

SCOPES

SUSTAINABILITY

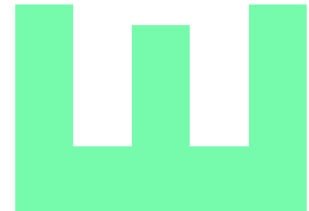
REPORT

2023



Introduction

- 3 Foreword
- 8 The Report: The Background

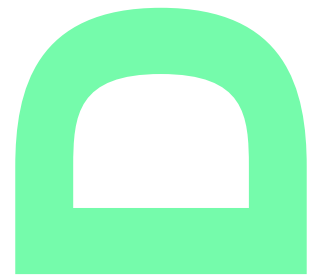


Sustainability communication between “Greenwashing” and “Silent Greening”

- 9 “Greenwashing”
“Silent Greening” (respectively “Silent Browning”)
Why is sustainability communication so important?

Perspective of the consumers

- 10 Perspective of the consumers
- 11 Take (pre-)judgements with a grain of salt
- 12 Differences and similarities
- 15 Segmentation is key
- 15 Excursus: “Down the rabbit hole — part 1”
- 16 How consumers “rank” Swiss companies
- 18 The ranking and its implications
- 21 Excursus: “Down the rabbit hole — part 2”



Perspective of the companies

- 22 Challenges of successful sustainability communication
- 23 Practical examples from companies:
Challenges and solutions



Conclusion and concrete recommendations for action

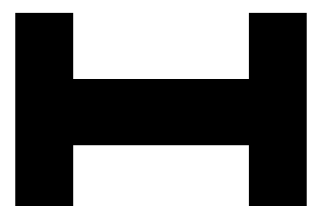
- 30 Key findings
- 31 Recommendations

Epilogue

- 33 The role and responsibility of brands
and communication agencies

Appendix

- 34



An analysis of the status quo of **Swiss sustainability communication and its perception**

Foreword by Dr Alexander Haldemann

“The SCOPES Report 2023 provides us with valuable insights into the perceived sustainability of companies in Switzerland. It enables us to progress significantly towards a more sustainable future by working on sustainability communication and promoting a dialogue between the companies and the stakeholders.”

Dear readers

I am pleased to present the SCOPES Report 2023; a groundbreaking work on the perceived sustainability of companies in Switzerland. As CEO of Publicis Groupe Switzerland, I would like to briefly introduce this exciting research and share the insights we have gained in collaboration with Grownate AG and the University of St. Gallen. We have prepared our findings to be accessible to a broad public, for we believe that only when data on sustainability is presented in an understandable and comprehensible way, it will have the impact that is needed.

At a time when sustainability has become a central topic in corporate branding and marketing, companies are faced with the challenge of legitimizing their actions, managing expectations of the various parties involved and strengthening trust via effective communication. To support this process, we joined forces with Grownate AG and the University of St. Gallen to carry out a benchmarking study and examine the sus-

tainability image of several dozen companies from the perspective of the Swiss population. We also learned which dimensions of sustainability are essential to the Swiss — there are, for example, interesting differences between the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability.

In addition, for the SCOPES Report 2023, extensive qualitative interviews were conducted with experts from various companies, highlighting the influence of sustainability for brands “from the inside” and demonstrating the way in which sustainability has become an integral part of companies’ brand communication. I want to thank all those involved from Grownate AG, the University of St. Gallen and our dedicated team at Publicis Groupe Switzerland for their passionate work and commitment in delivering this report. Their contribution has enabled us to gain essential insights and advance our collective efforts towards a more sustainable world.

Dr Alexander Haldemann
CEO, Publicis Groupe Switzerland

An analysis of the status quo of **Swiss sustainability communication and its perception**

Foreword by Andrea Fritschi

“The key lies in joint action between companies and consumers. Only when both sides share an understanding of what sustainability means can we bring about real change.”

Grownate, a Swiss start-up, stands for innovation and genuine dedication in the field of sustainability. Our innovative platform is intended to serve as a networking hub connecting companies, individuals and organizations that emphasize — and want to promote — a deep and thorough commitment to sustainability. Grownate develops different forms of consumer engagement and orchestrates cross-company initiatives and projects that drive interaction and dialogue around the topic.

The SCOPES report, which we co-initiated, provides valuable insights into how consumers in Switzerland perceive companies' sustainability efforts. The insights are based on a large-scale scientific study that was conducted with utmost care and among a large group of participants. By deepening our understanding in this field, we can on the one hand develop tailor-made tools and solutions to help companies optimize their communication and on the other hand promote joint engagement with consumers.

It is important to emphasize that the term “sustainability” must be understood as multidimensional, which makes the analysis and discussion even more complex. However, as direct contact and exchange between companies and consumers is often lacking, we hope the SCOPES report can bridge some of the current gaps. Only when both sides share an understanding of what sustainability means can we bring about real change.

Against this background, it is fascinating to take a deeper look at the findings of the SCOPES report. It is not just an analysis of facts and figures but a journey into the minds of consumers. Which factors influence their opinions? How do they perceive the commitment of companies? And are there “blind spots” that the companies need to take care of?

Let yourself be surprised and inspired by the following pages and discover the many facets of sustainability communication in Switzerland. It's worth it — on behalf of all of us.

Andrea Fritschi
CEO, Grownate AG

An analysis of the status quo of **Swiss sustainability communication and its perception**

Foreword by Prof Judith Walls

Sustainability is not a new topic for companies. But, in the context of rapidly rising global temperatures due to climate change, mass biodiversity loss, human aspirations for improving lifestyles associated with consumption, and global supply chains that raise concerns about resource extraction and human rights, the attention to corporate sustainability is at the forefront of investors and other stakeholders like consumers.

It's therefore not surprising that sustainability and marketing departments within companies have moved closer together over the past decade or so. Companies, after all, need to align their corporate communication for branding with that for sustainability purposes. Herein arises an inherent tension. Branding and marketing activities typically seek to grow customer demand and market share, while sustainability activities seek to mitigate a company's negative impact on nature and society.

Since marketing is often accused of driving unnecessary consumer demand, companies must think about how they will market their products and services in the future to avoid greenwashing. This requires creating value in new ways, implementing new business models such as circular economy, preparing for a slew of new regulations, and pulling together a wide range of stakeholders from suppliers to customers to reduce companies' negative impact on the environment and society while generating positive value to increase human well-being.

Among all this, one thing remains clear: sustainability topics like climate change and biodiversity loss must be addressed — now. Key to this is the action of companies. Without companies, we cannot solve problems like climate change or biodiversity since human industrial activity is the primary driver behind it.

At our institute, we seek to understand how companies govern and manage sustainability. This was also our motivation to join the study. How do companies communicate on sustainability and align the disparate goals of branding and marketing versus sustainability? How do they walk the fine line of greenwashing? How do they communicate complex sustainability concepts and approaches to consumers? How do they balance the needs of Swiss stakeholders against multinationals' global reach? These are some of the questions we answered through a scientifically rigorous qualitative study. The insights we found can inspire companies and scholars to think about the next steps in corporate communication around sustainability. We are not there yet, and there are no perfect solutions, but each step in the right direction is a beneficial one.

Prof Judith L. Walls
Chair of Sustainability Management
Director of the Institute for Economy and the Environment (IWÖ) Delegate for Responsibility & Sustainability
University of St. Gallen (HSG)

Foreword by Prof Dr Sven Reinecke

Marketing — and thus also brand management — is never neutral, but ultimately always constructivist: the decisive factor in marketing eventually is what consumers (potentially) know, think, believe and feel about a brand based on selective, subjective perception. From a marketing point of view, this purely subjective “reality” is what consumers ultimately make their purchasing decisions upon.

In today's world, a company's holistic (=environmental, social & economic) sustainability is an essential prerequisite for long-term success. From a marketing and communication point of view, it is therefore vital to know how relevant this topic is to purchasing decisions from the consumers' point of view, as well as how it is perceived by the consumers.

It is safe to assume that many sustainability efforts of companies are not recognized at all or only with an element of distortion by consumers, while other aspects — which the companies can hardly influence — significantly impact the perceived sustainability.

This study is, therefore, is a valuable contribution to the sustainability management of Swiss companies and brands. It may serve as a “zero-” or “baseline measurement” for further sustainability efforts. Only if it is known how the different brands are assessed in absolute and relative terms from the consumer's point of view is it possible — building on this

knowledge — to derive targeted management and communication efforts to positively influence brand perception.

The results of the present study are, thus, deliberately not an “objective”, scientific calculation of brand sustainability — but merely a reflection of the subjective attitudes of consumers with regard to the sustainability of brands. Regardless of whether a brand can be found at the top or at the bottom of the ranking we have included, the respective brand managers should critically question whether the consumers' view corresponds to the “objective” facts and real sustainability efforts — and whether adjustments with regard to sustainability communication are necessary.

In the area of sustainability, the same applies as in general brand management: “actual brand perception” and “desired brand perception” should not be too far apart.

Prof Dr Sven Reinecke
Executive Director of the Institute for Marketing & Customer Insight
University of St. Gallen (HSG)

Contributors

Dr Alexander Haldemann

Dr Alexander Haldemann serves as the CEO of Publicis Groupe Switzerland and stands as one of the co-initiators of this report. He possesses extensive expertise in strategic brand management and communication, which he adeptly applies within his organization and on behalf of Publicis clients. Dr Haldemann is renowned for his commitment to propelling forward-looking initiatives that generate environmental, economic, and social value, while simultaneously positively influencing the entire communications industry. Beyond his role at Publicis Groupe, Dr Haldemann also assumes the position of global chairman at the branding agency MetaDesign. He further contributes to the academic sphere as a lecturer at the University of St. Gallen (HSG).



Peter van der Touw, MSc

Peter van der Touw, MSc, holds the role of Senior Strategic Advisor at Publicis Groupe Switzerland, with his base in Zurich. His professional focus primarily centers on projects related to the development of new business areas. Peter boasts a wealth of expertise spanning management, finance, strategy, and digitization. In his capacity, Peter maintains close collaboration with the senior leadership of Publicis Groupe and external stakeholders. He dedicates himself to crafting effective solutions and identifying opportunities that confer advantages upon the group's clients, both in domestic



and international arenas. Of noteworthy mention is Peter's enduring interest in the realm of sustainability and the myriad challenges and opportunities it presents within the sphere of management. His involvement in the SCOPES report wasn't just a professional duty; it was a passionate commitment close to his heart.

Fabienne Baumgartner, FA

Fabienne Baumgartner, FA, holds the position of Deputy Project Manager at Publicis Groupe Switzerland. Her extensive skill set encompasses exceptional proficiency in project management, communication, and the orchestration of intricate, multi-stage processes that involve diverse stakeholders and interest groups. Notably, Fabienne possesses a profound passion for sustainability. Within her role, Fabienne played a pivotal role in the SCOPES report, bringing her expertise to bear on various aspects. Among her accomplishments was the successful coordination of numerous threads in the project, ensuring that they converged seamlessly at the right time and place. This task presented a substantial challenge given the project's complexity and the significance it held, and Fabienne executed it with remarkable precision.



Andrea Fritschi, MBA

With a background in private equity investment management and business development, Andrea Fritschi has made sustainability an integral part of her work. Her expertise

in catalyzing business growth and transformation extends across both large corporates and SMEs. Serving as the CEO of Grownate, a digital platform that aims to connect corporates, consumers and organizations to jointly engage on sustainability, she confronts ESG challenges head-on. This position has furnished her with valuable insights into the fundamental issues businesses face, alongside the rising demands from investors, consumers, and employees.



Charlotta Relander, MA

Charlotta Relander, MA, serves as the Co-Founder and COO of Grownate. Her steadfast commitment to integrating sustainability into her work extends across a diverse spectrum, encompassing her involvement with non-profit organizations, impact investing, and startups. Charlotta brings her extensive expertise to bear on both the operational and strategic aspects of the company. Charlotta's expertise is rooted in her practical experience in the field and her strategic advisory roles. She possesses a deep understanding of the fundamental challenges that companies encounter. Charlotta is driven by her belief in demand-driven innovation and possesses a special affinity for digital solutions that advance societal well-being. It is from this passion that Charlotta founded Grownate, with the explicit aim of directly confronting these critical issues and catalyzing positive change.



Contributors

Prof Dr Judith Walls

Prof Judith Walls holds the position of Professor and Chair of Sustainability Management at the University of St. Gallen (HSG). She also serves as the Director of the Institute for Economy and the Environment (IWÖ) and holds the title of Delegate for Responsibility and Sustainability. Her research is centered on the strategic management, reporting, and governance of sustainability within organizations. Professor Walls focuses particularly on assessing the biodiversity strategies of companies operating within competitive industries. She actively contributes to the academic community by serving on multiple editorial boards. Her work has earned recognition in leading academic journals and practical publications, with some pieces receiving prestigious scientific awards. As an educator, Professor Dr Walls imparts knowledge on sustainability within corporations at the master's, doctoral, and executive levels. She is a trailblazer in advancing sustainability within HSG's curricula across all programs. Furthermore, her professional journey encompasses research and consulting in investor relations across Europe and Asia. Beyond her academic pursuits, she has dedicated her time to voluntary involvement in environmental conservation projects in Africa and Asia.



Zsuzsa Borsa, MSc

Zsuzsa Borsa, MSc, is a doctoral student and research assistant under the supervision of Prof Judith Walls at the Chair of Sustainability Management within the Institute of Economy and the Environment at HSG.



Her research encompasses the dynamic intersection of sustainability, communication, and brand strategies. Her primary focus is to investigate how sustainability communication can impact stakeholders' trust, whether positively or negatively, and under what circumstances it is most advantageous to integrate sustainability into a brand's image. Zsuzsa Borsa holds a Master's degree in Communication Science and Sociology from the University of Pécs. She further honed her expertise by completing a CAS (Certificate of Advanced Studies) in Brand Leadership at the Hochschule für Wirtschaft Zürich (HWZ) and earning a certificate in Corporate Sustainability from the Stern Center at New York University. Before embarking on her doctoral journey at HSG, she accrued several years of valuable professional experience in brand and corporate communications, as well as strategic brand management, within Switzerland.

Oliver Brockschmidt, MSc

Oliver Brockschmidt, MSc, is a doctoral student and research assistant under the supervision of Prof Dr Sven Reinecke at the Institute of Marketing & Customer Insight at the University of St. Gallen (HSG). In addition to his academic pursuits, he serves as a lecturer in Marketing and Customer Insight at HSG, where he plays a pivotal role in the "Best Practice in Marketing" excellence program. Oliver's research is primarily centered on the transformative journey of B2B companies operating in CO₂-intensive industries as they evolve into more sustainable brands. He brings a multidisciplinary perspective to his work, having previously studied environmental engi-



neering at the Technical University (TU) in Braunschweig, Germany, and completing his Master's degree in economics at the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) in Aachen. Before joining HSG, Oliver gained valuable professional experience during his tenure at a consulting firm in the energy industry, where he worked for three years. His responsibilities encompassed diverse aspects, including formulating market entry strategies in the realm of electromobility, overseeing project management for the renewal of critical energy infrastructure, and actively contributing to the design and execution of energy-related concepts.

Prof Dr Sven Reinecke

Prof Dr Sven Reinecke holds the distinguished position of Managing Director at the Institute for Marketing and Customer Insight and serves as Associate Professor at the University of St. Gallen (HSG). Within HSG, he co-directs the Master's program in Marketing Management. Sven Reinecke's extensive expertise and research focus encompass strategic marketing, branding, marketing management control, price management, and management decision behavior. He leads the prestigious "Best Practice in Marketing" excellence program, a platform where companies spanning various industries, including B.Braun, Bühler, Continental, Geberit, Miele, Ricola, Roche, UBS, and Weber-Stephen come together to exchange experiences and advance innovations in marketing and sales. Outside of academia, Sven Reinecke contributes to the community as a member of the Board of Directors at Olma Messen St. Gallen AG and holds the role of Vice-President on the Board of Trustees of the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation in Trogen.



The Report: The Background

“SCOPES — The Swiss Consumer Perception of Sustainability” is a joint report by Publicis Groupe Switzerland, Grownate AG and two academic institutes: the Institute for Marketing and Customer Insight and the Institute for Economy and the Environment at the University of St. Gallen (HSG).

Together, they have embarked on the mission of exploring the state of sustainability-communication in Switzerland. Interestingly, there has been relatively limited country-specific research in this area, despite its significant relevance not only to academia but especially to practitioners in the field. In response to this gap, the creators of the SCOPES report took a two-fold approach: they delved into the perspectives of both consumers and companies. They sought to understand how Swiss citizens perceive sustainability communication from well-known companies and gain insights into the internal perspectives of these companies.

What to expect in the following sections

The SCOPES report first provides an overview of the current landscape of sustainability communication in Switzerland, revealing that it often oscillates between excessive and inadequate communication. The report then explores the viewpoints of consumers and companies, followed by a summary that includes recommendations on avoiding pitfalls and effectively managing challenges in sustainability communication.

The scientific approach

To examine both consumer and company perspectives, the authors employed a combination of quantitative comparative research and qualitative multi-case research. The report presents the key findings in an accessible manner for a wide audience.

In quantitative comparative research, 5'555 Swiss citizens were surveyed through a multi-stage process to gauge their perceptions of sustainability communication. The researchers aimed to uncover which aspects of sustainability consumers pay the most attention to, which companies they spontaneously associate with sustainability, and how they would rank a predefined group of companies in terms of sustainability (further details on the exact methodology can be found in **Appendix 1**).

Qualitative multi-case research, as applied in the SCOPES report, involved conducting 18 one-hour interviews with individuals responsible for corporate and brand communication, as well as sustainability experts. This interview pool included representatives from five Swiss companies spanning various sectors. In two cases, external consultants who specialize in sustainability communication were also interviewed. These discussions revolved around challenges, strategies, and the overall awareness of the significance of sustainability communication (additional details on the methodology are provided in **Appendix 2**).

Sustainability communication between "Greenwashing" and "Silent Greening"

In recent years, sustainability communication in Switzerland has been marked by two prominent phenomena: excessive communication regarding sustainability performance on one hand and insufficient communication on the other.

"Greenwashing"

Excessive sustainability communication, often referred to as "greenwashing", occurs when companies mislead consumers by either intentionally or carelessly overstating the sustainability of their products, services, or practices¹. This practice is problematic as it erodes consumer trust.

The consumer's confidence in a company's sustainability efforts can be significantly damaged. Once "greenwashing" takes place, it typically generates substantial skepticism, even when subsequent sustainability efforts are genuinely meant and transparently executed. Consumers tend to remember instances of insincere actions aimed solely at attracting new consumer segments or maximizing profits².

