THE 'S' WORD

c_space

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 'S' word is urgent, universal and unavoidable. It is also paralysing. The climate emergency is the most existential issue facing the planet. Yet 'sustainability' is one of the biggest drivers of inaction. It challenges governments who remain hostage to short-term needs for votes and vested corporate interests. It roots brands fearful of greenwashing and green-hushing to the spot. It makes culture warriors of consumers who feel lost, humbled, righteous, confused and guilty all at once. Sustainability is toxic. Sustainability is life-giving. Sustainability needs a new approach.

The climate emergency is undeniable except for those who deny it. And everybody in between. Attitudes towards sustainability have become so tricky to measure that many brands have given up trying. But the need to find a better way grows more pressing by the day. The say-do excuse ('our customers say they want sustainability but don't follow through') is wearing thin. Generations Z and Alpha – the customers shaping your future – demand you take more responsibility now. More sustainable ways of doing business are becoming an inevitable licence to operate, to the extent that many young people don't even consider it up for debate. And from supply chains to compliance, customer loyalty to product development, reputation management to investment, time is getting shorter for businesses who can't walk the talk on sustainability.

With this landmark piece of research from C Space covering more than 4,000 people across three continents, we've identified a new way forward for brands with sustainability. A way that respects and celebrates differences across products, sectors and markets. That recognises that commercial success and sustainability need not be at odds. That doesn't seek to slot consumers into unhealthy, antagonistic categories. That aims to make connections, build relationships and grow communities. That breaks apart our dysfunctional love triangles.

Dysfunctional love triangles? Yes, because this is what relationships on sustainability between brands, consumers and governments have become. Seething maelstroms of finger-pointing and distrust, where everyone else is always to blame. This 'S' word study dismantles these fractured connections and examines the five battlegrounds on which they play out: cost, effort, closeness, trust, and judgement. We offer up a new approach to research and strategy; one that recognises flaws in traditional segmentations, rethinks recruitment, unpicks the say/do gap and takes a more collaborative approach to building strategies and propositions.

We wind up in a more hopeful position than before. People crave leadership from companies on sustainability. They also want products that enrich their lives and brands they can trust. They want the good life. And we believe the good life and sustainability can work together. We're your expert guides, combining relationship thinking with a range of research and consultancy tools to help you navigate this complex space. With a more empathetic, benefit-led approach, current customer relationships can deepen, and new ones can be forged – beginning by rethinking the brand role you can play in your customers' sustainability stories.

This chapter ends there. But we'd love to continue the conversation with brands interested in strengthening customer relationships around sustainability.

Denise Hicks,
Global Climate Lead, and the C Space Climate Thinktank

METHODOLOGY

×11 MARKETS

UK, US, CN, AUS, DE, MX, KSA, NG, IN, PL, UA

8 IN-HOME INTERVIEWS

9 ONLINE COMMUNITIES

12 GROUP PARTICIPANTS

417 COMMUNITY MEMBERS

639 INDIVIDUAL STORIES

3,900 QUANTITATIVE RESPONSES

6 EXPERTS

Kate Shally
Marketing Director Pep+,
PepsiCo

Michael Lotfy Gierges
Executive Vice President
Home & Distribution,
Schneider Electric

Michelle Carvill
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

Gemma Butler
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

Alison Nuttall
Head of Sustainability Operations,
Jaguar Land Rover

Kian Bakhtiari
Founder of
THE PEOPLE

THE CONTEXT

FIRST CLIMATE CHANGE, THEN CLIMATE CRISIS AND NOW CLIMATE EMERGENCY. GLOBAL WARMING HAS BECOME GLOBAL HEATING. OUR ESCALATING LANGUAGE REFLECTS THE GROWING URGENCY OF THE SITUATION.

THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE ON OUR DOORSTEP

The climate emergency is no longer a peripheral concern.

It’s true that people living in the Global South have the worst of it. But from climate migration to extreme weather events to life-threatening pollution levels, global heating is affecting people in the Global North too. A recent survey of over 20,000 consumers across five continents found that almost 9 in 10 feel the disruptive effects of climate change in their lives.

Of course, this matters for the health of our planet, for people to thrive and for biodiversity to flourish. But, more than ever, it also matters for brands. Climate change no longer only impacts people living in remote, vulnerable places; right now, and for the foreseeable future, it affects consumers everywhere.

9/10

PEOPLE, GLOBALLY, FEEL THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THEIR LIVES.

THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND THE REAL RISKS TO BUSINESS

Global warming poses threats to businesses from all directions. As more people become affected by climate impacts, their attitudes and behaviour towards brands are changing. Three-quarters of Gen Z – who, by 2034 will spend USD $9 trillion globally – prioritise sustainable purchases over brand names. The latest results from the world's largest survey on climate change (1.2 million people across 50 countries) show that 32% of us think about climate change daily, more than half are more worried than last year, and only 39% feel that big businesses are doing a good job of tackling the problem.

Across markets, people are exposing brands to greater scrutiny. And when greenwashing accusations stick, the consequences are devastating. Customers lose faith, lawsuits mount, and brands lose their competitive edge.

Further up the value chain, raw materials are becoming scarcer, extreme weather is affecting farming and transport networks, and physical infrastructure is at greater risk of damage. Operational issues are more common, and the costs of insuring against climate-related disruptions are rising. At the same time, regulatory bodies are ramping up thresholds for compliance, including more stringent net-zero targets. Clients shun suppliers and investors shun businesses without robust sustainability commitments in place. A World Economic Forum survey found that 97% of executives say they have already felt the effects of climate change. Worse, almost half of CEOs globally believe their businesses will not be viable in a decade due to climate pressures. Nevertheless, only one fifth are taking decisive steps on sustainability.

It's clear that the effects of climate change are felt across businesses, and only those with integrated strategic solutions will successfully weather the storm.

"

IT'S NO LONGER NICE TO HAVE, IT'S NO LONGER A BUZZWORD… IT'S A LICENSE TO OPERATE. IT'S OUR LICENSE TO INNOVATE, IT'S OUR LICENSE TO MANUFACTURE, AND IT'S OUR LICENSE TO SERVE CUSTOMERS.

Michael Lotfy Gierges,
Executive Vice President
Home & Distribution,
Schneider Electric

"

WE SEE UPWARDS OF 70 - 80% OF CONSUMERS NOW TELLING US THIS IS IMPORTANT TO THEM. THIS IS SOMETHING THAT THEY CARE ABOUT. AND THIS IS SOMETHING THAT THEY EXPECT US TO BE DOING SOMETHING ABOUT.

Kate Shally,
Marketing Director Pep+,
PepsiCo

MORE INFORMATION. LESS SHARED UNDERSTANDING.

While we have never been better informed, we have never felt less in control. The amount of research on sustainability has ballooned in the last 25 years, but our greater access to knowledge has not led to a shared understanding or a sense of power and control to move things along.

Some people think individuals should be taking more personal responsibility, but more are frustrated that governments and businesses aren't setting the agenda. Nearly three out of five people around the world are concerned about climate change but don't know what to do about it. Responsibility is not shared but deflected. The three pillars of contemporary society – people, companies and governments – resemble a dysfunctional love triangle.

"I lived in New York, and we had to separate our rubbish by the number and colour on the plastic. And if you didn't do that, you were fined. Whereas in Florida, it's like the Wild West. Anything goes. There's rubbish in recycling bins and there's no penalty, no fine for not separating properly."

Liz, Early Majority, US

"It isn't simple or easy. There is too much information and what I think, someone else might not agree with. It feels very mixed and it's hard to know who to listen to or trust."

Zhang, Late majority, China

"All these insight reports are there, but people are taking those as a given rather than doing the detail around their **own** audiences... taking the time to really think and strategize."

Michelle Carvill,
'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

"When I came here, I was very surprised that all rubbish needs to be sorted. It was very confusing for me...I never did it before. We have to save our planet for our future generation, but to be honest, I don't know how to do it. I need some help, some guidance."

Iryna, Late Majority, Ukraine

"[Marketers are] drowning in a sea of data and noise - people are overwhelmed. What is it I need to know to solve this problem? What is it I need to be looking at?"

Michelle Carvill,
'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

"Ethics are important, but they're also very confusing. I can't fact-check everything I buy, and when do you stop? ... Sometimes you just have to decide and stop thinking about it and get on with your life."

