger group of swimwear consumers who place a lower value on sustainability and are less knowledgeable about the industry's operations, the perception outside the brand is as aligned, and in this case, discrepancies were not.

## **6. Recommendations**

As the fashion industry transitions to more sustainable practices and processes, businesses must stay current, considering market trends and tailoring their approach to their target audience, core values, and long-term goals. Companies must prioritise sustainable practices in their communication strategies to thrive in today's conscientious market. Emphasizing the advantages of comfort, lifespan, and fabric quality in their communication plan is crucial, as empirical evidence underscores the pivotal role of comfort in consumer decision-making. Moreover, lifespan and fabric quality consistently emerge as top attributes preferred by respondents.

Generally speaking, for brands, incorporating sustainable icons and certifications onto products is highly recommended, given their low cost. However, contributes to the purchase behaviour, as seen from the corroborating evidence from Conjoint Analysis. Lowering prime costs becomes paramount, as it has been identified as a major barrier. This can be achieved through effective negotiation. As Joana from 38 Graus has said, this is difficult to achieve. Therefore, companies could re-evaluate the necessity of specific sustainable measures. For instance, sustainable delivery may be excluded, as conjoint analysis indicates that consumers are prone to overlook the sustainability of delivery methods, and excessive charges may deter them, inadvertently hindering the desired impact. If necessary, the companies can only target a certain group of people comfortable with a higher price, such as the high-income group. To attract more people who are in favour of sustainable attributes, the overall style is supposed to be simple and timeless. Even though Conjoint Analysis does not prove the former two measures, it possibly results from the narrow sample size. Companies can try to re-do an additional study with optimisation and a larger sample, which are predicted to turn those results valid.

Meanwhile, as addressed in the discussion chapter, consumer must get educated on the sustainability practices available and their impact on the environment, society, and the economy.

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Consumer awareness of the benefits associated with sustainable products has grown significantly, and the results from Conjoint Analysis further validate the positive influence of sustainable attributes on consumer purchasing behaviour, leaving room for us to be optimistic about improvement in this industry. Nevertheless, across all methods and surveys used in this research to get consumer insights, most consumers demonstrated not to be aware of swimwear brands committed to sustainability and their practices. So, although they should make a self-motivated effort to stay informed, they also require some support and assistance in that process. Based on this, and after the analysis conducted on this project, we will now give some recommendations directed to the four brands.

### Conscious the Label

To reach other audiences, Conscious should focus on other attributes beyond what the brand is already doing in terms of sustainability, which impact the purchasing decision. While Conscious focuses on a niche target market that is highly appreciative and committed to sustainable practices, the brand is not associated with the most considered attribute in this market, design, narrowing its market share. Conscious would likely win the consumers, by targeting an adaptation in design first. While remaining "on brand" and staying within their essence of a more simple and minimalistic style, they could diversify their models to attract another set of consumers. This could mean collaborations and partnerships with young designers who are in touch with market trends and can capture a more youthful spirit that could bring a refreshing and unique take to the simpler models. In our opinion, it is crucial that they continue to communicate their sustainability practices and their impact. However, at the same time, they could extend their consumer base if they tried to attract young women more engagingly. When considering especially the comments made in the preliminary consumer interviews, it would be interesting to see them venturing more into body representation, a fiercer

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marketing approach, and an influencer marketing strategy endeavour, which we saw to have a powerful effect on brand recall. In relation to the topic of body representation, it might be interesting for the brand to incorporate more diverse body types in their campaigns to support inclusivity and body positivity. Based on our consumer interviews and the interview with 38 Graus, we believe this is a great communication strategy that will resonate with consumers. We discovered during the conversation with Conscious that the founder's passion for sustainability was reflected in the choice of the company name, in a "full-circle moment". Maybe they might take a different approach to the name and start a campaign emphasizing how they are "Conscious" of other issues, including body representation. By doing this, they might draw in female customers who are mindful of this problem and want to see representation for it in a swimsuit advertisement. They might use that chance to introduce the brand's other ideals and sustainable products to those curious and prospective customers. Given that the typical Conscious the Label customer is active on social media, another recommendation would be for the brand to collaborate with online influencers who are well-known to their target market, as they did with influencer Alice Trewinnard in the past, to promote the need for both consumers and brands to pay attention to their environmental footprint, particularly in the fashion industry. In addition to engaging and educating customers on sustainability topics, a series of podcast-style interviews with guests — who might be other industry influencers and experts — could be posted on the company's website and social media accounts. This would also create some "buzz" about the brand and increase awareness.