"Silent Greening" (or "Silent Browning")

In stark contrast, some companies opt not to communicate about their sustainability efforts, even when they are performing admirably in this regard. This phenomenon is known as "silent greening" (or "silent browning" when companies are entirely disengaged from sustainability)³. The concept of "silent greening" may initially appear counterintuitive or as a missed opportunity, but it stems from the recognition that effectively communicating about sustainability entails an enormous allocation of internal resources.

Companies face numerous hurdles, even when they are genuinely committed to sustainability practices. These hurdles include navigating a complex web of certifications, a wide variety of international standards, and opacity within their value chains. In light of these challenges, "silent greening" can sometimes seem like a more appealing option than the possibility of facing 'greenwashing' accusations.

Why is sustainability communication so vital?

Of course, there exists a category of companies that genuinely embrace sustainability, effectively communicating their commitment with substantiated facts.⁴ Their example underscores the significance of sustainability communication and why it's worth investing in. Well-executed sustainability communication serves several essential purposes: It empowers consumers to make informed decisions, enabling them to choose products and services aligned with their values. Sustainability communication demystifies the complexities surrounding sustainability, making it more accessible to the general public. It unites employees and employers who share similar value systems, fostering a sense of purpose within the organization. It contributes to sustainable value creation throughout the entire supply chain, benefiting both

businesses and society. Effective sustainability communication enhances the image of the company or brand, ultimately increasing its overall value. Moreover, sustainability communication plays a pivotal role in public discourse, encouraging consumers to reconsider behaviors that may be detrimental to the environment. This, in turn, empowers companies and advertisers to drive media initiatives that promote and initiate positive social change.

¹ Delmas, M. & Burbano, V. (2011). The drivers of greenwashing. *California Management Review*, 54(1), 64–87.

² McWilliams, A. & Siegel, D. (2000). Corporate social responsibility and financial performance, correlation or misspecification. *Strategic Management Journal*, 21(5), 603–609.

^{3,4} Delmas, M. & Burbano, V. (2011). The drivers of greenwashing. *California Management Review*, 54(1), 64–87.

Perspective of the consumers

To understand how Swiss consumers understand the sustainability activities of companies, we must begin by acknowledging that the term “sustainability” is multifaceted. This complexity is evident in the feedback obtained from the participants involved in the baseline studies for the SCOPES report. The current study differentiates between three dimensions of sustainability, aligning with the criteria established by Errichiello & Zschiesche (2022).⁵

Economic sustainability entails that companies prioritize long-term corporate objectives over short-term profit, avoiding actions that harm the environment and society. Environmental sustainability involves the responsible and efficient utilization of available natural resources. It aims to minimize the environmental impacts of production and consumption while fostering environmental regeneration. Social sustainability emphasizes fair compensation for all participants in the production process, ensuring that individuals are adequately rewarded for their work.

In Switzerland, it appears that consumers primarily prioritize environmental sustainability, with social and economic sustainability following as secondary considerations. This phenomenon is explored in detail below.

Upon initial data analysis, several possible explanations for this trend emerged. Consumers tend to show greater interest in topics that directly impact their daily lives. Within the realm of sustainability, these topics often encompass recycling, plastic waste reduction, and environmental protection — all of which play an enduring role in Swiss daily life. However, this dynamic shifts when economic and environmental sustainability are presented together. In such cases, the combined dimensions reinforce the impact of sustainability communication.

For instance, when companies openly acknowledge that they will achieve cost savings in the medium to long term through reduced energy consumption or waste reduction, this resonates positively with consumers. Consumers understand that companies pursue profit-oriented goals, and they do not necessarily expect purely altruistic motives. If profitability is achieved through environmentally responsible practices, it is seen as a win-win situation.

⁵ Errichiello, O., & Zschiesche, A. (2022). Green Branding. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

Perspective of the consumers

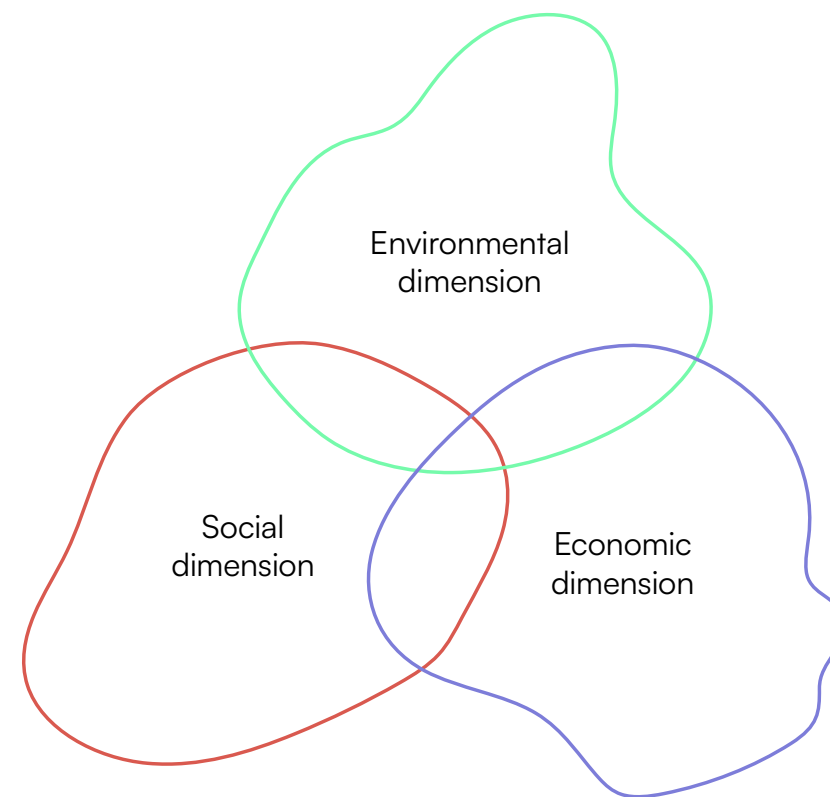
Take (pre-)judgements with a grain of salt

The emphasis on environmental sustainability in the evaluation of sustainability communication by Swiss consumers serves as an initial example highlighting that their judgment of companies is far from neutral. Various factors come into play when people assess a company's sustainability.

While the prominence of environmental sustainability in consumer assessments can be partially explained by its proximity (or distance) to the everyday lives of the Swiss, it would be overly simplistic to stop there. We asked consumers to allocate 100 points to indicate how relevant they think environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability are (for companies), in general. The outcome is: that the ecological dimension received 40 points, the economic dimension received 30 points, and the social dimension received an average of 29 points.

For companies, this underscores the importance of not prioritizing one dimension over the others. For instance, if a company exclusively focuses on social sustainability in its communication — such as promoting workforce diversity — consumers feel that environmental efforts are missing (from companies) but they may also respond with skepticism due to this inconsistency. Likewise, if a company emphasizes environmental protection but exploits its employees, similar skepticism is likely to arise.

Dimensions of Sustainability



Source: own diagram

Social criteria

Beyond assessing the relevance of various dimensions, the study also examines which components within these dimensions hold particular importance. In the realm of social components, the establishment of humane working conditions and the assurance of health and well-being rank as the most vital among the ten social criteria presented (please also see **Appendix 3**, “Relevance of social criteria”). Given the current global crisis situation, it comes as no surprise that ensuring peace, justice, and robust institutions closely follows in importance. Interestingly, clear gender differences emerge in this context. Notably, women tend to place significantly greater importance on gender equality compared to men. Differences in perception were also observed based on other demographic factors. For companies, this underscores the importance of tailoring their communication to specific target groups and adjusting their focus accordingly.

Environmental criteria

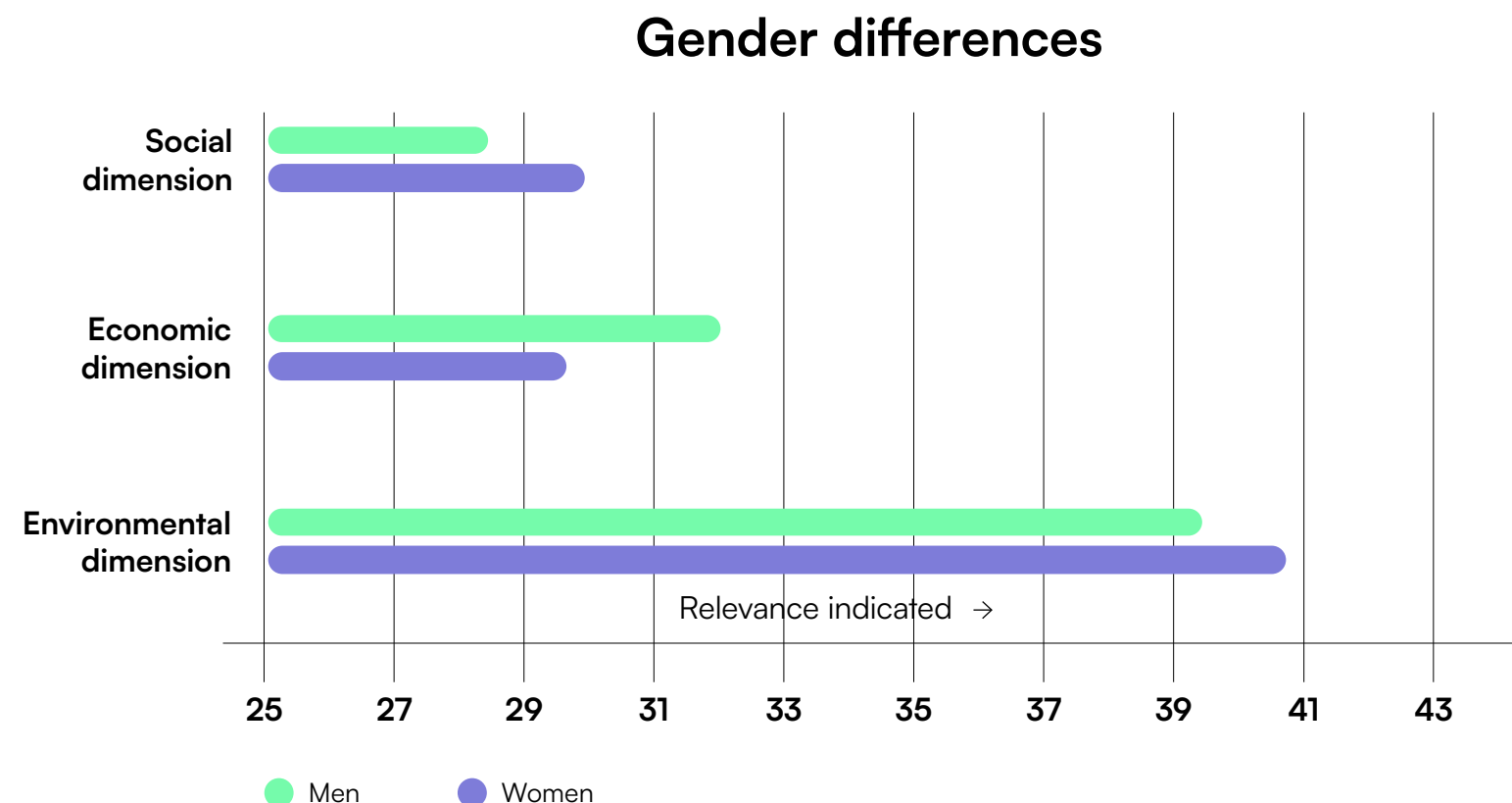
The environmental dimension was divided into nine components covering the product life cycle. The most pivotal criterion is “recycling and reuse”, evident from its high average importance score and the lowest variance among all criteria. This criterion holds the greatest relevance for consumers and should, therefore, be integral to corporate communication. Notably, the prioritization reveals that the reduction of energy consumption and the decrease in CO₂ emissions emerge as the least important components for consumers. While both criteria serve as essential key performance indicators (KPIs) in business practice and reporting, they appear to lack tangibility for participants. The more tangible a topic, the higher it ranks in importance for participants. CO₂ emissions, while frequently communicated in corporate discourse, are undeniably relevant in reality but may be perceived as less tangible by consumers, possibly explaining their lower perceived importance. For more comprehensive insights into these findings, including the interplay of various dimensions and criteria in shaping the perception of a sustainable company, refer to the in-depth analysis provided in **Appendix 3**.

Perspective of the consumers

Differences and Similarities Certainly, it's not the case that the emphasis on environmental sustainability in consumers' evaluations of sustainability is consistent across all demographics, irrespective of their background, education level, or age. These distinctions may initially seem subtle, but they can be critical factors for the success of sustainability communication. A “onesize-fits-all” approach is not advisable. This leads us to a question that should be of paramount interest to all companies: What holds particular significance for whom? In the following section, we present some empirical results, distilled to their essential findings.

Gender Differences and their Implications

In the survey, both Swiss men and Swiss women exhibit a distinct preference for the environmental dimension of sustainability. Men tend to place greater importance on the economic dimension, while women tend to emphasize the social dimension more strongly. For those aiming to engage one of these genders with custom-tailored sustainability communication that goes beyond highlighting the environmental dimension, it's crucial to bear these distinctions in mind. For a detailed understanding of how these three dimensions influence a company's sustainability rating, please refer to **Appendix 3**.



Source: own diagram

Perspective of the consumers

Educational differences and their implications

When examining the discrepancies in the average relevance of environmental and social criteria, a noteworthy pattern emerges: as the level of education increases, the average relevance of environmental criteria also rises. Conversely, when it comes to social criteria, this effect is reversed. Here, the average importance decreases as the level of education increases. Consequently, the significance of social criteria tends to be notably higher on average for individuals with lower levels of education than for those with higher education levels.

Individuals with lower levels of education often do not belong to the top earners in their professional lives and, therefore, may perceive social issues as more closely aligned with their own life experiences. Conversely, individuals with higher levels of education do not find social topics unimportant, but they place more emphasis on environmental topics but may exhibit a certain degree of intellectual skepticism. People feel less urgency to act on environmental topics than social concerns. Consumers with higher levels of education appear to place a stronger emphasis on environmental sustainability.

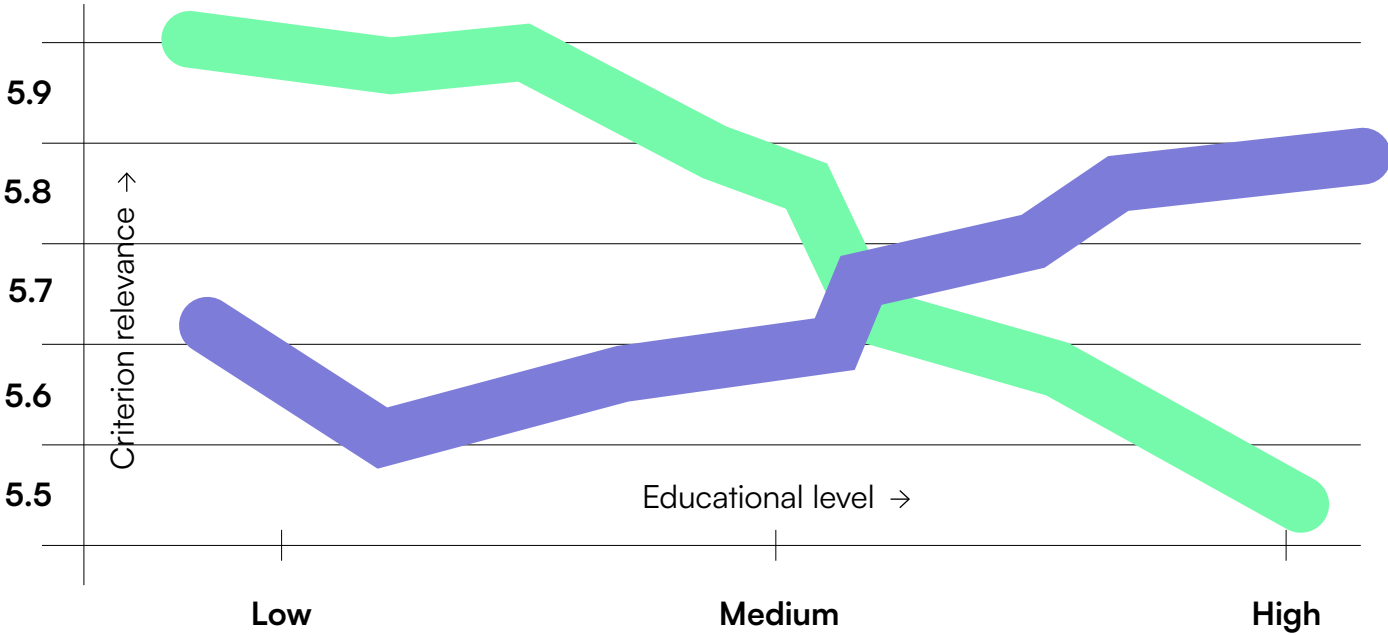
Regardless of the underlying explanations for these effects, a clear implication emerges: Those employing sustainability communication targeted at groups with lower levels of education should not neglect environmental considerations but should emphasize the connection of environmental factors to social issues, to make the issue more salient to such consumers. Conversely, for audiences

with higher educational backgrounds, the opposite holds true — highlight environmental aspects while ensuring that social factors remain prominently identifiable.