Kit, Early Adopter, Hong Kong

THE PROBLEM

Image: Ishan Tankha / Climate Visuals Countdown

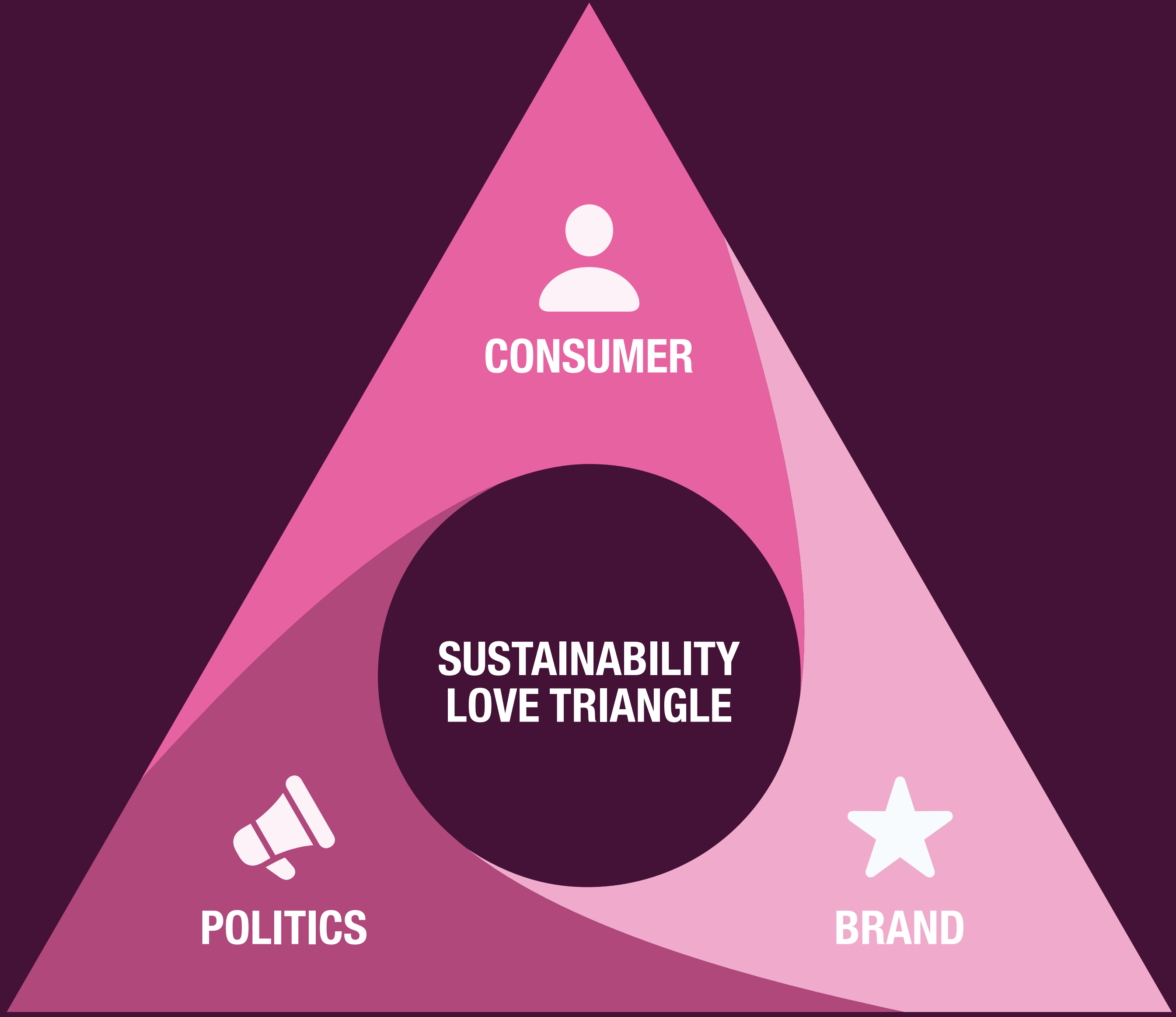
THE DIAGNOSIS

Love triangles seethe with mistrust, desire and betrayal, and our love triangle around the 'S' word is no exception. Sustainability has become a fiercely emotional subject about which our conflicted characters appear in turmoil. We see a classic psychological drama play out, where brands, consumers and government adopt the roles of persecutor, victim and rescuer in turn. Each points the finger at the others, attributing blame, claiming vulnerability, and excusing inaction.

Brands are tempted to be the rescuers, but they risk being exposed as dishonest and self-serving. Meanwhile, the real victim remains the planet, whose suffering increases as the drama plays out around it. Who will make the first move and break the deadlock on the world's most contested and urgent problem?