As we have seen in this study, consumers value sustainability as a plus and not an attraction feature to the brand, meaning that even though they might be interested in making a more ecologically conscious purchase, if they do not like the design of the swimwear product, they won't purchase it. This means that Conscious the Label has significant growth changes if it

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communicates differently to consumers or uses more than one claim so that it can engage with other consumers.

### 38 Graus

From all the brands studied, we believe that 38 Graus has the most significant margin to grow regarding sustainability perceptions. Since the brand has the highest score in terms of design perception, one of the essential attributes of the purchasing decision process and considering that sustainability is a plus and not a must for consumers, as mentioned in the preliminary interviews, it is a perfect scenario for 38 Graus in terms of market share expansion. They can take advantage of the fact that they already have a broader set of consumers and a wider receptive audience to their brand image, and by enhancing their approach to sustainability, they can influence more consumers to make more sustainable purchases and contribute to a greener industry. The brand's second-hand project is one of the most impactful practices in its sustainability journey. As mentioned in the expert interview, they are still in the process of spreading awareness about this initiative, and they are hoping to scale it up. Before this upcoming summer season, we recommend they explore the initiative more, use their social media platforms to advertise it, and use their relationships with influencers and digital media personalities to promote it. Along with the idea of creating a sense of community around the brand, and for the sort of consumer that, like the ones in the expert interviews, showed to appreciate trying the products in the store and seeing the fabrics in person, an event at the 38 Graus store, where a sort of market could be held dedicated to the "2nd Life Project" could prove to be very successful. By inviting both consumers and local and uprising influencers, the brand could have this moment where people could get to know the program better, testify to the quality of the pieces and have a fun day overall, aligned with the brand's style. Content made during the event, such as photographs, Instagram reels, and TikTok, could be used to boost their

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social media pages and expand 38 Graus's eco-friendly initiatives' reach. This type of communication strategy gives a more significant margin for the brand to grow and improve its consumer perception regarding sustainability. The consumers we interviewed showed they would be open to more sustainable and conscious purchases if the marketing, publicity, and communication were more engaging than what they are currently seeing. However, they could have shown more initiative in getting informed on the subject; they want brands to do a better job informing and educating them and being transparent and clear about how they contribute to a more sustainable industry.

### Cantê and Latitid

As validated by the experts from 38 Graus and Conscious the Label, Cantê (2011) and Latitid (2012) are the most prominent players in the Portuguese swimwear market, as they are also the longest-running ones of their category.

Cantê surprised us the most regarding sustainability perceptions and associations. It made us consider that people may relate all made-in-Portugal brands as sustainable, just considering that they are not fast fashion. Cantê is attentive to the environmental impact that their processes have on the environment, but it does not seem to be at the brand's core. Out of the four brands we discuss in this research, it is the most well-known and pioneered this line of Portuguese swimwear. Given that consumers currently view Cantê as having a powerful sustainability image, the company needs to seize this opportunity and go above and beyond. As a result, they should investigate further industry-available sustainable practices or perhaps align themselves more with what Conscious the Label and 38 Graus can achieve.

Considering the perceptual map results, Latitid should spend more time benchmarking since it is very far apart from all perception points. The brand was launched in 2012, after Cantê, which was essential to establish, but the study reveals that it is not as updated with market trends and not associated as much with the consumers.

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When we spoke with Inês from 38 Graus, the industry expert was quite puzzled about why other brands — especially these two with more prominent names in the business — do not have more circular economy initiatives or second-hand programs, and we wonder the same. Inês acknowledged that for the reward their "2nd Life Project" brings them, it is "actually no work at all", suggesting that other brands could implement initiatives like this one quite easily if they wanted to. These two brands could take advantage of the fact that consumers view them as already more sustainable than others, such as H&M, Zara or WomenSecret, and work towards having a more active voice and role regarding sustainability in the industry by easily implementing second-hand initiatives. It could be very advantageous for brands like Cantê and Latitid, as they would also contribute to creating a sense of community around them to support the storytelling they are trying to achieve (which, in the expert interviews, was also pointed out as a great way brands can differentiate themselves).