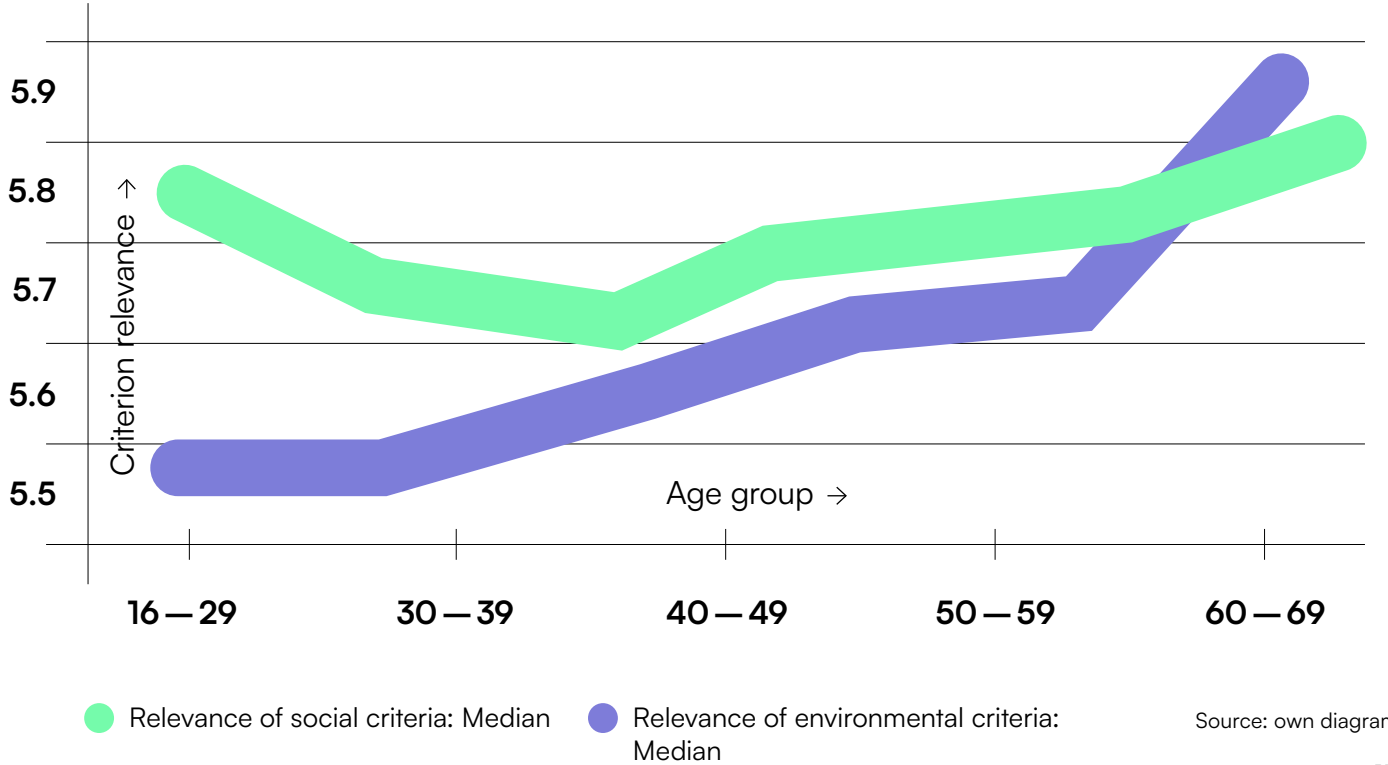
Age differences and their implications

Similar to education levels, age differences also show that as consumers get older, they care more about environmental sustainability. Social criteria, however, also remain quite important as the age of consumers rises. Taken together, these findings suggest that as Swiss consumers get older, they may be contemplating their legacy on both environmental and social sustainability on future generations.

Differences in education



Age differences



Source: own diagram

Perspective of the consumers

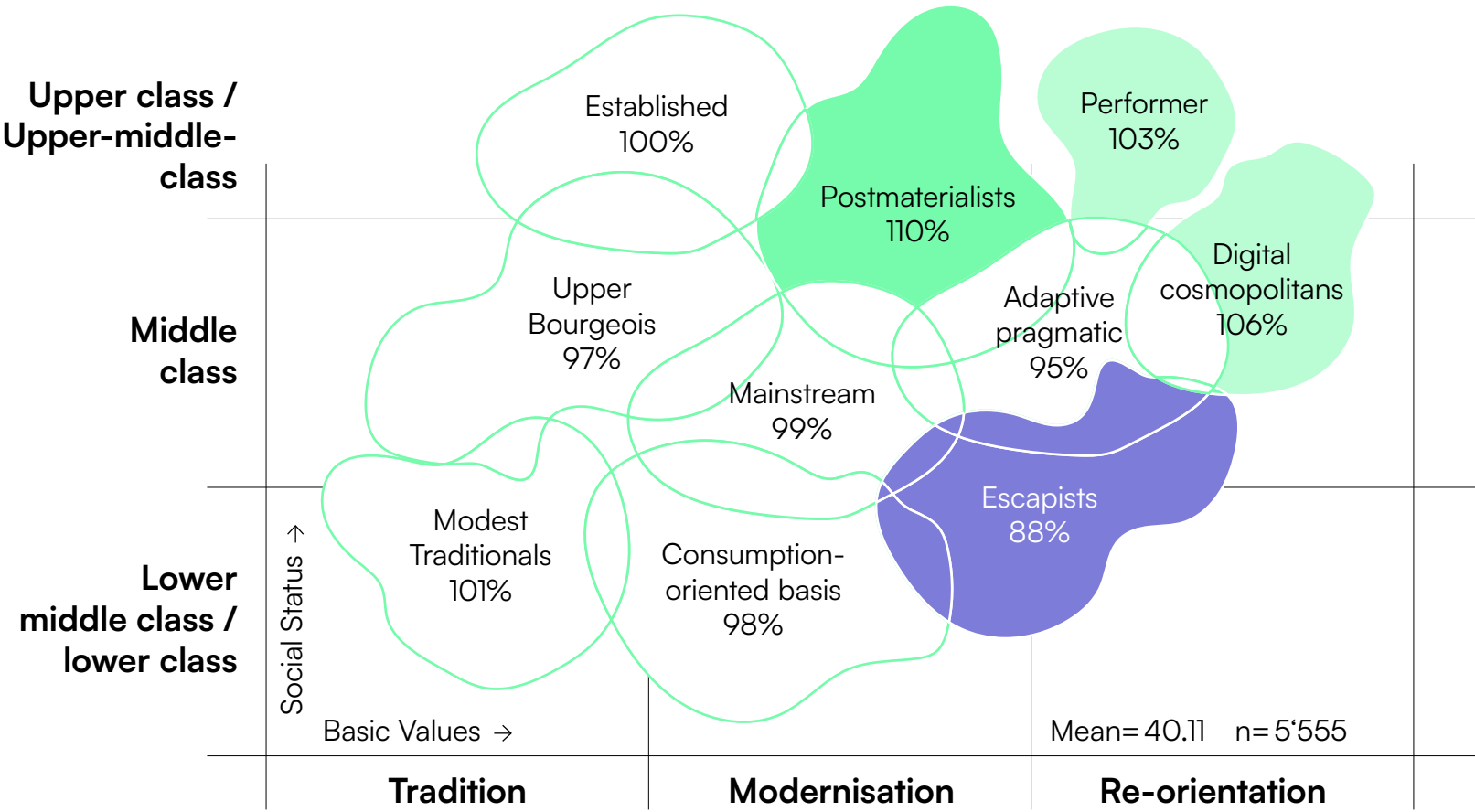
Sinus Milieu differences and their implications

Sinus Milieu[◊] categorize individuals based on their perspectives and lifestyles, relying on two fundamental dimensions: “Social Status” (lower, middle, or upper class) and “Basic Values” (tradition, modernization/individualization, and reorientation). These Sinus Milieus take into consideration fundamental values, encompassing aspects like family, consumption, work, and media. It’s essential to note that these classifications are specific to each country, and in this study, parameters tailored to Switzerland were used. The research within the SCOPES report reveals a significant finding: the Sinus Milieus categorizations reveal stronger patterns of consumer attention towards different sustainability dimensions than those observed in gender, age, or education differences. Once again, while environmental sustainabil-

ity takes the forefront, it’s within these milieus that the most pronounced shifts towards other sustainability dimensions occur within Milieus. This observation is pivotal for the development of tailor-made sustainability communication strategies. What does this signify in practical terms? Among the diverse Sinus Milieus, there exists a group known as the “escapists” who attribute considerably less significance to ecology compared to all other milieus. The importance and appreciation of environmental sustainability points within these milieus display significant contrasts.

In contrast to the “post-materialists” (+10 percent), the “digital cosmopolitans” (+6 percent), and the group of “performers” (+3 percent), who place a stronger emphasis on sustainability, the “escapists” (-12 percent) exhibit by far the lowest interest in environmental sustainability. One may wonder if this lack of interest stems from their relative indifference to the future of the planet, with their focus being on other more captivating pursuits. While this supposition remains speculative, it does align with the characterization of “escapists”.

Sinus Milieu differences and it’s implications of environmental sustainability



Source: own diagram, based on the typology of the Sinus institute, Heidelberg, Germany.

Questions

How relevant are — from your point of view — the three dimensions of sustainability? Please distribute a 100 points in total among environmental, social and economical sustainability.

- **Environmental Sustainability**
- Economic Sustainability
- Social Sustainability

◊ Practice of the Sinus Milieus

Perspective of the consumers

Segmentation is key

The data reveal two significant findings: On one hand, as previously noted in this chapter, environmental sustainability is the aspect of sustainability that resonates most strongly with the majority of people in Switzerland. However, consumers differ in their perceptions according to gender, education, age, and most notably, among the Sinus milieus. While it remains at the discretion of companies how they choose to segment their (potential) consumers, the quantitative results presented here underscore the importance of a “segmentation imperative”.

The most pronounced differences are observed within the most intricate metric: Personal viewpoints on climate change do not predominantly align with gender, education, or age, but rather serve as expressions of the fundamental values and lifestyles within a milieu. Individuals within a particular milieu exhibit significant similarity in their stance on climate change and their personal sense of responsibility.

Once again: The criteria for customer segmentation may vary — but segmentation should never be left out in sustainability communications.

Excursus: “Down the rabbit hole — part 1”

For an even more nuanced analysis of sustainability communication perception, the three dimensions — environmental, environmental, and social — can undergo further subdivision. While we went down this rabbit hole, we only present a high level overview of our findings here, due to space constraints. For a comprehensive understanding, please refer to **Appendix 3**. At this juncture, we will confine our discussion to a concluding remark:

The data reveals that consumers themselves may not always offer consistent information regarding the sustainability of companies. It’s imperative for companies to consider this factor.

Perspective of the consumers

How consumers “rank” Swiss companies

Not only were the 5'555 Swiss consumers asked about which sustainability dimensions were important to them to evaluate companies, they were also asked to identify and name companies they deemed exceptionally sustainable and explain why they thought so.

By asking consumers to do so, we were able to complement the quantitative research with concrete insights. Nevertheless, con-

sumers were not asked to provide assessments without context. Instead, they were tasked with evaluating a predetermined list of companies. After a multi-step selection process (see **Appendix 4**), we identified 100 Swiss companies or brands for consumers to assess. Out of these, 78 received a sufficient number of evaluations to be included in the final ranking. These companies can be categorized into six groups based on how they

perceived companies' sustainability performance. It's worth noting that there are only minor distinctions in the “sustainability value” attributed by consumers within each group. It is worth noting that within each of these six groupings, consumer perceptions of sustainability value differed only “slightly”. We therefore present the companies and brands within each group in alphabetical order.

How can we interpret this ranking? What factors contribute to the evaluation of a company as sustainable or less sustainable, beyond its actual sustainability initiatives? In the ensuing analysis, we delve into the outcomes of the company ranking and compile notable observations.

The perspective of the consumers

Ranking of brands in Switzerland according to perceived sustainability

Group 1	    
	          
Group 2	           
	         
	       
Group 3	       
	      
Group 4	         
Group 5	     
Group 6	 

Source: own diagram

The perspective of the consumers

The ranking and its implications

“Bonus points” for “Swissness”

“Swissness” holds a special appeal, especially among older individuals. The top-performing companies in the main ranking,

including AXA Switzerland, Victorinox, Zurich Insurance, V-Zug, and Ricola, are considered the most sustainable according to the 5’555 participants. What sets these top companies apart is their strong connection to Switzerland. With the exception of AXA, all

of them are Swiss brands, and some actively market their Swiss origins.

For instance, Ricola emphasizes its use of herbs from the Swiss mountains in its advertising, establishing an association with essential Swiss characteristics. Victorinox even incorporates the Swiss coat of arms into its logo, placing “Swissness” at the core of its brand values. This association with Swiss characteristics and values, coupled with the “Made in Switzerland” label, may contribute to a “domestic country bias” among study participants in Switzerland⁷. This bias can lead to an increased perception of quality, reduced risk, and a feeling of reduced environmental impact.

In addition to the companies’ actual sustainability efforts, their “Swissness” can be seen as a potential reason for the positive perception of these brands.

When looking at age-specific rankings, the presence of Swiss brands in the “Top 5” companies is also notable. Among people aged 16 to 29, three of the five companies are of Swiss origin, with German and American companies also seen as particularly sustainable by these generations. However, among people aged 50 to 59, four of the five top companies have headquarters in Switzerland. The presence of “Swissness” becomes even more pronounced among those aged 60 to 69, where only Swiss companies are found in the “Top 5”. This suggests that the appeal of “Swissness” increases with age, alongside its general significance among the older generation, likely due to the high unaided recall of these brands among older individuals.

Long delivery routes are becoming a “No-Go”

AliExpress and Wish are notably the poorest performers in the main ranking, with their index values distinctly separated from the section above them. Moreover, in the age-specific rankings, these companies find themselves among the “Worst 5” for four out of five age groups. One possible explanation for this phenomenon relates to the origin of these companies and their products, which

entails lengthy transportation routes. While AliExpress is a Chinese firm, Wish is headquartered in California but primarily markets products manufactured in China. In contrast to the favorable impact of “Swissness” mentioned earlier, the evident remote origin of these products appears to negatively influence the perception of a company’s sustainability.

The clear identification of a distant origin and the resulting long supply routes negatively impact the classification of a company as sustainable.

⁷ Bernard, Y., Collange, V., Ingarao, A., & Zarrouk-Karoui, S. (2020). Products labeled as “made in domestic country”: the brand matters. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(12), 2965-2987.

The perspective of the consumers

The importance of key events (or: image is everything)

The company rankings in the previous section (main ranking) can also shed light on potential reasons for being perceived as a sustainable company. Credit Suisse, for example, faced public criticism for several months, particularly related to the company as a whole, which appears to have influenced the perception of its corporate sustainability. Ferrero also received relatively negative ratings, mainly due to concerns related to palm oil. Nestlé faced similar challenges, with participants expressing critical views on its sustainability efforts. Despite being ranked second best in the Swiss Reputation Group's Reputation Ranking 2/2022, Nestlé received a lower rating in the consumer perception.

While the 20 Swiss Market Index companies enjoy a positive media reputation, their consumer ratings place them in the pe-

nultimate section of the SCOPES ranking. Despite these companies' long-standing commitment to corporate sustainability, as well as some positive media attention, public discussions and past key events appear to have a lasting impact on consumer perceptions. Such highly visible and impactful events can create a long-lasting negative image of corporate sustainability in consumers' minds that overshadows their perceptions.

Considering the assumption that the overall impression of a company is closely tied to perceptions of its sustainability, participants were asked questions about their general impression of the company. Through regression and correlation analysis, it was demonstrated that an improved overall impression correlates with a more favorable perception of the company as sustainable.

Key events can have long-term overriding effects on a company's perception of sustainability, as exemplified by Credit Suisse, Ferrero, and Nestlé. Furthermore, it's evident that perceived sustainability is closely connected to the overall impression, whether positive or negative, that consumers have of a company.

Age matters — for better or worse

As mentioned earlier, the "Swissness" effects impact on how consumers evaluate a company is, to some extent, age-dependent. However, this relationship also works the other way around. Companies like Nestlé, which received a below-average rating in the SCOPES report (see "The importance of key events (or: image is everything)"), are not uniformly perceived negatively by all age groups. While Nestlé ranks among the "Worst 5" for consumers aged 16 to 49, it falls in the

However, Ford presents a different scenario. It falls in the lower half of the ranking for consumers aged 16 to 29, 40 to 49, and 50 to 59. Surprisingly, among consumers aged 60 to 69, Ford was only rated four times, indicating limited recognition among this age group. Among consumers aged 30 to 39, Ford stands among the "Top 5" companies perceived as sustainable, reflecting a more positive assessment by this generation compared to others.

Even though some companies fare poorly in the ranking, the level of criticism varies depending on the age group of the respondents.

lower third of companies for those aged 50 to 59. Surprisingly, it ranks in the top third for consumers aged 60 to 69 (see **Appendix 1**).

A similar pattern can be observed for Nespresso. Despite being a registered B-Corp company meeting high sustainability standards, it remains unrecognized or unnoticed by a significant portion of consumers. Among those aged 16 to 29, Nespresso is placed in the lower half of evaluations and falls into the third section of the overall ranking. In contrast, consumers aged 60 to 69 have a substantially different perception, ranking Nespresso in the top 10.

These generational differences in company perceptions and sustainability evaluations suggest that age-dependent perspectives play a significant role in evaluating corporate sustainability. One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be differences in brand familiarity, knowledge, and usage. Consumers who regularly use a particular brand may be less critical of it to avoid questioning their own behavior and choices.

The perspective of the consumers

Industry strongly influences the perception of sustainability. Companies like Zalando, Amazon, and Syngenta, which also rank in the penultimate section of the main ranking, share a commonality: they operate in sectors that participants considered relatively unsustainable. In addition to the brand ranking, a sector ranking was conducted to further support this thesis. The results are shown in the table on the right, and the exact methodology can be found in **Appendix 5**. The online mail-order industry and the chemical and pharmaceutical companies occupy the last two places by a wide margin. Their sustainability reputations are ranked as the worst. This is reflected in the participants' overall impression of these companies, which they rate poorly.

Industry significantly shapes the perception of a brand's sustainability, particularly in the case of the mail-order and chemical/pharmaceutical industry. Consumer judgments are heavily influenced by abstract assessments.

Industry perception and sustainability

Rank	Sector	Weighted Dimension performance
1	Other consumer goods	5.11
2	Households appliances & electronics	5.10
3	Primary insurance	5.08
4	Furnishing	5.07
5	Luxury Goods & Watches	5.05
6	Logistics & Transport	4.99
7	Snacks & Confectionery	4.98
8	Retail & Food Trade	4.80
9	Mobility & Automobile	4.79
10	Banks	4.75
11	Consumer electronics	4.72
12	Beauty & Hygiene	4.51
13	Drinks	4.49
14	Food	4.39
15	Chemistry & Pharma	4.04
16	Online mail order company	3.26

Source: own data

The index values calculated for individual companies generally do not deviate significantly from the sector average. Companies in positively perceived sectors tend to receive better ratings on average than those in negatively perceived sectors. This phenomenon suggests that the sustainability image of the industry overshadow individual companies, so that even potentially sustainable companies tend to be rated negatively. Consequently, consumers often base their assessments of individual companies on their overall perception of the industry. Zalando

and Amazon are part of the online mail order industry, while Syngenta operates in the chemical and pharmaceutical sector — both sectors are negatively rated by participants. This negative influence on rankings could be attributed to sector associations.

Further analysis was conducted to assess the actual impact of various activities on the perception of corporate sustainability. For chemical and pharmaceutical companies, the most influential factors were the use of environmentally friendly materials, waste reduction, and the avoidance of environmental pollution. On the other hand, for online mail order companies, factors such as resource utilization, environmentally friendly packaging and transportation, and waste reduction played a significant role in determining their ratings.