I THINK WE ALL HAVE TO BE RESPONSIBLE. GOVERNMENTS NEED TO BE RESPONSIBLE IN TERMS OF THE POLICIES THEY SET AND THE DIRECTION OF REGULATION. ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO REALLY LOOK AT THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE. SOCIETY AND CONSUMERS NEED TO TAKE MORE INFORMED ACTION. THERE IS NO ONE STAKEHOLDER WHO CAN SOLVE THE ISSUE.

Gemma Butler,
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author



DESPITE THE APPARENT CLASH, ALL THREE BODIES – POLITICS, BRANDS, AND CONSUMERS – ARE FIGHTING THE SAME FIVE BATTLES:

THE POLITICAL STORY

The political crosswinds surrounding sustainability blow hard from all directions – especially when actual extreme weather events strike. The younger generation demands action to protect its future. Voters everywhere want sustainable public services that won't break the bank. And geopolitics is tangled up with climate migration, energy and resource security, and global trade.

Political leadership on sustainability comes at a cost, and with political cycles so short environmental action often falls foul of proximity bias. Politicians are forced to prioritise voters' immediate demands for a lower cost of living, while fossil fuel companies demand diluted climate policies to maximise short-term profits. Despite the case for Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) regulation becoming more pressing, in some political quarters, it is too divisive to mention.

International coordination efforts offer hope, such as the COP28 agreement to transition away from fossil fuels and the 2024 EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). But progress is challenging. The 25-year timeframe for limiting temperature increases to 1.5° C can struggle to compete with short-term electoral cycles.

Policies like low emission zones and green tariffs require politicians to walk a fine line. Environmentally conscious citizens welcome decisive actions on sustainability, while culture warriors engage in 'greenlash' conspiracy theories. Political judgements to engage younger voters with green actions attract cynicism when governments retain strong links to Big Oil corporations.

Cost, effort, closeness, judgement and trust. The political challenges around sustainability mirror those facing brands and consumers. The result? Inaction and paralysis.

THE BRAND STORY

Image: USDA Photo by Lance Cheung

THE COST BATTLE

The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has proved beyond doubt that the rewards of operating more sustainably (often more efficiently as a result) significantly outweigh the costs in the long-term. In the US, products marketed as sustainable show 8% higher growth than their competitors. From compliance to productivity, customer loyalty to investment value, sustainable practices and efficiencies drive, not inhibit, commercial success. But many brands still see the upfront costs to be too high and the challenges to the business model too great. They won't change unless their hand is forced.

"COMMONLY A FRANCHISEE MODEL, HOTELS RELY ON SHORT TERM ROI AND THE TRANSITION COMES WITH A HEFTY PRICE TAG…SO CHANGE WILL ONLY COME IF IT'S ENFORCED OR IF THE CURRENT BUSINESS MODEL BECOMES UNCOMPETITIVE."

Hospitality Consultant

THE EFFORT BATTLE

Whether it's moving to renewable energy, overhauling waste disposal or innovating new green products, transitioning to sustainable practices is hard. At C Space, we've helped many clients innovate around new ways of doing business that inspire customers and stakeholders alike. The rewards can be rich, but the process involves wholesale transformation and education across the business. It means setting goals and sticking to them. Rewiring everyone's brains.

"MOST OF THE TIME IT'S AN EXCITING JOURNEY. BUT REALISTICALLY SPEAKING, IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY AND THE ALTERNATIVES ARE NOT ALWAYS THERE. SO YOU NEED TO PUT IN THE EFFORT. BUT THE OUTCOME IS REMARKABLE."

Michael Lotfy Gierges,
Executive Vice President Home & Distribution,
Schneider Electric

THE CLOSENESS BATTLE

In business, as in society, the climate emergency is everyone's problem. At the same time, it feels too big and too far away. But just as global heating no longer only affects remote regions of the world, environmental action can no longer be confined to Climate and Sustainability departments.

The more companies think they need to solve the problem all at once, the more it gets pushed further away. But multiple small steps in the right direction can bring change closer. Moving forward means aiming for progress, not perfection.

"

CLIMATE CHANGE SITS NEXT TO AI AS TWO OF THE BIGGEST CONVERSATIONS HAPPENING IN THE WORLD TODAY: THEY'RE BOTH GOING TO CHANGE HOW WE LIVE AND OPERATE WITHIN BUSINESS.