As previously mentioned, the fashion industry's environmental effect is positively impacted when a more circular economy is adopted - there is less waste, materials that could be utilized to create new products are preserved, and production-related pollution is reduced. However, in the case of swimwear, it can be more challenging for the consumers as it is a very intimate product. Our research led us to the conclusion that Portuguese consumers buy swimwear quite often. They tend to buy and own multiple pieces, sometimes more than they need, so buying pre-owned swimsuits (rather than new ones) may be a more thoughtful decision. We think, and the 38 Graus expert agreed, that companies may reassure customers and motivate them to embrace these purchases if they assume quality control and ensure the pieces are ideal enough to be resold. Additionally, second-hand purchases can resolve consumer issues, such as price. According to consumer feedback from our interviews, one of the reasons people do not purchase sustainable products is the cost. Therefore, if these brands use the argument that it will cost them less to buy, for example, a pre-owned bikini than a new one to promote the purchase,

they can engage and win over consumers. The brands could develop a section of their website dedicated to the reselling of previously owned swimwear from their respective brands, as 38 Graus did, or even if the investment could be secured, an app that could make the whole process easier and more social-media-oriented for the consumer. In conclusion, venturing into the second-hand and embracing a more circular economy more straightforwardly and actively way can be a strategic move, as it would not only broaden Cantê and Latitid's sustainable portfolio but also address a significant hurdle – price, making sustainable options more accessible to a broader audience.

### 6.1. Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent limits and shortcomings that may affect how the results should be interpreted. Our research endeavour was shaped by some constraints that encompass factors from the nature of the topic to materials and the methodology and approach followed. This section will highlight these limitations, which include the nature and size of the market that was studied, the lack of some financial data, the small sample size of our data collection, some challenges in selecting the attributes for our research tools, and the lab environment, along with recommendations for further research.

*Niche market:* Despite having several participants and experiencing significant growth over the last ten years, the Portuguese swimsuit sector is still regarded as a small sector, mostly because of the set prices. Local production expenses have a significant influence on product prices, while fast fashion brands continue to benefit from this. Our research was limited by selecting this market because it was difficult to obtain respondents who were familiar with the brands and had purchased from them. Although most respondents were familiar with all four of the brands that served as the dissertation's emphasis, we believe that their experience with one or

more of the brands was more common than their previous exposure to all four. Thus, the results might not be as useful as we anticipated.

*Financial Data Absence:* One of the most significant obstacles our project has encountered is the inability to obtain crucial financial data, particularly market share information for the companies under analysis — 38 Graus, Conscious the Label, and Cantê and Latitid as well. One of the most important metrics for assessing how well a business is performing in its sector is the market share indicator. The lack of this indicator makes it more difficult for us to assess their competitive position in the market. Our assessment of these brands' position in the market was primarily based on the preliminary interviews, and industry experts corroborated it. It becomes challenging to evaluate these companies' respective advantages, disadvantages, and industry rankings without a good grasp of their market shares. Moreover, the inability to conduct a thorough comparative examination of the firms is further complicated by the lack of financial data, as market share numbers provide valuable insights that are crucial for strategic decision-making. In this sense, it is challenging to form accurate assessments regarding the companies' market strategies due to the absence of financial measures. This constraint must be acknowledged to fully comprehend the limitations to which the results may be applied, emphasizing the need for caution when offering definitive assessments of the companies' competitive situation.

*Sample Size:* While the findings of the perceptual map and the conjoint analysis offer valuable insights into this work project, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations related to the sample used, especially in the case of conjoint analysis. Since we were looking for the typical consumer of female swimwear companies in Portugal, the scope of the people that we could reach out to complete our surveys was quite restricted. The sample size for the conjoint analysis survey is rather small, smaller than what was initially set out as desirable, consisting of just 88

individuals, which limits the study's robustness and results. It might be more challenging to capture the entire range of population variability with a small sample size like the one utilized in this project. This could result in statistical limitations that affect the reliability and validity of the findings. Moreover, while the information obtained from this sample is valuable, it is not generalizable to a wider range of groups. Moreover, within this already small sample, we noted that some respondents of the conjoint analysis survey could perhaps not have properly completed the questionnaire. Due to the nature of the survey from the Conjointly.com platform, some participants found it to be quite confusing and lengthy, which led to a few excluded low-quality responses (for example, those who didn't look through all the options or exit halfway). If we had more total responses, it could have outweighed and diminished the importance of these. Moreover, the lack of sample size also resulted in a higher P-value during the regression study. Additional study with a wider range of representative samples is then necessary to overcome these limitations. Greater validity, reliability, and generalizability of the study's conclusions might be achieved with a larger sample size.