The perspective of the consumers

Perspective of the consumers

The main ranking was also analyzed to identify differences between regions within Switzerland. The exact methodology can be found in **Appendix 6**. The top and worst performers in the German-speaking and French-speaking regions are shown in the figure on the right. When comparing the

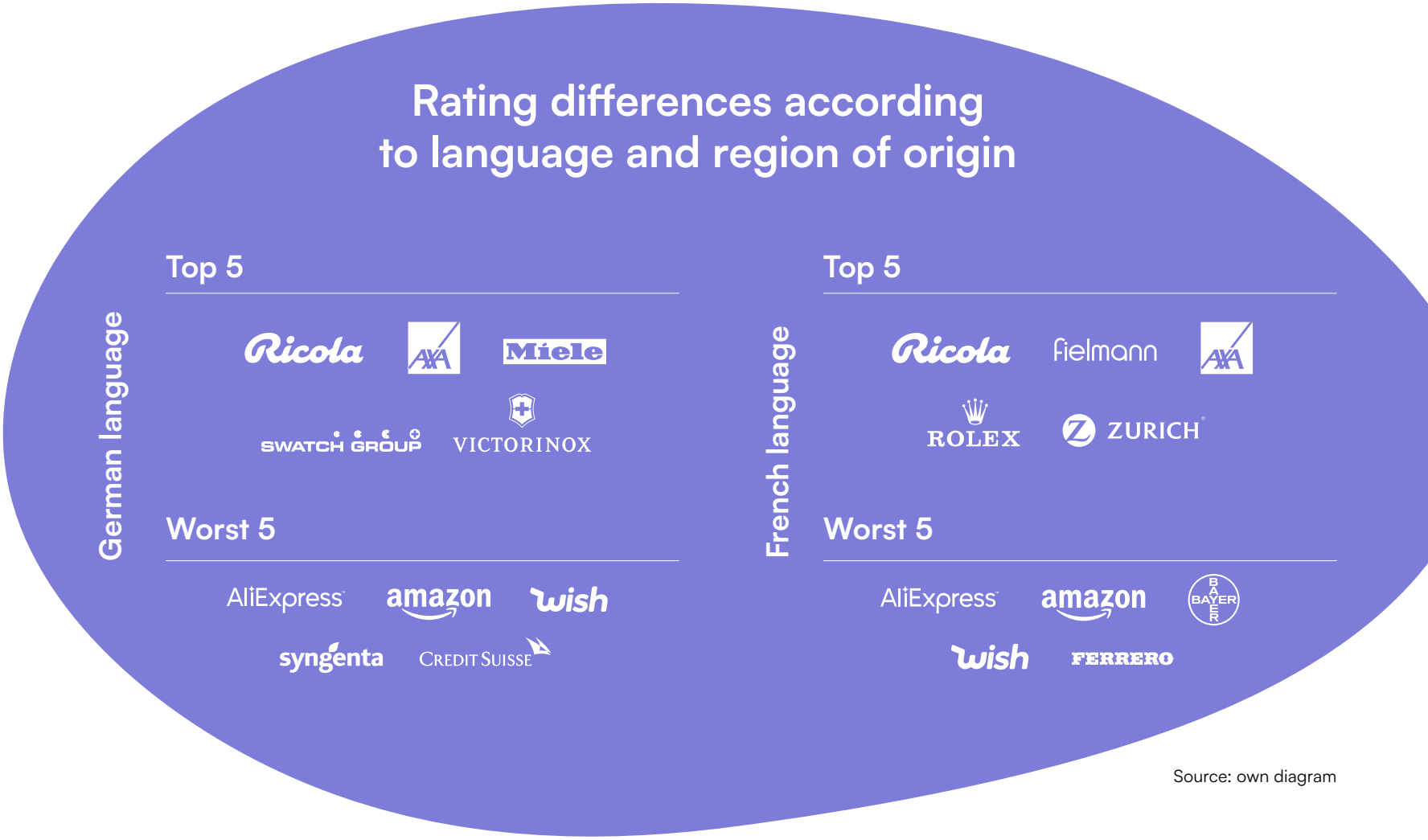
These rating differences reveal a clear pattern: Rolex, Nestlé, and Nespresso are headquartered in French-speaking Switzerland, with Rolex in Geneva, Nestlé in Vevey, and Nespresso in Lausanne. Participants from these regions rated these companies significantly more positively in this ranking than

The origin effect also operates within Switzerland. Brands headquartered in French-speaking Switzerland, such as Nestlé, Rolex, and Nespresso, are perceived as more sustainable in that region.

German-speaking and French-speaking regions, significant differences are found in the rankings of Rolex, Nestlé, Nespresso, and Victorinox.

Rolex is one of the top 5 performers in French-speaking Switzerland. In German-speaking Switzerland, Rolex received numerous ratings but was placed in the lower third of the ranking. Nestlé received ratings frequently in both French-speaking and German-speaking Switzerland, but it was rated much lower in the latter, falling into the bottom 10% of companies. In French-speaking Switzerland, Nestlé is in the top 70% of the ranking. Nespresso is in the top 50% of the ranking in French-speaking Switzerland but only in the top 10% in German-speaking Switzerland, placing it in the lower third. Victorinox is in the top 5 in German-speaking Switzerland with 122 ratings but only in the top 20 in French-speaking Switzerland with 46 ratings.

participants from German-speaking Switzerland. Victorinox, on the other hand, is headquartered in the German-speaking town of Ibach and received more positive ratings from consumers in German-speaking Switzerland. Thus, consumers tend to rate companies from their region of origin more favorably than companies from other regions. Similar to “Swissness” and the “domestic country bias”, local proximity to companies based on their origin positively influences the assessment of corporate sustainability.



Source: own diagram

Excursus: “Down the rabbit hole — part 2”

At the outset of the research for the quantitative section of the SCOPES report, the authors opted to conduct a prompted survey to ensure comparability of the results. At the same time, we carried out an unprompted survey to ascertain which companies consumers naturally associate with sustainability. The outcomes of this survey are detailed in **Appendix 7**. They corroborate certain aspects of what was gleaned from the prompted survey data but also offer additional intriguing insights.

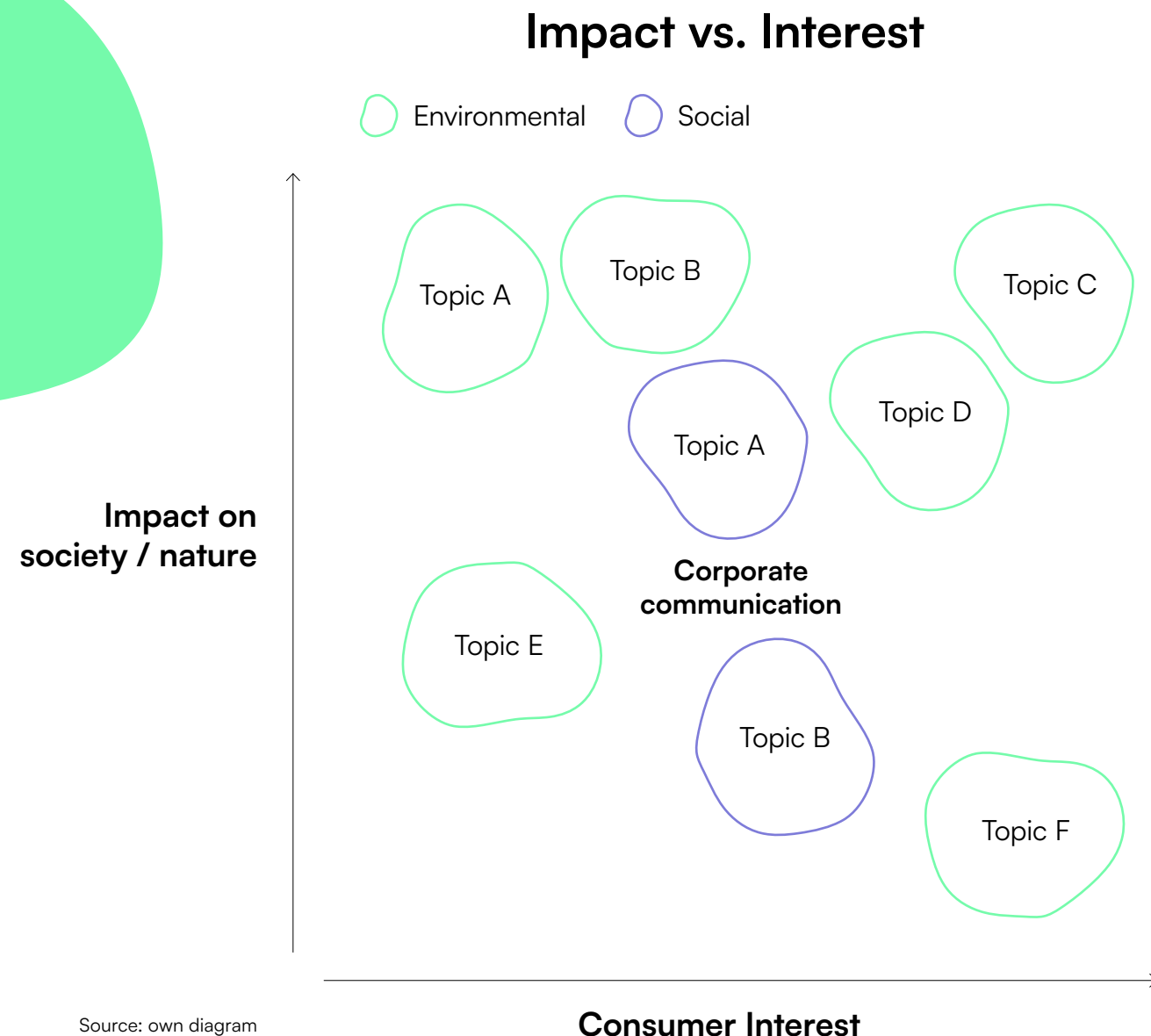
The perspective of the companies

In contrast to the quantitative section of the SCOPES report, which involved a large number of participants, the qualitative part of the report adopts a “smaller but more refined” approach. As previously mentioned in Appendix 2 regarding the precise methodology, it’s worth reiterating that this section of the report relies on extensive one-on-one interviews with individuals responsible for sustainability, corporate, and brand communication. Some of these interviewees have dedicated themselves almost exclusively for many years to the challenge of effectively communicating their respective companies’ sustainability efforts both internally and externally. Regardless of their industry or the size of their organizations, these individuals demonstrated during the discussions a profound understanding of the imperative for successful sustainability communication to involve cross-departmental collaboration.

Challenges of successful sustainability communication

Companies often find themselves navigating the vast landscape of sustainability initiatives and the need for a clear, concise message at the brand level. Typically, companies make a distinction between sustainability-related issues and those that pique consumer interest.

Sustainability managers tend to emphasize the importance of assessing the environmental and social impact of their operations throughout the entire supply chain. They employ techniques like life-cycle analysis to identify areas of concern and develop a comprehensive sustainability strategy. However, consumer interests may differ, focusing on other aspect of sustainability.



The perspective of the companies

There is a gap between communication for the purpose of sustainability and communication for the purpose of branding.

In corporate communication, such as sustainability reports, companies often lay out their entire sustainability roadmap. However, in brand communication targeted at consumers, they selectively communicate sustainability topics based on consumer interest and receptiveness. Only a subset of these topics becomes an integral part of the brand promise, typically when there's a strong alignment between brand values and sustainability.

When incorporating sustainability into brand communication, companies seek to strike a balance between discussing issues of utmost sustainability importance (i.e., those with the greatest impact) and addressing topics that interest consumers. In cases where these two objectives don't fully align, companies may differentiate between sustainability issues in corporate communication and those in brand communication.

Companies sometimes find themselves addressing topics in marketing that hold less significance from a sustainability standpoint but are perceived as important by consumers. For instance, using plastic con-

tainers instead of glass for certain products, although heavier and causing a larger carbon footprint when transported over long distances, may be seen negatively by consumers who are generally critical of plastic. In such scenarios, companies may need to launch campaigns to educate consumers about the reasons behind their choice of plastic containers and to raise awareness about sustainability issues with more significant impacts. Balancing consumer perceptions and sustainability considerations can be a complex task in brand communication.

Practical examples from companies: Challenges and solutions

From the discussions with those responsible in companies and external consultants, it was possible to gain insights into various practical attempts in sustainability communication that have already been "tested". Since the interviewees and the companies they work for remain anonymous (see **Appendix 2**), some "best practices" that the interviewees have successfully implemented are listed below. Challenges that the interviewees faced are also mentioned. In some places, particularly insightful quotes are also reproduced anonymously to give a better impression of the interview process.

Multiple brands in the portfolio? "A-B-C" testing made easy

Companies with multiple brands or sub-brands, or a range of brands in their portfolio have more flexibility in differentiating between corporate communication and

brand communication, compared to companies with one corporate brand (monobrand). Multi-brand companies can opt to focus on a particular sustainability topic for one brand while simultaneously stress other sustainability factors in a different brand, or even opt not to communicate about sustainability altogether for some brands. Multi-brand companies can adopt this partitioned approach without reputational damage to the corporation, because often consumers do not realize that different brands are owned by the same company.

"Multi-brand companies" can highlight different dimensions of sustainability in sustainability communication — without the majority of consumers noticing.

The perspective of the companies

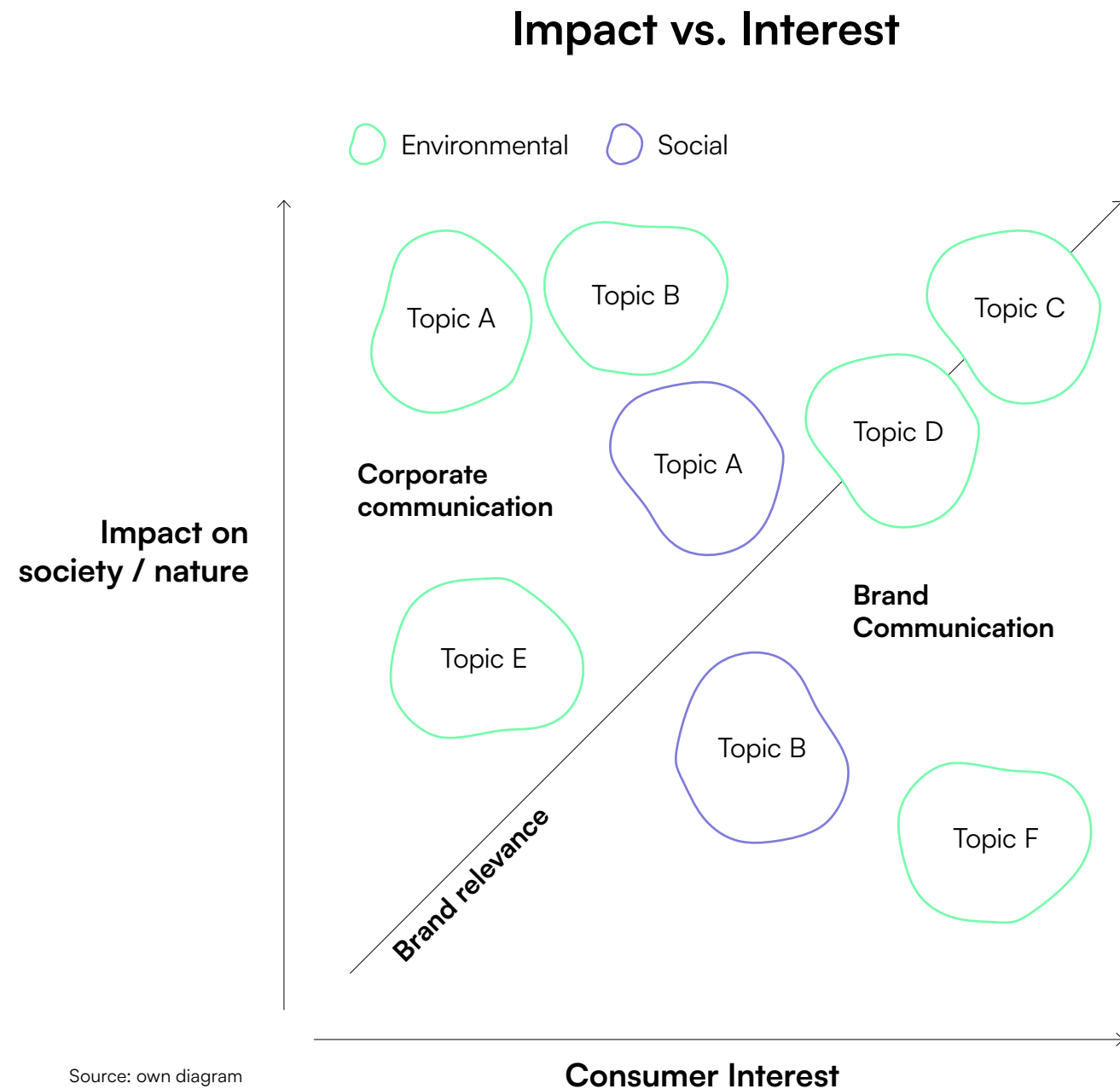
What consumers want to hear is only a fraction of what there is to say
Sustainability issues at the corporate level are extensive, spanning local, national, and global areas. Consequently, sustainability communications, especially for large companies, often need

to cover a wide spectrum to address the diverse needs of various stakeholders. However, the challenge arises when it becomes evident that consumers are only interested in a fraction of the topics typically covered in sustainability reports.

This discrepancy between what consumers are interested in and what is crucial for a company's social and environmental impact can be problematic. To bridge this gap, companies must strike a balance between the breadth of corporate-level sustainability information and the specific interests of consumers, who generally have limited receptiv-

ity to complex messages. The interviewees from various companies admitted that aligning comprehensive corporate information with consumer interests in a communicative context was not always straightforward.

Indeed, sustainability communication should be tailored to the specific target audience because consumers are typically interested in only a subset of the many possible sustainability topics.



Quote “We deliberately distinguish between sustainability communication for the corporation versus our brand. In branding, it’s clear that we consider what is relevant for the brand on the one hand and for the consumer on the other. For corporate sustainability communication, we must include the entire footprint, including our supply chain.”

— CEO, Beverage Company

The perspective of the companies

Keeping up with the times — or leave after some time

Another challenge in brand communication on sustainability is that consumer interest in sustainability is not static, but changes over time as mass media and public opinion change.

Communication and sustainability managers have observed that consumer interest in certain sustainability topics is not fixed but rather fluid and subject to change over time. This dynamic nature of consumer interest reflects the evolving landscape of public opinion and media coverage surrounding sustainability issues.

For example, energy expenditures for lighting buildings generally account for only a small portion of a company's environmental footprint. However, during the energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine, consumers increasingly focused on building lighting outside of operating hours or Christmas lighting. This was seen as "wasteful" and not environmental. The respondents of our study or their companies reacted quickly by switching off the lighting and communicating this partly via corresponding campaigns, which was positively received by the consumers.