WHILST THE PUBLIC PROFILE OF SUSTAINABILITY HAS GONE UP, THE CONVERSATION WITHIN MARKETING IS STILL RELATIVELY NICHE…MARKETERS ARE STILL VERY MUCH HELD TO THE SAME SORT OF GROWTH TARGETS, KPIs AND REVENUES AS ALWAYS.

Gemma Butler,
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

THE TRUST BATTLE

Just 12% of customers trust brands to keep their promises on sustainability. But brands don’t trust their customers either. The say-do gap is a revealing behavioural insight and often used as an excuse for brands to give up on sustainability. They have a point. People say they’re willing to pay more for sustainable products, but more say inflation will impact their spending.

In reality, people buy green products and offers that are easy and affordable to access, adopt, and backed by clear, honest sustainability claims. When products fall short, consumers remain sceptical and sales decline. But when products deliver, the majority will follow Early Adopters, and brands will succeed.

12%

OF CONSUMERS TRUST BRANDS TO KEEP THEIR PROMISES ON SUSTAINABILITY

“

WE STOPPED DOING CONSUMER RESEARCH BECAUSE OF THAT SAY-DO GAP - IT’S A WASTE OF MONEY.

Head of Insights, Global Toy Brand

THE JUDGEMENT BATTLE

The evidence mounts up. Not only will visible, credible actions on climate change strengthen your brand, but staying silent on sustainability will likely see you lose market share. And modest sustainability measures are not enough. In fact, they breed complacency by creating the impression of progress and thwarting more radical solutions. It's known as the 'green paradox'.

Businesses need to be bolder and deliver systemic change, but even senior decision makers with 'climate' in their job title sense the risks. It's a high-wire act with no safety net: one slip and your distrusting customers won't give you a second chance. You've seen it happen to other brands, and you don't want it to happen to yours.

The result? More inaction. More paralysis.

"THERE'S A COURAGE ELEMENT REQUIRED BY ORGANIZATIONS TO PUT THEMSELVES OUT THERE, TO SAY THIS IS WHERE WE ARE, IT'S NOT PERFECT. AND IN A VERY COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE, NOBODY'S SHARING, EVERYBODY'S TRYING TO DO THIS AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE RATHER THAN COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE. THERE'S A REAL MINDSET SHIFT THAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN.

Michelle Carvill,
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

SEVEN SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING DILEMMAS

01 FOCUS

What do our customers want to prioritise? Where do I focus our teams' efforts?

02 COMMS

How do we talk about it without being shot down?

03 ACTION

How do we make sure we walk the talk?

04 RELEVANCE

Why should customers choose us for their sustainable purchase decisions?

05 ADOPTION

What will it take for customers, staff and suppliers to make the leap?

06 INSPIRATION

Why should customers choose us for their sustainable purchase decisions?

07 COMMERCIAL

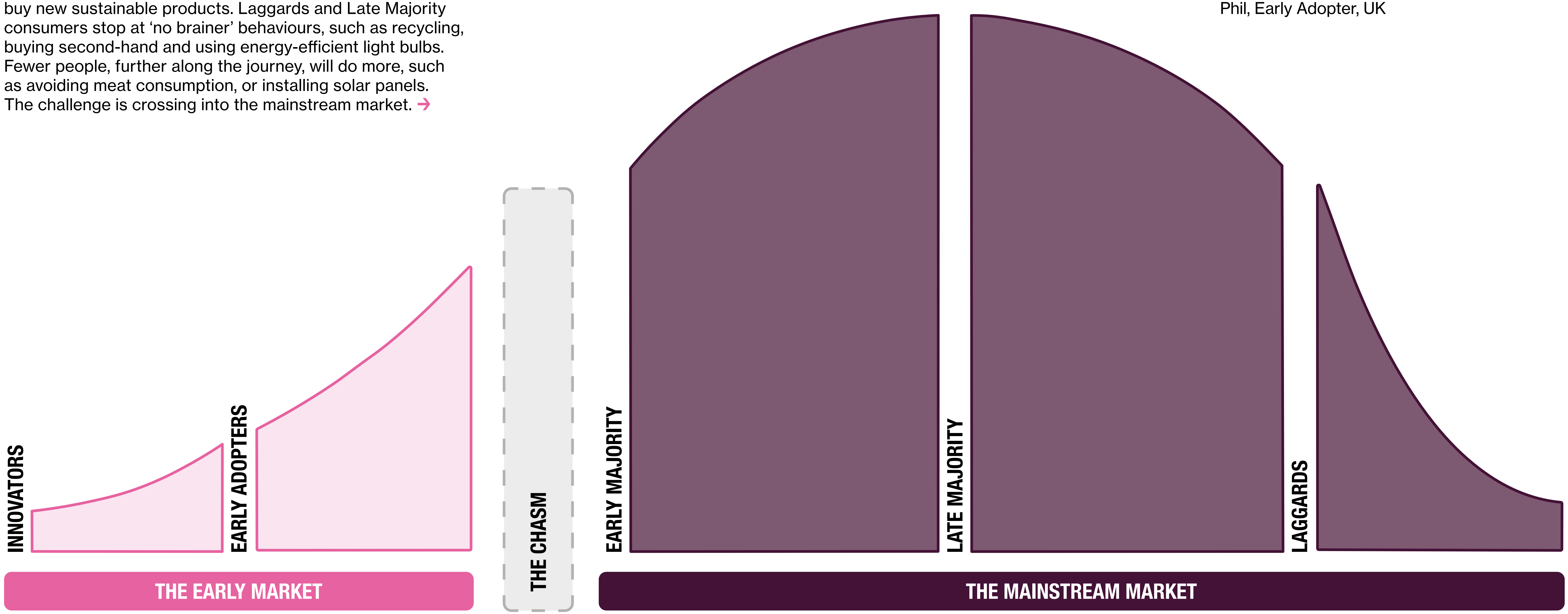
How do we make it profitable?