*Choice of Attributes:* Another limitation of our thesis is that it cannot fully avoid the subjectivity in Conjoint Analysis. When we were drafting the Conjoint Analysis, during to the purpose was to get objective insights from the hypothesized products, however, despite our repeated attempts, we cannot avoid the subjectivity of some issues. For example, *Style* is often a highly intuitive and subjective concept with diverse personal preferences. However, due to constraints, we were limited to selecting only two pictures for the accompanying visuals. This restriction may not align with everyone's aesthetic preferences, potentially impacting the experimental results. As a result, despite being a commonly discussed point in preliminary interviews, style does not emerge as one of the top three preferred attributes, introducing a seeming contradiction. Meanwhile, *comfort* is another attribute regarding subjective feelings that is highly mentioned in our preliminary interview, and it should ideally be included in the perceptual map. However,

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our research market is so niche that many respondents have not even bought one piece, so it would be hard for them to evaluate the extent of comfort. Thus, we first integrated it into the conjoint attribute list. As it is a subjective attribute, no matter how we strived to polish and interpret it, instead of including it, we added one scale at the end of the survey for them to evaluate the importance of comfort by themselves, even though we of obtained an overcome regarding the importance of comfort, it is not through an objective way which is ideal.

*Lab Environment:* During the conduction of the perceptual map and conjoint analysis, some respondents may have chosen the more sustainable alternative because they were aware that our experiment was related to sustainability, which influences the hypothetical sustainable experimental setting. They might have, unconsciously or not, leaned towards options they perceived as more sustainable, even though their real intentions and behaviour may differ from the results obtained. Therefore, answers are influenced by this, choosing the more sustainable option. But in real life, their real behaviour may differ from this. So, although the conjoint analysis shows that they preferred the more sustainable option within the same price range, this may be unreliable due to the influence of the biased experimental environment.

## **7. Conclusion**

This thesis dives into the complex realm of the Portuguese sustainable bikini market, revealing the multifaceted relationship between consumers and brands in their shared pursuit of sustainability. At its core, this investigation reveals a dichotomy that calls into question the foundation of sustainable consumerism.

On the one hand, there is an urgent need in Portugal for improved consumer education. Attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable purchasing decisions are lagging, particularly in the swimwear industry. This disparity emphasises the importance of consumers adopting more sustainable mindsets in purchasing decisions and their overall lifestyle practices. It is not, however, solely the responsibility of consumers. Brands must also step up to the plate, pushing the boundaries of innovation to provide more sustainable and ethically produced options. This dual effort is crucial for fostering a market where sustainability is not just a label but a lived reality.

On the other hand, this thesis identifies a paradox in the market for sustainable swimwear. Even as consumers shift towards more sustainable brands, a culture of excessive consumerism persists. When brands encourage frequent purchases of new models and designs, despite their sustainable ethos, they inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of excessive consumption. This phenomenon highlights a significant challenge: ensuring that sustainability efforts do not simply serve as a cover for consumerism. Sustainable brands must advocate for mindful purchasing to walk this tightrope — buying less, choosing well, and making the most of each swimwear piece.

Consumer education, which goes beyond simple purchasing decisions, is critical to resolving these issues. It entails developing an understanding of the product lifecycle, including care, maintenance, and disposal practices. Quality and durability should be prioritised over sheer quantity in this education. Brand transparency is also critical. Consumers must be informed

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about the complexities of sourcing, production methods, and supply chain. Transparency fosters trust while also empowering consumers to make informed decisions.

Finally, the Portuguese sustainable bikini market is at a crossroads. True sustainability is a difficult path requiring a collaborative effort from consumers and brands. By fostering a culture of complexity of sourcing, production methods, and supply chain of education, transparency, and mindful consumption, this industry has the potential to become a model of sustainability, setting a standard not only for Portugal but for the global market as a whole. As a result, this thesis serves as a call to action — a lighthouse pointing the way to a more sustainable future in the swimwear industry.

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**Appendix**

**Background**

**Appendix 1 – Porter’s Five Forces Analysis Diagram**