Between past and present

Sustainability communication extends to past performance and future goals. A company's sustainability report, for example, not only reflects the activities carried out during the reporting period, but also contains goals that the company is striving to achieve in terms of emissions, waste reduction, recycling, and so on. In the discussions with responsible parties, it was made clear on several occasions that such statements relating to the future are mostly intended to show the company's contribution to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals⁸ and the Paris Agreement⁹. In order to gain the trust of the relevant target groups, companies usually build their sustainability communication on past successes and describe exactly how they intend to achieve future goals. This works better and resonates with consumers, the people we interviewed unanimously confirmed. But what if there are no or hardly any past successes? If this is the case, as we learned in the qualitative interviews for the SCOPES report,

then companies talk all the more concretely about the future — for example, about new production methods, energy sources, more efficient processes, comprehensively certified supply chains or the like. Whether communicating about the past or the future,

commitment to a sustainability issue reflects the sincerity of a company's commitment to sustainability and helps build brand equity.

Communication and sustainability managers use past successes, share their visions — or both. The most important thing is that they focus on continuity.

another important aspect of successful sustainability communication mentioned by our respondents is continuity. Commitment to an issue over a longer period of time is not only important from a sustainability perspective, but such continuity in brand communication helps companies gain credibility. Long-term

Quote "We talk about past accomplishments about seventy percent of the time because they're just (...) more tangible. And because anyone can set goals. The problem is when you only communicate the goal and not how you're going to get there."

— Communications Manager, Beverage Company

⁸ <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement>

The perspective of the companies

Quote “To establish credibility, it is essential to showcase your accomplishments. We must provide reports that document our past actions, demonstrating that they were not merely greenwashing. This serves as a ‘reason to believe’, indicating that we have achieved specific sustainability goals up to this point. However, we don’t stop there; we continually strive to surpass these achievements.”

— Brand Portfolio Director, Beverage Company

Between heart and brain

Environmental and social sustainability issues often trigger emotions among consumers; not only because these issues can affect them directly — but also because different worldviews and belief systems factor influence their consideration, which can lead to division and conflict. When companies fail to act sustainably, consumers may experience negative emotions that have a long-term impact on brand sentiment and purchasing decisions (see also the quantitative part of this study). The company representatives

interviewed therefore believe that focusing on facts and data is the way to achieve greater credibility in the area of sustainability — especially since activities in this area can be “tracked” and thus monitored transparently. At the same time, those interviewed for this report confirmed a prevailing consensus in research, namely that worldviews and beliefs are difficult to “fight” with facts¹⁰. Therefore, if brands are trying to reach a broader, non-expert audience, they must be able to translate the complexity of sustainability into simple messages.

The respondents we interviewed indicated that translating fact-based sustainability communication into communication that creates (emotional) impact for brands with a broad audience is one of the most difficult aspects of sustainability communication. Of course: not all brands need the same level of emotional messaging — functional brands, such as most insurance companies or banks, can engage consumers through rational marketing approaches. Brands that in one way or another help shape the lifestyle of consumers (such as food & beverage, clothing, luxury...) are more likely to score points through emotion. This applies to all areas of brand communication, sustainability is not exempt from this. If you would like to get a more detailed picture of when facts — and when emotions — should speak, we recommend **Appendix 8**.

Those who communicate on the subject of sustainability sometimes rely on facts, sometimes on emotions. Both have advantages and disadvantages. In addition, “working” with emotions can be enormously challenging.

Quote “We need to really explain the belief that is behind corporate sustainability because this is what connects us emotionally with our consumers.”

— Head of Sustainability, Food Company

¹⁰Hoffman, A. J. (2015). How culture shapes the climate change debate. Stanford University Press.

The perspective of the companies

Those responsible in companies are coming to the realization that cooperation (with NGOs, for example) has a more authentic effect than sustainability labels.

Partnerships beat labels

The use of sustainability labels and certificates is intended to inform consumers about a product or service's environmental or social impact and influence their purchasing decisions positively. However, as the number of such labels has grown, consumers find it challenging to understand their significance and credibility¹¹. In line with previous research in sustainability marketing, corporate executives interviewed in the qualitative part of the SCOPES report expressed that consumers were generally skeptical about labels and certificates. Consequently, companies found it more beneficial to establish partnerships and collaborate with experts or NGOs. Such partnerships not only transfer

reputation to the company but also provide valuable knowledge for shaping sustainability strategies. Additionally, optimizing supply chain collaboration can enhance sustainability performance and reputation, especially if the efforts are consistently communicated, such as through social media.

Quote “We are working with a lot of NGOs, exchanging, and sharing with them, to push ourselves. Working with NGOs and other external stakeholders gives us an outside view on what we do.”

— Head of Marketing & Communication, Food Company

Quote “There are changes in the mindset of the consumers: The first one is urgency, the second one is complexity and then the third one is this shift to collaborate. You know, we’ve been trying on our own for two decades, but it hasn’t happened, so we need to collaborate how to do it. And so, I think these three things have shifted over the last couple of years.”

— Manager, Construction Company

¹¹ Gosselt, J. F., van Rompay, T., & Haske, L. (2019). Won't get fooled again: The effects of internal and external CSR ECO-labelling. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 155, 413-424.

The perspective of the companies

Sustainability in B2B

In January 2024, new regulations on climate data disclosure will come into force in Switzerland, largely based on the corresponding EU regulations¹². This will require all Swiss companies with more than 500 full-time employees to adhere to the principle of “double materiality” — i.e. they will have to report both on how sustainability issues affect their business (“outside-in”) and on how their activities impact society and the environment (“inside-out”). (Potential) business partners and shareholders will look even more closely (and “see” even more) before entering into a cooperation with or investing in a company. In the companies where we conducted interviews, it was emphasized that sustainability has already become an enormously important selection criterion for many B2B partnerships — and will increase in importance for the reasons outlined. Already, therefore, companies are increasingly highlighting sustainability goals and achievements in their B2B communications. Often, B2B sustainability communication seems to be easier than B2C communication because the parties involved are more familiar with

the topic and have similar goals. Less “educating” needs to be done — but the stakes are also higher. Because if a B2B contact, who decides on a large order, doubts the sustainability of a company — then this is

B2B sustainability communication is just as important as B2C sustainability communication. After all, no one wants to do business with “dirty” companies anymore.

much more serious than if individual consumers ask themselves from time to time whether company X or company Y really fulfills all sustainability requirements.

Quote “With the B2B client, the situation is completely different because those are big organizations mainly who have their own sustainability roadmaps, so they really want much more detailed and granular information, for example, on our carbon footprint.”

— Head of Sustainability, Food Company

“Putting a face” to the effort

Corporate brands have a broad audience, including employees, investors, service partners, and local communities, all of whom contribute to shaping the company’s brand image^{13, 14}. Among these stakeholders, employees play a crucial role in influencing the brand image and contributing to the success of sustainability communication. As essential internal stakeholders, employees assist companies in implementing sustainability strategies across their operations and individual processes. They also act as “brand ambassadors” whenever they interact with consumers and business partners. Additionally, sustainability serves as a significant criterion for attracting talent, particularly among younger employees who seek companies aligning with their values, where sustainability often plays a central role^{15, 16}.

According to the insights gathered from interviews, sustainability-related topics included in internal communication must be planned as meticulously as external commu-

nication. Companies should regularly inform employees about sustainability initiatives and actively involve them in implementation. Interestingly, this involvement can also occur in a “public” manner, such as through social media or specific advertising campaigns. This approach generates impact and has a tangible effect, especially when involving employees from various company departments and hierarchical levels.

Communication and sustainability managers do their best to win over employees as “ambassadors”. If they do not follow suit, that doesn’t only generate problems regarding credibility — but also when it comes to recruiting new talent.

¹² <https://www.pwc.ch/en/insights/sustainability/swiss-sustainability-reporting-requirements.html>

¹³ Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2001). Are the strategic stars aligned for your corporate brand. *Harvard Business Review*, 79(2), 128-134.

¹⁴ Knox, S., & Bickerton, D. (2003). The six conventions of corporate branding. *European Journal of Marketing*, 37(7/8), 998-1016

¹⁵ Whelan, T. & Fink, C. (2016). “The comprehensive business case for sustainability”. *Harvard Business Review* 21.

¹⁶ <https://recruiters.theguardian.com/advice/why-all-recruiters-should-go-green>

The perspective of the companies

Quote “What works well: Showing the employees in our communication. Then it’s not as abstract that the company does something, but it’s these particular people who look after, e.g., recycling every day (...). I think that’s a way to show that it’s in the DNA of the company. It has to be part of the culture, then people will accept it.”

— Head of Marketing & Communications, Logistics Company

Stronger together

Traditionally, sustainability management is decentralized across various corporate departments, including corporate communications, legal or compliance, innovation, investor relations, operations management, and others¹⁷. The specific position of sustainability management often evolved historically, with different departments becoming “pioneers” and others subsequently following suit. Initially, sustainability management was primarily responsible for sending out messages and was

often situated within investor relations, corporate communications, marketing, and branding departments. However, with sustainability becoming a strategic priority, many companies have expanded their sustainability teams, establishing dedicated coordination offices and positioning experts strategically throughout the organization. Despite variations in organizational structures, our interviews revealed a close

working relationship between communication experts and sustainability professionals within companies. Communication and brand experts are enthusiastic about conveying the company’s sustainability messages but also acknowledge challenges that may exceed their expertise. Conversely, sustainability professionals highly value the expertise of communication specialists who are skilled in address-

ing consumers and their interests. In an ideal collaboration, as affirmed by the individuals we interviewed, com-

munication teams make the sustainability content, which is carefully developed by the sustainability unit, accessible and comprehensible to the wider audience.

The respondents agree that the best results come from close cooperation between communications and sustainability professionals.

¹⁷ <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/sustainability/our-insights/organizing-for-sustainability-success-where-and-how-leaders-can-start>

Conclusions and recommendations

for action

Key findings

On the preceding pages — and, if you choose to take a look at it, in the appendix — we have presented a range of intriguing and valuable findings concerning the state of sustainability communication in Switzerland.

A fundamental insight from our research is that Swiss consumers primarily focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability, while also considering social and economic sustainability to be highly relevant. Quantitative research indicates differences between gender groups, age groups, educational levels, and particularly, Sinus milieus. Swiss consumers' perception and evaluation of sustainability communication are heavily influenced by their lifeworld and milieu — essentially, the people they associate with, their values, convictions, and worldview. All of these factors appear to be significantly more important for the assessment of sustainability communication than other criteria we examined. What feels authentic and tangible to people has a profound impact on them and endures.

The importance of rendering sustainability “tangible and understandable” is further underscored by our respondents' consistent positive rating of “Swissness” and regional origin. In simpler terms, what is familiar and local tends to be perceived as more sustainable than distant alternatives.

Nonetheless, sustainability communication alone is insufficient. Our research also reveals that a company's overall image or significant events (in the media)

can easily overshadow the positive effects of sustainability communication. This is a crucial consideration for communications managers across all industries as they strive to align sustainability communication with other topics on their agenda.

Our qualitative study has yielded important insights as well. A recurring challenge highlighted in all case studies is that branding and sustainability-related communications can create tensions because their objectives and target audiences differ. Fortunately, there are strategies that companies can employ to effectively manage this challenge, provided those in charge are cognizant of it (see recommended actions in the Recommendations section).

In general, corporate stakeholders share the perspective of consumers (and are inevitably influenced by them since corporate communication is directed, at least in part, toward consumers). For the Swiss market, sustainability communication should emphasize the environmental dimension of sustainability while not neglecting other aspects. The approach is also significant: B2C clientele requires straightforward clarification, whereas B2B clientele exhibits higher scrutiny and exacting standards (particularly from 2024 when they will pay closer attention to the sustainability performance of medium-sized and large companies).

For these reasons, it is imperative that company stakeholders break down silos

and collaborate. Sustainability experts must navigate a web of regulations and intricate interdependencies in process and supply chain management. Their colleagues in communications must convey this complexity in a way that is comprehensible to both insiders and outsiders alike. They must engage employees, B2C and B2B customers alike. Meanwhile, past sustainability achievements that continue to exert influence remain etched in memory — a valuable resource. If a company does not yet have such successes to showcase, it is prudent to provide detailed plans for the future without making unfounded claims. It is also advisable to engage credible partners, such as NGOs or foundations, who can lend their credibility to the company. Our qualitative interviews revealed that this is more effective than relying on labels and certificates, which consumers often struggle to understand. Additionally, a company's employees can serve as potent ambassadors for sustainability communication, embodying the company's sustainability efforts in a tangible manner.

Conclusion In terms of sustainability, it is particularly important for companies to build and maintain trust, whether in the B2B or B2C sector. Once the trust of the relevant target groups has been disturbed, companies have a hard time restoring it. The negative perception of sustainability remains in the minds of consumers for a long time.

Conclusions and recommendations for action

Recommendations

Based on both our broad quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews, we have identified some key challenges for sustainability communication in Switzerland. In the following, we highlight ways in which communication professionals can address these challenges:

“Greenwashing”

The fear of “greenwashing” often results in overly cautious - and in some cases unintentionally misleading - communication.

- Criticism and doubt can be prevented if statements are backed up with concrete data and facts.
- While it is important to strive for and publicize specific sustainability goals for the future, communication that reflects past successes serves as transparent “proof” for the audience.
- An accurate and understandable explanation of where the company is on its sustainability journey and which practices it is using to achieve future goals reduces the risk of (unintentional, negligent) “greenwashing”.

- Using clear and confident language in sustainability communications reassures consumers that the company is trustworthy. For example, instead of saying, “We are trying to reduce our CO₂ emissions”, a company could clearly say: “We are reducing our CO₂ emissions by (...) tons of emissions every year.”

Skepticism

Since corporate sustainability addresses problems caused by business itself, companies must expect — and overcome — a high degree of skepticism among stakeholders. This can be done via the following techniques:

- **Continuity:** Long-term commitment to a topic emphasizes the seriousness of the commitment. Companies should not be afraid of “repetition” in their communication, but should find creative ways to talk about the same topic with stakeholders on different levels (internal and external communication, corporate and brand communication...) and in different forms.
- **Cooperation:** Via strong and lasting partnerships (e.g. with NGOs, independent experts...), companies can not only ensure the correct alignment of their sustainability strategy but also strengthen the trust of the relevant target groups through external validation.

Conclusions and recommendations for action

Lack of consumer knowledge

Consumers often lack knowledge about sustainability, leading to misconceptions about a company's sustainability performance and causing them to draw undesirable conclusions.

- Consumers' knowledge of sustainability is improved by informing them about the key impacts of consumption and production in the respective industries. This can be done through advertising campaigns, dialog events, social media, etc.

Distorted perception of the size and sector of the company

Larger companies and those operating in "controversial" industries are generally perceived as less sustainable.

- By explaining the efficiency of larger companies (for example, in production processes or transportation), consumers gain a better understanding of sustainable practices.
- By investing more in sustainability projects (both environmental and social), larger companies can have a greater impact. They should emphasize this in their communication.

Translating complexity

It is sometimes difficult to "translate" the complex interrelationships of sustainability communication in such a way that a broad mass of people understand what is at stake.

- When using key figures in communication, comparative values that consumers already know help them to "digest" facts (an example: "Through this measure, we save X tons of waste every year — that's as much as an average village in Switzerland produces annually").
- Working with carefully selected emotions in communication allows brands to connect with consumers on a personal level.
- By explaining the "why" — the purpose — "behind" the facts, complexity is reduced and consumer knowledge is increased.

The interests of consumers

Companies do a lot for sustainability, but they often do not know what consumers are most interested in.

- Among the three sustainability dimensions, the environmental dimension is the most important from the consumer's point of view. It should therefore be a central element of corporate communication.
- Among the social criteria, decent working conditions as well as health and well-being are clearly of highest relevance for the participants of the present survey. In addition to commitment in these areas, communication of the corresponding activities is also of great importance.
- Among the environmental criteria, recycling emerges as the "top issue". And it also proves that the more tangible sustainable communication is crafted, the better the outcome will be.

Epilogue

Perspective of Publicis Groupe Switzerland, by Peter van der Touw

The role and responsibility of brands and communication agencies

This report addresses the multifaceted aspects of how consumers perceive corporate sustainability communications and the responsibilities that companies and their communications agencies bear in effectively conveying their sustainability efforts. Here are five key points of high importance highlighted in the report:

Consumers' Critical Awareness

The report underscores that consumers today are highly aware and discerning when it comes to evaluating a company's environmental and social practices. The emphasis on sustainability has amplified the significance of a company's actions and communication efforts. Consumers critically assess a company's sustainability practices and how well these are communicated.

Consumer Perceptions

Consumer judgments and opinions about companies and brands are increasingly influenced by their perceptions of sustainability initiatives and communication activities. How a company's sustainability efforts are perceived plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior, fostering brand loyalty, and determining the overall reputation of the company.

Responsibilities of Communications Agencies

Communications agencies are central in helping companies effectively convey their sustainability initiatives to consumers and stakeholders. They bear the responsibility of ensuring that communications are accurate, transparent, and trustworthy, avoiding

over-promising or under-delivering on sustainability commitments.

Harmonizing Promises and Reality

Communications agencies play a critical role in advising companies on how to strike a balance between setting ambitious sustainability goals and delivering concrete results. Aligning communication efforts with verifiable actions fosters credibility and trust among relevant audiences.

Educating Consumers

Both companies and communications agencies are tasked with the responsibility of educating consumers about intricate sustainability issues and initiatives. This involves demystifying myths, elucidating complex subjects, and empowering consumers with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions.

In essence, the report highlights the intricate relationship between consumer perceptions, sustainability actions, and communication strategies. It emphasizes the need for companies and communications agencies to navigate this landscape with transparency, credibility, and a commitment to educating consumers about sustainability practices.

Appendix 1: How the quantitative part of the SCOPES research was conducted

The quantitative part of the SCOPES report aimed to determine the key components of corporate sustainability that are most important to consumers. To provide context for this inquiry, participants' fundamental perspectives on sustainability were explored, along with their assessments of company sustainability measures. This data collection was carried out through a standardized questionnaire, structured as follows:

Part 1: Participant background and attitudes

The initial segment of the questionnaire started with inquiries of a general nature, including topics like employment, educational background, income, and more. Subsequently, it delved into areas such as self-assessment of knowledge, self-efficacy, and purchasing preferences related to corporate sustainability matters.

But what is “sustainability”, anyway?