THE CHASM & THE CURVE

THE ADOPTION CHASM

People’s engagement with sustainability depends on where they sit on the adoption curve. Early Adopters are risk-takers, more willing to tolerate imperfections, and more likely to buy new sustainable products. Laggards and Late Majority consumers stop at ‘no brainer’ behaviours, such as recycling, buying second-hand and using energy-efficient light bulbs. Fewer people, further along the journey, will do more, such as avoiding meat consumption, or installing solar panels. The challenge is crossing into the mainstream market. →

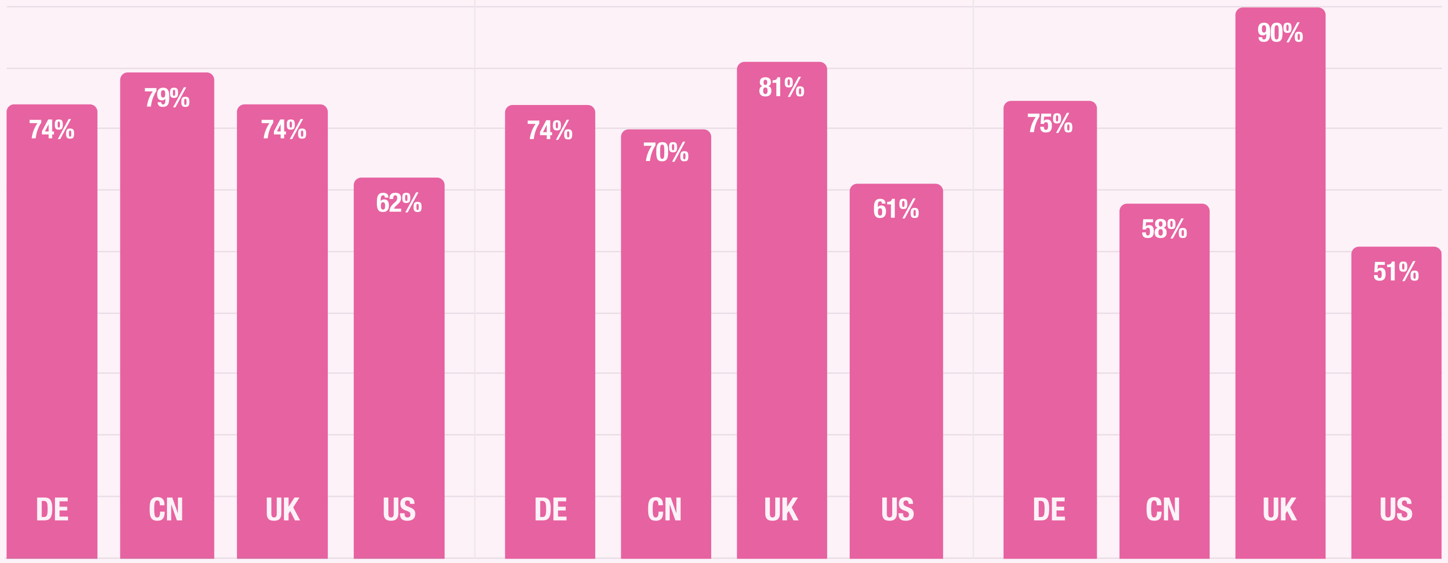
> **I USED TO BE NOT REALLY INTO SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE, AND I WAS VERY MUCH DOING THIS TYPE OF, ‘IT DOESN’T REALLY MATTER TO ME, IT’S IN THE FUTURE’. BUT I HAVE STARTED TO MAKE AMENDS, TO CHANGE THINGS GRADUALLY AS I’VE GONE ALONG.**
>
> Phil, Early Adopter, UK



72%
I CHOOSE ENERGY-EFFICIENT APPLIANCES AND BULBS

72%
I REDUCE PLASTIC USE BY REUSING BAGS AND BOTTLES

69%
I RECYCLE HOUSEHOLD WASTE



So far, so predictable. But these insights only get us so far.

It's not straightforward. Attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability can be complex and contradictory and not all sectors are created equal. For example, things we use and dispose of every day, like FMCG products, trigger concerns about our recyclable packaging. Our electric toothbrush that we replace once a year, or our mouse for our computer, not so much. We notice visible car emissions, while emissions from our fitted kitchen fly under the radar. A product's lifespan affects the extent to which we think about its disposability, and how unsustainable it is. So even relative eco-warriors might unthinkingly generate landfill if their perception masks the reality. A simple trigger – such as a new category entrant or new solution – can encourage a total reframe of the category.

Sustainability attitudes and behaviours sit on shifting sands, and these can change overnight. As a result, taking snapshots of what consumers are doing and saying can fail to futureproof strategies. It is crucial to establish an ongoing dialogue with people in order to track perspectives and expectations. Online communities or brand tracking are two ways into this.

Different markets are at different points on the curve, too. As you would imagine, where governments encourage or mandate habits such as recycling household waste and reducing single-use plastics, most people have obliged. But Germany is so far ahead in some areas that they're regressing, while markets like the US are playing catch up.

And then, there are colleagues within organisations who come with their own particular attitudes, behaviours, and positions on the adoption curve. We know seriously committed brands embed sustainability across the organisation, so these audiences matter too.

Source: C Space survey (n=3888)

"EVERYBODY AS INDIVIDUALS, AND THEN COLLECTIVES OF INDIVIDUALS, AND THEN MARKETS – WE'RE ALL ON THIS JOURNEY AT A DIFFERENT PLACE IN OUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES. SO IT REALLY BECOMES VERY INTERESTING AND EXCITING – HOW DO WE IDENTIFY WHERE PEOPLE ARE AND WHAT WE NEED TO DO TO MOVE FORWARD?"

Alison Nuttall,
Head of Sustainability Operations,
Jaguar Land Rover

TO BE HONEST, MY CONCERN NOW IS TO LOOK AT THE SYSTEMS…I'M LESS CONCERNED WITH RECYCLING BECAUSE I KNOW IT'S SMALL IN THE SCHEME OF THINGS."

Jonas, Self-defined attitudinal 'Early Adopter', Germany

I CONSIDER MYSELF AN EARLY ADOPTER. I ENCOURAGE MY KIDS TO RECYCLE. WE TRY TO AVOID PLASTICS.

Liz, Self-defined attitudinal 'Early Adopter', US

UNPICKING THE SAY-DO GAP

Amidst all this complexity, brands still use the say-do gap as an excuse to stay quiet on sustainability. But we've spoken to climate sceptics with a deep desire to protect nature – and owners of electric vehicles and solar panels who don't believe in recycling. Across markets, two in every three people admit they don't really know what it means to be 'sustainable'. So, what does the 'say-do' gap even mean?

To bridge the adoption chasm, we need to get past the view that people whose behaviours don't match their attitudes can't be trusted – there are multiples variables at play (not least the cost of living, see below). We need to be more careful with our research and look more closely at the evidence. We need to stop seeing the say-do gap as a value judgement and start focusing on the practical challenges and opportunities it presents.