In the opening summary of this paper, it was highlighted that sustainability encompasses diverse components. Therefore, our research is grounded in Errichiello's definition of sustainability, as outlined in Zschiesche (2022)¹⁸, which differentiates between economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

- **Economic sustainability** entails that companies prioritize long-term corporate objectives over short-term profit gains, avoiding actions that harm the environment and people.
- **Environmental sustainability** involves the responsible and efficient utilization of existing natural resources. It aims to minimize the environmental impact of production and consumption while facilitating the restoration of the environment.
- **Social sustainability** entails ensuring that all individuals involved in the production process receive fair and adequate compensation for their work.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of which aspects within these three dimensions are most important to the participants, the environmental and social dimensions were further divided into sub-criteria. For the social dimension, the criteria were aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015.

The UN SDGs aim to identify the most critical sustainability objectives and encourage cooperation among countries and sectors. All 193 member states have committed to working at national, regional, and international levels to achieve the SDGs by 2030¹⁹, making these goals highly relevant in practice. To assess companies, we selected the SDGs that have social implications and are measurable for companies as social criteria for this study.



¹⁸ Errichiello, O., & Zschiesche, A. (2022). Green Branding. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

¹⁹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Source: SDGs with social references, own diagram based on <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

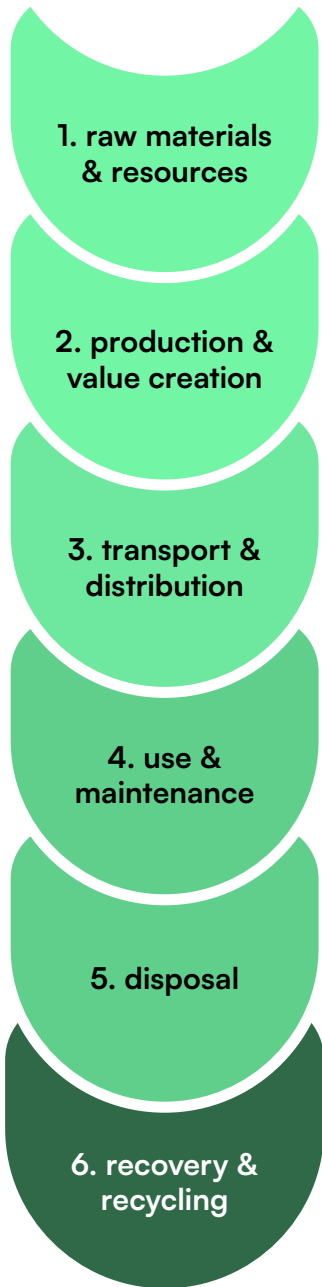
Appendix 1: How the quantitative part of the SCOPES research was conducted

The environmental criteria were structured around the concept of the product life cycle. The primary criteria used were derived from the work of Öberseder et al. (2014)²⁰ and Wagner et al. (2008)²¹. The questions addressed various environmental aspects across the value chain, including the significance of environmentally friendly materials, resource usage, energy consumption, utilization of renewable energy sources, emission reduction, environmental contamination, eco-friendly packaging and transportation, product environmental impact, waste minimization, and recycling and reusability.

Part 2: Unaided survey of sustainable businesses

Participants were requested to identify companies they perceive as notably sustainable. Furthermore, they were encouraged to provide explanations for their selections. This unaided survey was employed to identify which companies have a prominent presence among the participants in terms of sustainability.

Environmental criteria along the value chain



Source: own diagram

Part 3: Company-related assessment

The third section was designed for evaluating companies. Its objective was to assess 100 designated companies and subsequently establish a ranking based on perceived sustainability. In this process, 35 companies were presented to participants using a two-stage approach. Initially, participants were asked to select five companies from this list for which they could provide an opinion regarding their sustainability. Subsequently, participants were required to choose two companies from these five selections for which they held the strongest opinions regarding sustainability. For the two chosen companies, participants were asked to express their perceptions of the companies' sustainability practices, their overall impressions of the companies, and whether they considered the companies to be sustainable. Additionally, the companies' performance in the previously defined dimensions and criteria was assessed. As each participant evaluated two companies, a total of 11'110 company evaluations were collected.

Panel Description

To ensure the data's significance, a panel of 5'000 participants was targeted. Given that the study investigates perceptions of sustainability among companies in Switzerland, only residents of Switzerland were surveyed. The panel was organized and conducted by the Sinus Institute in collaboration with Gapfish, ultimately resulting in an adjusted number of 5'555 participants who can be categorized into the following groups:

²⁰ Öberseder, M., Schlegelmilch, B. B., Murphy, P. E., & Gruber, V. (2014). Consumers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 124, 101-115.
²¹ Wagner, T., Bicen, P., & Hall, Z. R. (2008). The dark side of retailing: towards a scale of corporate social irresponsibility. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 36(2), 124-142.

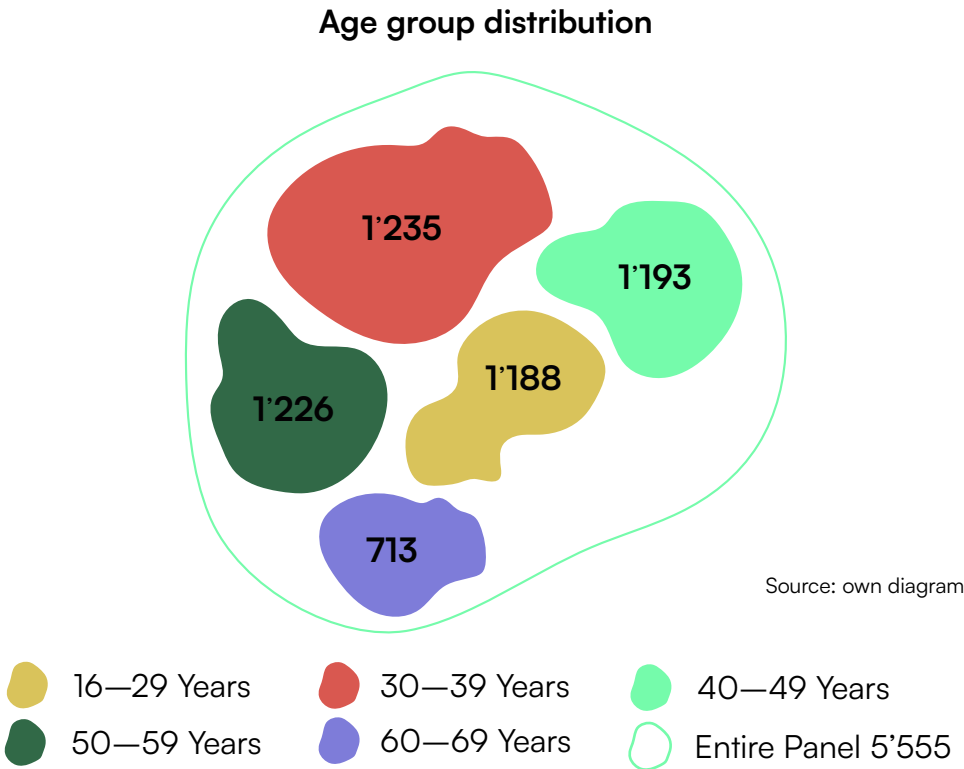
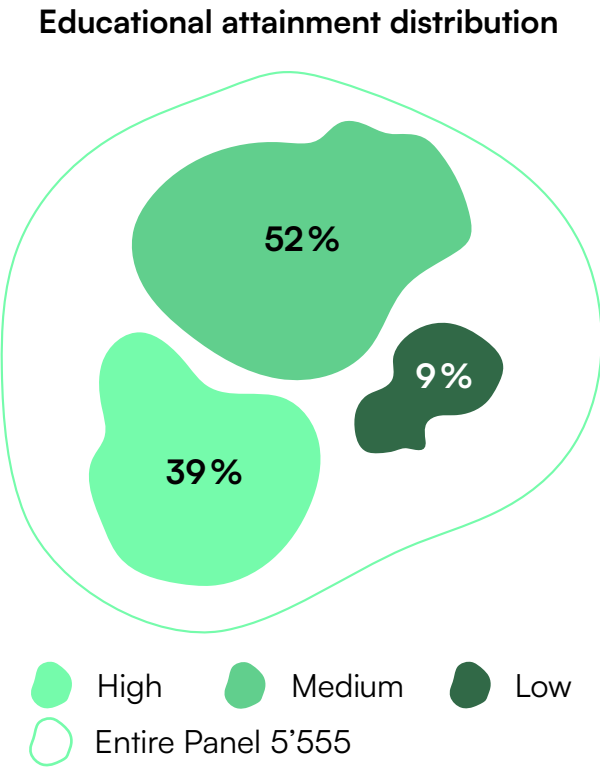
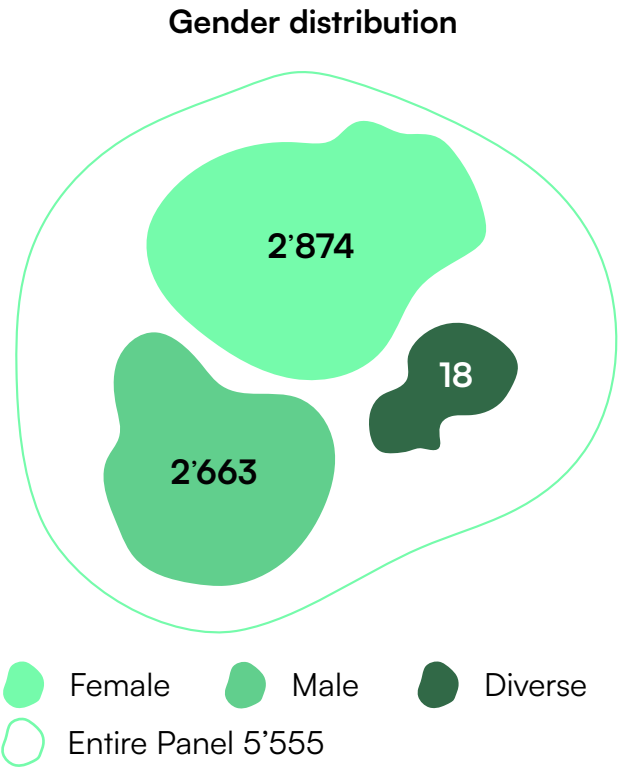
Appendix 1: How the quantitative part of the SCOPES research was conducted

Demographic composition of the quantitative panel

Total panel	Number
Number of participants	5'555
Gender distribution	
	Number
Female	2'874
Male	2'663
Diverse / Unspecified	18

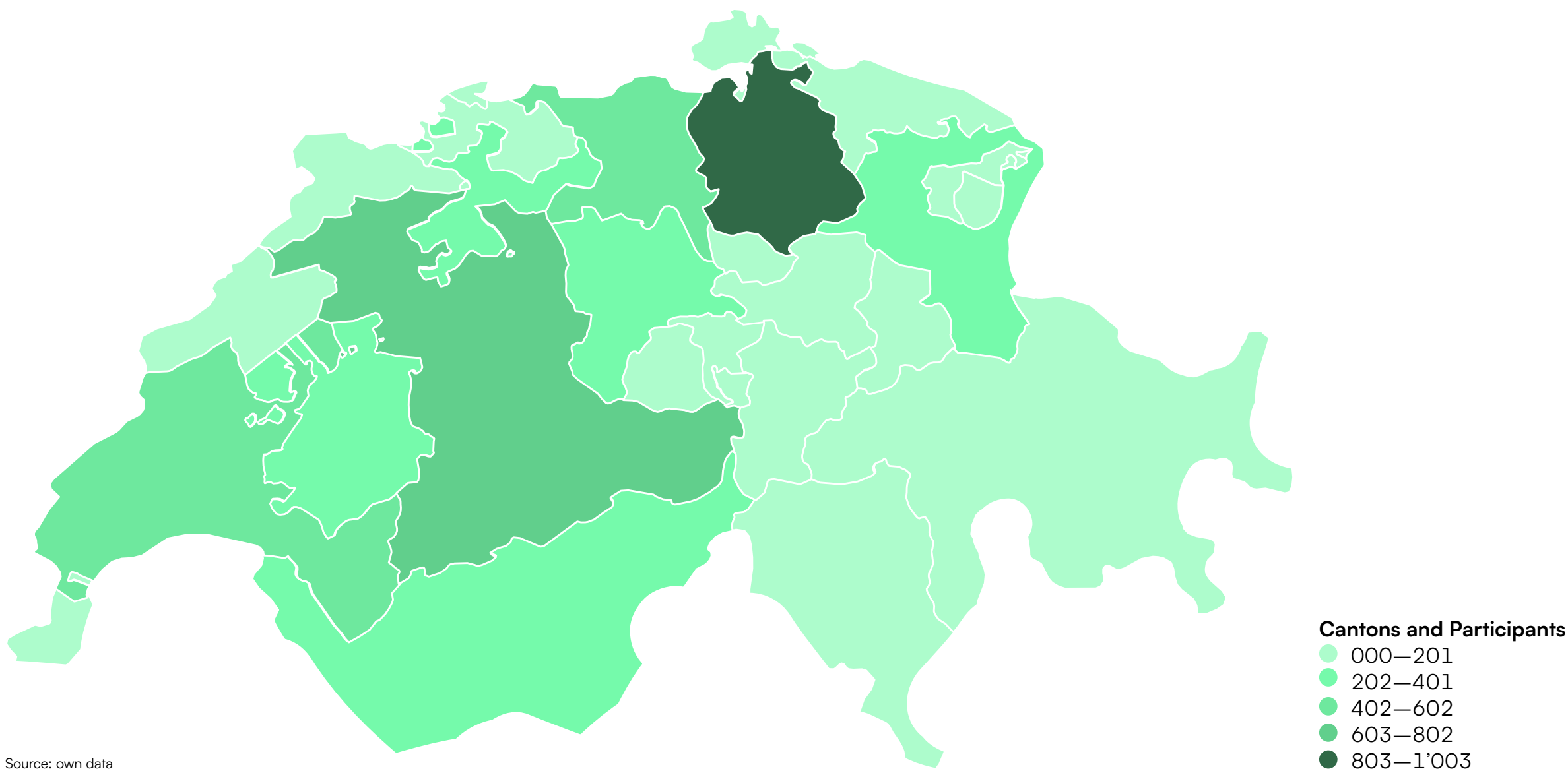
Educational attainment distribution		Number
Low	No education or comparative training (yet)	21
	Compulsory (mandatory) schooling	336
	Secondary school diploma or preconditions for vocational school	128
Medium	Apprenticeship for vocational school, full-time vocational school	2'370
	Grammar school	525
High	Higher technical / vocational school	785
	University of Applied Sciences	391
	University	999

Age group distribution	Number
Under 16	0
16—29 years	1'188
30—39 years	1'235
40—49 years	1'193
50—59 years	1'226
60—69 years	712
70 years or older	0



Appendix 1: How the quantitative part of the SCOPES research was conducted

Regional composition of the quantitative panel



Appendix 2: How the qualitative part of the SCOPES research was conducted

In addition to examining the consumer’s viewpoint through a quantitative study, a qualitative study was conducted to gain insights from the company’s perspective.

In addition to examining the consumer’s perspective through a quantitative study, a qualitative study was conducted to gain insights into the company’s perspective. This qualitative study employed a specific case study design to investigate how companies integrate sustainability into their corporate and brand communication. It aimed to assess the extent of integration between these two areas within the overall organization of the respective company and identify the primary challenges they face in doing so. Furthermore, the study sought to uncover the practices and strategies adopted by companies to address these challenges.

To select suitable case studies, five brands from various sectors and cantons in Switzerland were chosen. Interviews were conducted with individuals responsible for brand and/or corporate communication, as well as sustainability experts within these companies. In two cases, external brand/communication consultants from the companies were also interviewed. The 18 semi-structured interviews, which lasted an average of 60 minutes each, were primarily conducted in person at the companies’ headquarters, with two exceptions conducted via video call. Field notes were taken during these visits. Additionally, the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

To supplement the interviews, secondary data was collected from archived and visual sources such as sustainability reports, websites, advertising campaigns, television and video campaigns, packaging, and in-store experiences. To investigate the two-way sustainability communication between (corporate) brands and their stakeholders, the study also analyzed data from social media and public consumer reviews over the past two years.

The five selected brands are widely recognized in Switzerland, with four of them enjoying international recognition as well. The chosen cases encompass a diverse range of companies, including both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) entities, spanning both service and product providers. These brands also exhibit varying degrees of engagement in sustainability communication, from low to high.

In terms of company size, the number of employees across these companies varies: ranking from 1’200 to 62’000 employees and the highest turnover among these companies is nearly 29 billion Swiss francs. It’s important to note that the anonymity of these companies is maintained in the presentation of the study’s results.

	Sector	Consumer orientation*	Service / Product	Level of sustainability communication**
Case 1	Drinks	B2B2C	Product	Low
Case 2	Food	B2C	Product	Medium
Case 3	Transport	B2C	Services	Low
Case 4	Construction	B2B	Product	High
Case 5	Logistics	B2C	Services	Low

Overview of the selected companies

* Some companies are active in both sectors; here, we focus on the prevalent sector.

** Based on initial orientation via the companies’ websites and social media.

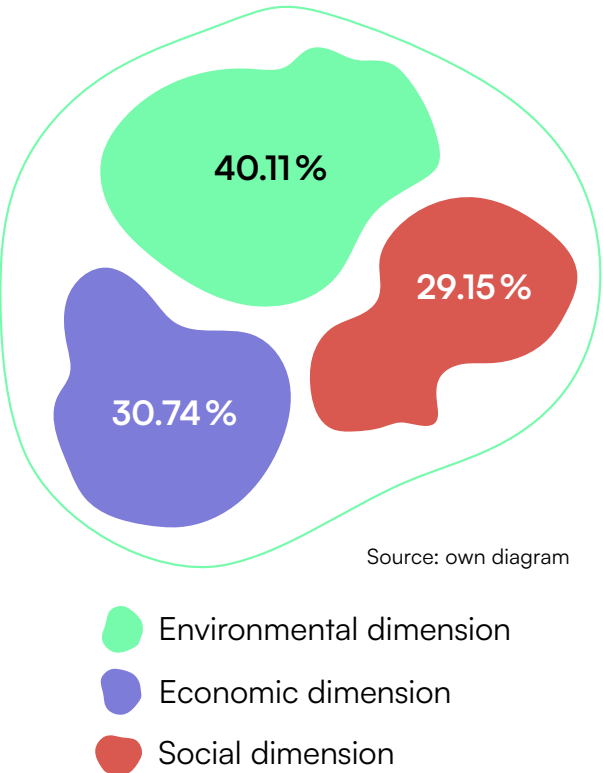
Source: own data

Appendix 3: A nuanced segmentation

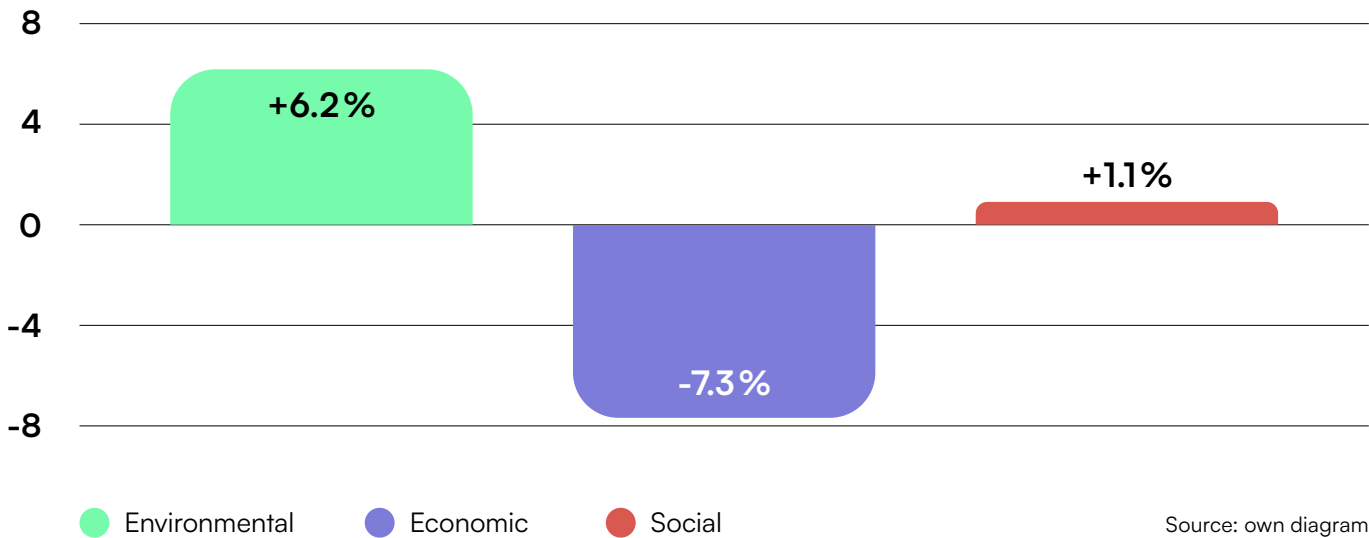
On the stated relevance of the dimensions

Both expert interviews and the data collected from 5'555 survey participants consistently highlight the environmental dimension as the most significant among the sustainability dimensions, with a clear lead. The economic dimension comes in as the second most important, closely trailed by the social dimension. While there is a reasonably distinct ranking of these dimensions, the presence of a very high standard deviation across all three dimensions underscores the existence of significantly divergent opinions and perspectives among the participants regarding their relevance.

Indicated relevance of the sustainability dimension from the participants' point of view



Actual influence of the dimensions on the company-related sustainability rating compared to the stated relevance



On the actual relevance of dimensions

To determine the actual impact of the three sustainability dimensions on a company's perception of sustainability, an lmg metric was employed. Through the analysis of 11'110 company assessments related to corporate sustainability in relation to their dimension performance, it was revealed that these three dimensions collectively account for 77.2% of the perception of sustainability.

Breaking down the influence of each dimension, two deviations from the initially stated relevance of the dimensions are particularly noteworthy:

1. The environmental dimension holds a 6% greater influence on the perception of a company as sustainable than what was previously indicated by its relevance.

2. Conversely, the influence of the economic dimension decreases by approximately 7%, while the social dimension remains relatively stable.

This analysis underscores the fact that consumers place significant weight on the environmental dimension when evaluating sustainability, not only in terms of its general importance but also in their company-specific assessments. Nonetheless, it is evident that both economic and social sustainability remain highly relevant factors in shaping consumer perceptions of sustainability.

Appendix 3: A nuanced segmentation of social criteria

The relevance of social criteria

To gain more precise insights into which aspects of sustainability matter most to consumers and should therefore be integrated into brand communication, both the environmental and social criteria were evaluated, in addition to the three overarching sustainability dimensions. The economic dimension was not further broken down. Participants were able to rate individual criteria on a scale from 1 to 7, indicating their subjective importance. This assessment yielded a ranking of criteria based on consciously made evaluations of their subjective relevance. It provides clarity on which criteria are considered most important and least important by the participants. In addition to assessing their conscious relevance, the actual influence of these criteria on the perception of a company as sustainable was calculated, using the same Img metric applied to the dimensions.

Ensuring health, well-being and decent working conditions emerge consistently from the actual (= calculated) relevance and the stated relevance as the most important social criteria from a business perspective.

Stated relevance of social criteria

When considering the relevance of social criteria, “creating decent working conditions” emerged as the most important criterion, closely followed by ensuring “health and well-being”. These two criteria are unsurprisingly ranked highest, as they have the most immediate impact on people’s daily lives and are highly relevant to their personal well-being. Given the ongoing international crisis situation, it’s also understandable that ensuring “peace, justice, and strong institutions” takes third place. The relatively less important criteria are “prosperity of people worldwide” and opportunities for “innovation and further development”. However, it’s important to note that all criteria are still rated very highly in absolute terms. Systematic evaluation differences are also evident among these sub-criteria. For instance, the most significant difference in the evaluation of social criteria is between

Stated relevance	Social criterion	Arithmetic mean value
1	Decent working conditions	6.16
2	Health & wellbeing	6.02
3	Peace, justice & strong public institutions	5.89
4	Gender equality	5.81
5	Equal conditions irrespective of disability, religion, social or ethnic origin, sexual orientation	5.81
6	Education and development	5.72
7	Humanitarian projects to prevent hunger	5.71
8	Innovation and further development	5.52
9	Prosperity of people all across the globe	5.48

Source: own data

men and women. While women rank “gender equality” as the third most important criterion, men place it only in eighth place. This indicates that the issue is considerably more important to women. Hence, corporate communications should take into account activities related to gender equality when targeting women. In terms of education levels, the most pronounced difference relates to “humanitarian projects to prevent hunger in the world”. The relevance of this criterion decreases significantly as education levels rise. Therefore, for less educated target audiences, it’s essential to communicate projects that ensure the fulfillment of basic needs.

Appendix 3: A nuanced segmentation of social criteria

Actual relevance of social criteria

The Img assessment was also conducted for the social criteria. The assurance of “health & well-being” and “decent working conditions” were reaffirmed as the most important social criteria and, consequently, have the greatest influence on the perception of a company as sustainable in the company-related assessment.

In the case of equal opportunities, the stated relevance (higher) and the actual (calculated) relevance (lower) differ greatly.

The last places and, consequently, the most significant deviation from the previous evaluation are evident for “equal conditions regardless of disabilities, religions, social or ethnic origin, or sexual orientation” and “gender equality”. While these criteria have a relatively high relevance in the direct survey, they exerted the least influence on the calculated actual weighting. Participants seem to consider these criteria as generally important, but this may not necessarily be reflected in their company-specific opinions. Expressed attitudes may not always align with actual intentions.

Actual relevance	Social criterion	Stated relevance
1	Health & wellbeing	2
2	Decent working conditions	1
3	Humanitarian projects to prevent hunger	7
4	Education and development	6
5	Peace, justice & strong public institutions	3
6	Prosperity of people all across the globe	9
7	Innovation and further development	8
8	Equal conditions irrespective of disability, religion, social or ethnic origin, sexual orientation	5
9	Gender equality	4

Source: own data

Appendix 3: A nuanced segmentation of environmental criteria

The relevance of environmental criteria

Consumers place particular emphasis on tangible elements such as recycling and waste avoidance in their environmental assessment. Energy consumption and CO₂ reduction, on the other hand, are assigned significantly lower importance. However, when assessing the importance of these criteria in relation to consumer judgments, a different order emerges, highlighting the instability of the assessment.

Indicated relevance of environmental criteria

The environmental criteria were also evaluated based on the mean values provided on a 7-point Likert scale across the 11110 company-related assessments. The resulting prioritization is displayed on the right.

“Recycling and reuse” clearly emerges as the most important criterion, with both its mean value and the lowest variance confirming its top position in the ranking. This criterion holds the highest relevance for consumers and should be included in corporate communication.

It’s noteworthy in this prioritization that “reduction of energy consumption” and “CO₂ reduction” occupy the last two positions. These criteria are crucial key performance indicators (KPIs) in corporate practice and reporting but may lack tangibility for participants. The more tangible a topic is, the higher it’s rated in this ranking.

CO₂ emissions, which are frequently communicated in corporate language, are indeed relevant in reality but might be considered the least important criterion

Stated relevance	Environmental criterion	Arithmetic mean value
1	Recycling & reuse	6.16
2	Waste prevention	5.91
3	Waste prevention	5.82
4	Minimizing the consumption of resources	5.73
5	Use of environmentally-friendly materials	5.69
6	Use of renewable energies	5.69
7	Environmentally-friendly packaging & transport	5.57
8	Environmental compatibility of the products	5.57
9	Reduction of energy consumption	5.56
10	CO ₂ reduction	5.51

Source: own data

by consumers due to their lack of tangibility. However, overall, the mean value for all ten criteria is very high, with even the lowest value being 5.51 on a scale of 7.

Appendix 3: A nuanced segmentation of environmental criteria

If we condense the ten criteria associated with the product life cycle into six stages, it becomes evident that, from the consumer’s perspective, recovery and recycling hold the highest importance. Subsequently, waste reduction and the selection of environmentally friendly materials and resources closely follow. Surprisingly, the production phase ranks only fourth in significance.

Interestingly, the phases of use and maintenance, along with transportation and distribution, are considered the “least important”, despite being areas largely influenced by consumers. On one hand, consumers can often actively choose how a product is shipped and whether they want to offset emissions. On the other hand, they can make eco-conscious decisions when selecting products. This suggests that increased consumer responsibility and control reduce the relevance of business activities in these domains.

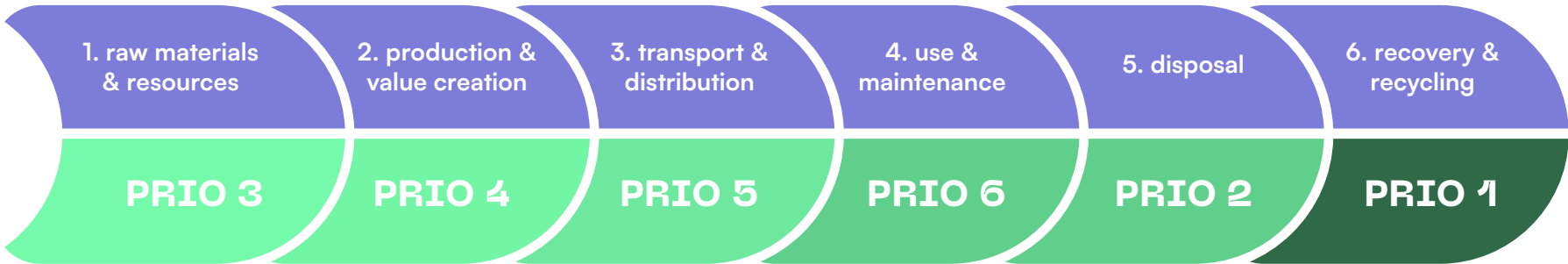
Nevertheless, even within environmental criteria, variations in prioritization are evident. The most pronounced disparities become apparent when comparing different regions. For instance, in Italian-speaking Switzerland, “use of renewable energies” ranks as the second most important criterion, whereas, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, it falls to sixth place, signifying its reduced relevance in this region.

Influence factors such as the tangibility of the criterion come into play. Due to a higher potential for solar energy generation in Italian-speaking Switzerland, it is plausible that photovoltaic systems are more prevalent, leading to a greater emphasis on renewable energies in this area.

Italian-speaking:
higher relevance of renewable energies

German-speaking:
higher relevance of resource consumption

Prioritisation along the productlife cycle from the consumer’s point of view



Source: own diagram

Appendix 3: A nuanced segmentation of environmental criteria

This underscores the distinction between the deliberate prioritization of environmental criteria and the inadvertent, calculated impact these criteria subsequently exert on the company’s evaluation. It becomes evident that consumers’ judgment is not steadfast; evidently, they encounter challenges in defining their preferences.

Actual relevance of the environmental criterion

Similar to the social criteria, notable disparities between the declared and computed importance were observed for the environmental criteria. In this assessment, “pollution prevention” emerged as the most influential criterion. Surprisingly, “recycling & reuse” ranked second to last rather than first. This suggests that while participants view this criterion as highly significant, its actual incorporation by companies appears to have the least impact on their perception of a sustainable company.

Actual relevance	Environmental criterion	Stated relevance
1	Waste prevention	3
2	Use of environmentally-friendly materials	5
3	Minimizing the consumption of resources	4
4	Waste prevention	2
5	Use of renewable energies	6
6	Environmentally-friendly packaging & transport	7
7	CO ₂ reduction	10
8	Reduction of energy consumption	9
9	Recycling & reuse	1
10	Environmental compatibility of the products	8

Source: own data

Appendix 4: How the list of companies and brands to be "ranked" was generated

Which companies are perceived by people in Switzerland as being particularly sustainable and how can this be explained?

To address this question, the SCOPES research project examined how the public perceives sustainability among the 100 most prominent branded goods and service companies in Switzerland. The process involved several steps:

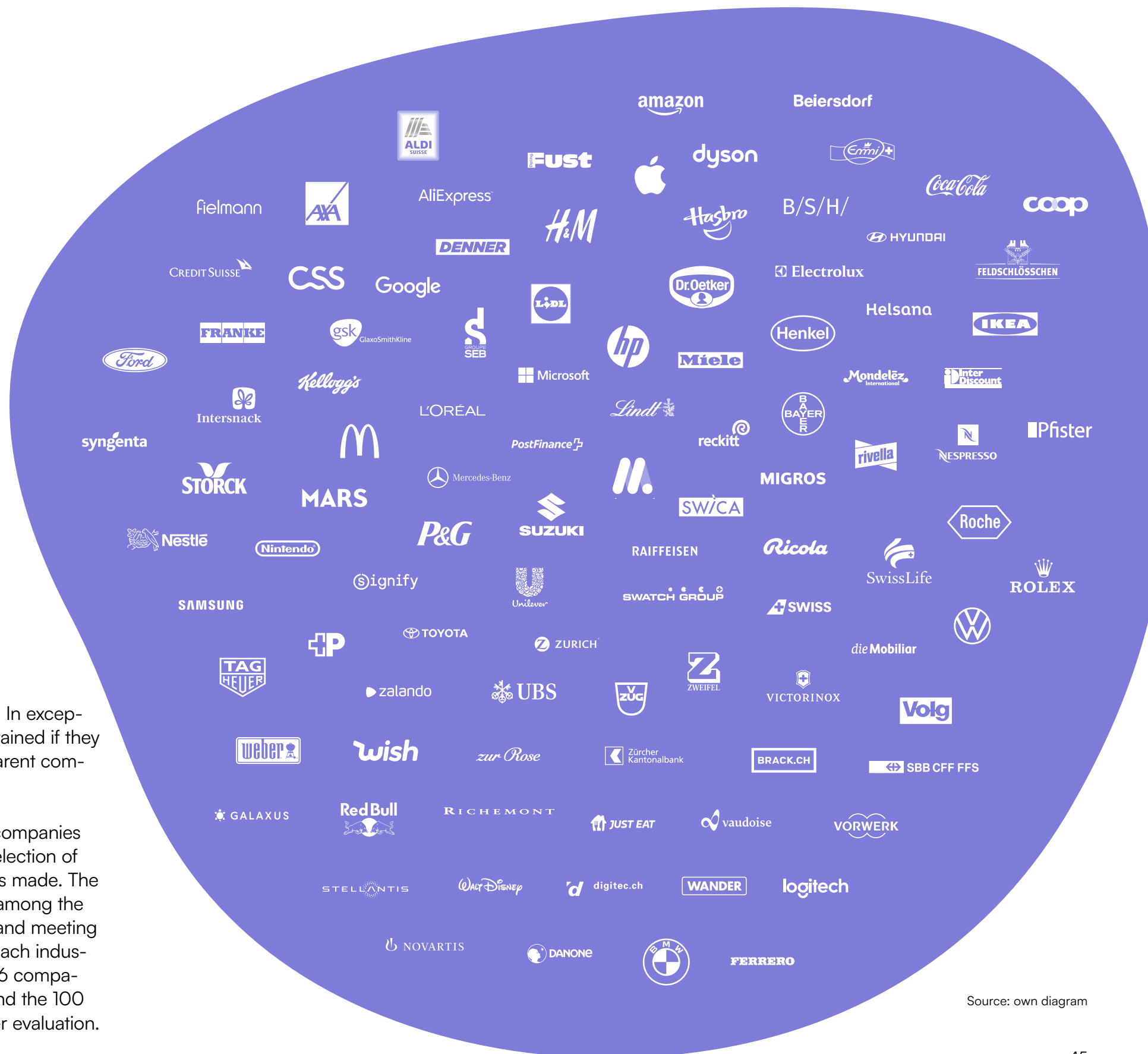
Initially, a list of the top 500 companies with the highest turnover in Switzerland was obtained from sources like Handelszeitung and Dun & Bradstreet. This list was supplemented by a roster of Promarca members, totaling 101 companies. Lists of the largest banks (20), insurance companies (20), and B2C online shops (10) were incorporated. Furthermore, a list of the 100 companies with the highest advertising expenditure in Switzerland, provided by Publicis, was included.

This amalgamation resulted in a comprehensive list of 673 companies. To determine the most relevant companies within this list, several steps were taken:

The companies were categorized into various sectors, with 16 of them identified as being most accessible to customers. Overlapping companies were identified, and it was decided to prioritize the company's brand while

excluding associated trademarks. In exceptional cases, sub-brands were retained if they operated independently of the parent company's brand.

After these steps, a total of 346 companies remained, from which the final selection of the 100 most relevant brands was made. The selection criteria included being among the “Top Advertisers in Switzerland” and meeting a turnover threshold relevant to each industry. By applying these criteria, 246 companies were excluded, leaving behind the 100 most significant brands for further evaluation.



Source: own diagram

Appendix 4: How the list of companies and brands to be “ranked” was generated

The 5’555 participants in the study were each asked to rate two companies of their choice based on their perceived sustainability. The selection of these brands occurred in two steps:

First, out of the total 100 companies, 35 were randomly presented to all participants. From this initial list, participants were required to choose 5 companies they had opinions about regarding sustainability.

Next, participants were asked to select only 2 out of the 5 previously chosen companies that they felt most competent to judge in terms of sustainability. Subsequently, they answered company-specific questions for these 2 selected companies.

In this manner, the 5’555 participants provided a total of 11’110 company evaluations. To ensure a relatively even distribution of the number of evaluations among companies, the number of evaluations per company was capped at 300. Once a company reached this limit, it was no longer available for selection by subsequent participants.

The companies displayed most frequently in the second step, and thus subject to this evaluation limit, appear to have garnered notable attention in terms of corporate sustainability and/or general awareness. Additionally, to maintain the representativeness of the statements, it was determined that a company must have received evaluations from more than 30 participants to be included in the ranking.



Source: own data

Non-selection of certain companies could be attributed to two possible reasons: either these companies were not sufficiently known to consumers, or respondents had no perception of their sustainability efforts. The latter scenario may indicate that these companies were relatively inactive in their communication regarding sustainability or were not associated with sustainability-related topics — either positively or negatively — for various reasons. It’s also plausible that consumers were familiar with the products but not the specific brands, leading to non-selection.

The companies excluded due to a low number of evaluations are the following:

After excluding these companies, 78 companies remained and are thus part of the ranking.



Source: own data

Appendix 4: How the list of companies and brands to be “ranked” was generated

In order to create a ranking of companies that best reflects the subjective perception of corporate sustainability, an index was created and named “Weighted Dimension Performance”.

The calculation of this index involves multiplying the relevance of the three dimensions, as determined through the constant sum procedure, by the company’s performance rating on each respective dimension. For each company, the mean values were computed from the weighted dimension performance scores provided by all participants who evaluated that company. This mean value serves as the basis for classifying perceived corporate sustainability.

This approach ensures a customer-centric evaluation, considering both the importance of sustainability criteria and how well companies fulfill them.

The index values assigned to the companies were then categorized into six groups using a clustering method. Consequently, the most substantial disparities in values are observed between these clusters, with relatively minor differences among companies within the same cluster. This results in a ranking that divides the companies into positions

1 to 6, with the “Top 5” companies highlighted within the first section. It’s important to note that the order within each section is based solely on alphabetical order and does not imply any specific ranking placement.

The formula beyond the ranking

$$\emptyset = \frac{1}{n} \times \sum_{i=1}^n (R_{i_{economy}} \times P_{i_{economy}}) + (R_{i_{environment}} \times P_{i_{environment}}) + (R_{i_{society}} \times P_{i_{society}})$$

n = Number of ratings of the respective company
R = Individual relevance of the dimensions
P = Perceived performance of the companies in the context of the respective dimension

Appendix 5: The industry ranking

In addition to the brand ranking, a ranking of 16 industries was made.

In this evaluation, the individual company assessments that were previously excluded were incorporated into the sector-based analysis. Similar to the brand rankings, averages were computed using the weighted dimension performance index. For each industry, all company-specific ratings were consolidated into a single value. Consequently, a ranking of sectors, with sustainability perception descending, was established. All 16 sectors received a substantial number of ratings, ensuring the meaningfulness of the values within this classification.

Rank	Sector	Weighted Dimension Performance
1	Various consumer goods	5.11
2	Household appliances	5.10
3	Primary insurance	5.08
4	Furnishing	5.07
5	Luxury goods & watches	5.05
6	Logistics & transport	4.99
7	Snacks & confectionery	4.98
8	Retail & food trade	4.80
9	Mobility	4.79
10	Banks	4.75
11	Consumer electronics	4.72
12	Beauty & hygiene	4.51
13	Beverages	4.49
14	Food	4.39
15	Chemicals & pharma	4.04
16	Online mail order companies	3.26

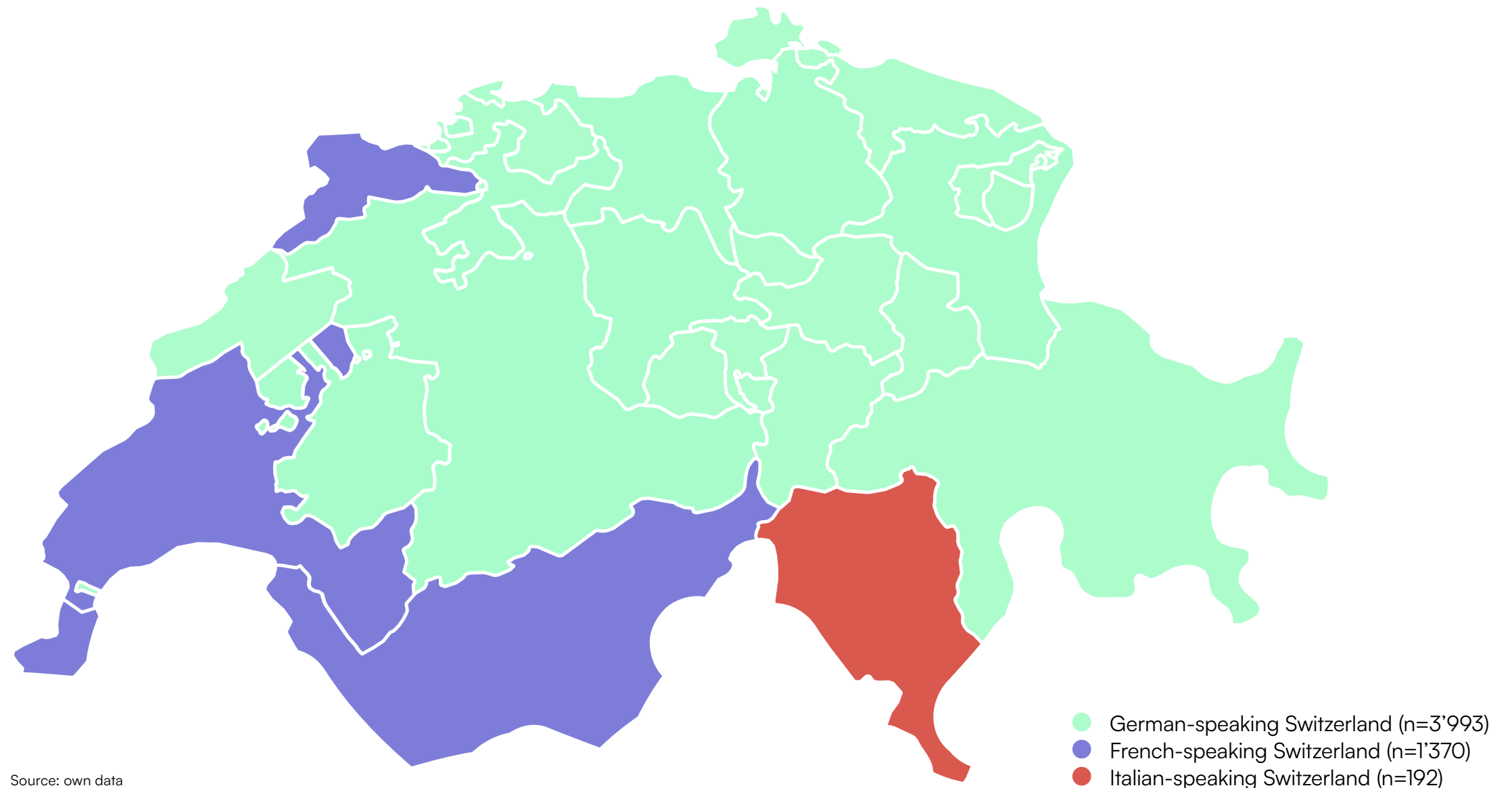
Source: own data

Appendix 6: The ranking by region

3'993 people from the German-speaking, 1'370 people from the French-speaking and 192 people from Italian-speaking Switzerland took part in the SCOPES report.

For the SCOPES study, participants were categorized into three language regions based on their place of residence. Much like the age-specific ranking, a minimum of 10 ratings per company was set as the threshold. However, it's important to note that in Italian-speaking Switzerland, the number of ratings per company is notably low, which limits the extent to which meaningful comparisons can be made with the other language regions. Only the following companies received at least ten ratings in Italian-speaking Switzerland: PostFinance, IKEA, Raiffeisen, H&M, Die Post, Nespresso, Lidl, SBB, and Coop.

Ranking according to regions



Appendix 7: Sustainability, but make it spontaneous

An unaided survey was conducted before the 100 companies were ranked.

The aim here was to determine which companies immediately come to mind when participants are asked about a sustainable company. Participants were allowed to name up to five companies and provide reasons for considering them particularly sustainable. A total of 4’846 companies and reasons were mentioned. This unaided ranking revealed Swissness as a driver of sustainable perception, with the “Top 5” companies in this ranking all being headquartered in Switzerland.

In addition to the influence of Swissness and the origin effect, analyzing the reasons provided by consumers for their sustainability assessments yields valuable insights. By coding and clustering these reasons, a multitude of factors were grouped into overarching categories that are independent of specific companies, thus enabling sorting by relevance. The categories of reasons listed on the right were the most frequently mentioned, with the top three categories each cited over 250 times. The most frequently cited reasons fell under the “recycling and reuse” category, affirming the findings of the study on environmental sub-criteria. Alongside the general “commitment to sustainability”, the topic of “regionality” emerged as a significant driver of sustainable perception in various forms. Regional products and production played a major role, emphasizing the importance of regional activities by companies to consumers, which should be effectively communicated.

Unaided sustainability ratings by company

Rank	Company	Number of nominations
1	Migros	698
2	COOP	446
3	Nestle	132
3	Swisscom	132
4	SBB	127
5	Nikin	122
6	Lidl	77
7	Post	68
8	Ikea	64
9	Aldi	54
10	Too good to go	52
11	BMW	34
11	UBS	34

Source: own data

Migros was the most frequently mentioned company in the unaided survey, with 695 mentions. The topic of “regionality” emerged as the primary reason for its sustainability, closely followed by “organic products”. These two topics also stood out as the most significant drivers of corporate sustainability for Coop.

An interesting finding from the unaided survey is the frequent mention of Nestlé. This reinforces the previously observed origin effect, with almost 50 percent of mentions coming from French-speaking Switzerland, despite participants from this region comprising only about 25 percent of the total panel. Additionally, Nestlé’s constant presence in sustainability discussions contributes to its prominence when people contemplate sustainability. Reasons for considering Nestlé a sustainable company varied widely, reflecting Nestlé’s comprehensive commitment to sustainability rather than being attributed to a specific group of reasons.

Unaided sustainability judgements according to criteria

Rank	Reason
1	Recycling & reuse
2	Commitment to sustainability
3	Regionality
4	“Organic”
5	Transport & packaging
6	Sustainable products
7	CO ₂ reduction / neutrality
8	Renewable energy
9	Waste & disposal
10	Sustainable production
11	Planting trees
12	Innovation
13	General protection of the environment
14	Electric vehicles
15	Resources

Source: own data

Appendix 8: Facts and emotions in sustainability communication

	Facts	Emotions
Features	• Often require (some) expertise • Crucial for good governance (coherence, transparency, accuracy, accountability) • Important for corporate sustainability communication	• Do not require expert knowledge • Value-oriented • The creation of an emotional bond with the consumer is crucial • Important for some types of brand communication
When to use	• Functional / rational brands • Tracking progress • Increasing credibility • Communication of proof points • Particularly relevant for environmental issues such as climate change • Useful for longer messages and media (e.g. print) • Targeting B2B; Investor relations	• Emotional brands • Bringing new topics to the market • Reflect the values of the brand • When consumer engagement is required (e.g. for recycling) • Particularly relevant for social issues related to care and concern • Useful for short messages and media (e.g. TV) • Targeting B2C

Appendix 9: **Limitations** of this report

It is inherent in reports of this nature that they cannot provide a definitive assessment of the topic. Instead, their purpose is to initiate a discussion on sustainability communication in Switzerland and offer an initial, significant contribution to this discourse. Nonetheless, it's essential to acknowledge certain limitations of this report.

Limitations of the quantitative study include:

- In some instances, there are only slight differences between the ratings of criteria. As a result, the ranking of criteria relevance represents more of a tendency than a clear consumer preference.
- The study exclusively reflects the perspective of Swiss consumers. It predominantly focuses on B2C communication, with a few exceptions, and exclusively involves Swiss citizens.
- There is no direct link between consumers' actual behavior and their evaluation of different brands. This means that consumers might assess a brand negatively in terms of sustainability but still purchase its products for reasons not covered in this study, such as price or availability.
- Since this is a one-time cross-sectional analysis rather than a longitudinal time-series study, it cannot establish cause-effect relationships. Instead, it can only interpret correlations between variables.

Limitations of the qualitative study include:

- The results are drawn from five cases representing five industries, which restricts the ability to generalize the findings. Nonetheless, this approach permitted in-depth interviews with company managers.
- While 80 percent of the cases involve companies with both Swiss and global operations, the study's results are specifically related to Switzerland. This may limit the broader applicability of the findings to a global context.

Appreciation & Thanks

Grownate, the University of St. Gallen (HSG), and Publicis Groupe Switzerland express their gratitude to the funding partners for their generous support, as well as to the creators, contributors, companies, and interview partners for their valuable assistance.

The authors, staff, and interview partners have made significant contributions to this report on their own initiative and behalf.

Grownate

Grownate is a Swiss startup dedicated to developing an innovative platform that fosters communication and interaction within the realm of sustainability. This platform functions as a networking hub, connecting companies, individuals, and organizations, and facilitating credible communication and collective engagement in sustainability efforts. Key features of the platform include diverse forms of active consumer involvement, as well as collaborative initiatives and projects spanning multiple companies.

[Website](#)

University of St. Gallen (HSG)

The University of St. Gallen (HSG) was established in 1898, during the peak of the St. Gallen embroidery industry. Initially founded as a commercial academy, it has evolved into a comprehensive university offering programs in economics, law, social sciences, international relations, and information technology. The first lectures were conducted in 1899. Throughout its history, the HSG has been

known for its commitment to practical relevance and an integrated perspective in education. Today, it stands as one of the prominent business universities in Europe, holding accreditations from EQUIS, AACSB, and AMBA, which reflect its high academic standards and quality.

[Website](#)

Involved were the

Institute for Economy and the Environment, which aims to equip future business leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary to confront global sustainability and climate challenges. This is achieved through rigorous research and impactful teaching efforts.

[Website](#)

and the

Institute for Marketing & Customer Insight, which enjoys the highest recognition as a leading academic institution in science, practice, politics and society for its diverse contributions in the fields of marketing and customer insight.

[Website](#)

Publicis Groupe Switzerland

Publicis Groupe Switzerland stands as the largest communications group in Switzerland, boasting a team of over 300 specialists. Under one roof, it unites renowned entities such as Publicis Zurich, Leo Burnett, Saatchi & Saatchi, Prodigious, MetaDesign, Bagels of Berkeley, Publicis Media, Zenith, Spark Foundry, Starcom, Notch, Performics, and Publicis Sapient. Through the “Power of One” strategy, the clients of Publicis enjoy seamless access to the full spectrum of services.

The agencies of Publicis provide a comprehensive range of offerings, spanning from communication to media, data, and technology. Publicis Groupe as a whole boasts a global presence with approximately 100'000 experts operating in over 100 countries.

[Website](#)

Imprint

Lead authors

Zsuzsa Borsa, MSc (HSG)
Oliver Brockschmidt, MSc (HSG)

Co-authors

Prof Dr Judith Walls (HSG)
Prof Dr Sven Reinecke (HSG)
Andrea Fritschi, MBA (Grownate)
Charlotta Relander, MA (Grownate)
Dr Alexander Haldemann
(Publicis Groupe Switzerland)
Peter van der Touw, MSc
(Publicis Groupe Switzerland)

Contributors from Grownate

Dr Willi Leimer
Andrea Fritschi, MBA
Charlotta Relander, MA

Contributors from HSG

Prof Dr Judith Walls
Prof Dr Sven Reinecke
Zsuzsa Borsa, MSc
Oliver Brockschmidt, MSc

Contributors from Publicis Groupe Switzerland

Dr Alexander Haldemann
Peter van der Touw, MSc
Fabienne Baumgartner, FA

Design & Layout

Jürg Schaeppi
Nina Martens
Nicolas Leuthold
Cédric Moore
Nils Mäder

Cover

Picture credits: Roberto Moiola / Sysaworld
Bachalpsee, Grindelwald, BE, Switzerland

Market / Social research institute

Sinus Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH
Teil der INTEGRAL-SINUS-OPINION Group
Adenauerplatz 1
69115 Heidelberg, Germany
Phone: +49 6221 80 89-0

Disclaimer

This Sustainability Marketing Report has been prepared for information purposes only. It is intended to provide a general overview of sustainability practices and trends in Switzerland and does not constitute professional advice or recommendations.

Although every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information presented in this report (websites, charts, graphs, illustrations, discussions and statements), we make no representations or warranties, express or implied, as to the reliability, suitability or availability of the content. The information provided is based in part on publicly available sources and our state of knowledge in 2022 and 2023, and therefore may not reflect the most current developments or changes in the sustainability landscape.

The content of this report should not be considered a substitute for professional advice or judgment. Readers are advised to conduct their own independent research and seek advice from qualified experts before making any business or investment decisions related to sustainability initiatives or marketing strategies in Switzerland.

In no event shall we be liable for any loss or damage arising out of or in connection with the use of this report. This includes, but is not limited to, indirect or consequential loss or damage, loss of data or loss of profits arising out of or in connection with the use of this report.

Mention of third-party organizations, products or services in this report does not constitute an endorsement or recommendation. We have no control over the content or actions of external organizations and cannot be held responsible for inaccuracies, omissions or consequences arising from their activities.

This report may contain forward-looking statements that involve risks and uncertainties. Actual results may differ materially from those expressed or implied by such statements. Past results are not indicative of future results.

By using this report, you agree to hold us harmless from any claims, damages, losses, liabilities, costs or expenses arising out of or related to your use of the report.

Copyright and intellectual property rights in this report are owned by the authors and may not be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission.

Please note that sustainability laws, regulations and practices in Switzerland are subject to change. This report should be considered a snapshot of the sustainability landscape at the time of its preparation and does not necessarily reflect the current legal or regulatory framework.

This disclaimer is governed by and construed in accordance with Swiss law. Any disputes arising from the use of this report

shall be subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the courts of Switzerland.

If you do not agree with any part of this disclaimer, please do not use this report.

**Date of the initial publication:
August 22, 2023.**

Contact

Do you have any questions about the SCOPES Report 2023?
fabienne.baumgartner@publicis.com
will be happy to help.

As part of our consistent commitment to sustainability, we ask all readers **not to print this report, but to use it via digital channels in the spirit of our shared responsibility for the environment.**