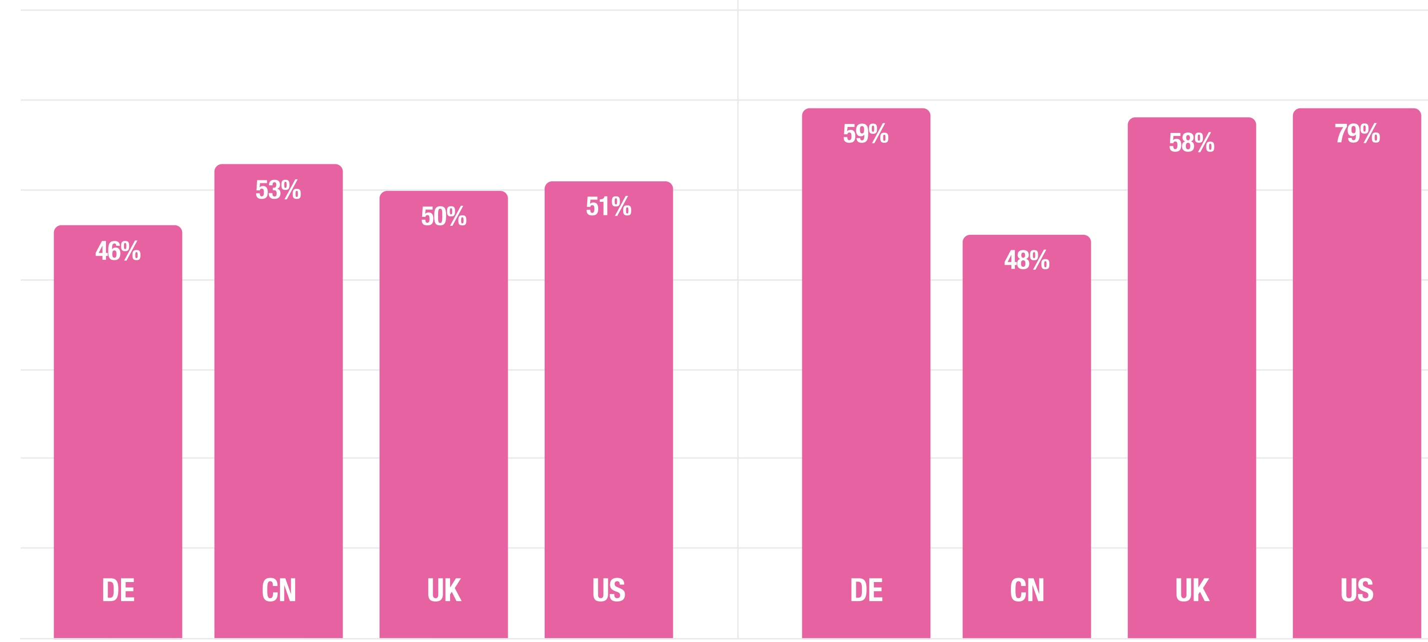
Globally, around 50% of people say they 'don't see enough genuine alternatives that are better for the environment', and a majority think that brands say one thing on sustainability but do another. Instead of pointing the finger at customers on the say-do gap, we can do better by understanding the reasons behind it. This requires more observation, smarter research and more implicit research techniques such as our C Space Way 'Magic Box' of psychology-inspired tools; getting into what people can't say, won't say or don't know how to say.

I want to, but the sustainable alternative...

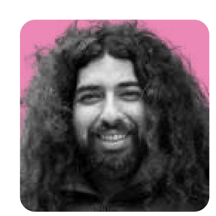
- is nowhere to be found
- is not fit for purpose for my needs
- is too expensive
- is not from a brand I'm familiar with/that I trust
- requires a significant change in behaviour that is not practical
- is not available in stores near me
- is not yet tried and tested

50%
SAY THEY 'DON'T SEE ENOUGH GENUINE ALTERNATIVES THAT ARE BETTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT'.

54%
THINK THAT BRANDS SAY ONE THING ON SUSTAINABILITY BUT DO ANOTHER.



> IT'S NOT A SAY-DO GAP AS MUCH AS AN ACCESSIBILITY GAP. IT'S NOT THAT PEOPLE'S VALUES DIFFER OR THAT THEY CAN'T TAKE THOSE SUSTAINABLE ACTIONS BECAUSE THEY CAN'T AFFORD TO. MANY OF THEM EXPECT SUSTAINABILITY TO BE EMBEDDED INTO THE PRODUCT RATHER THAN A CHOICE THEY HAVE TO MAKE.



Kian Bakhtiari,
Founder of THE PEOPLE

Source: C Space survey (n=3894)

THE CONSUMER STORY

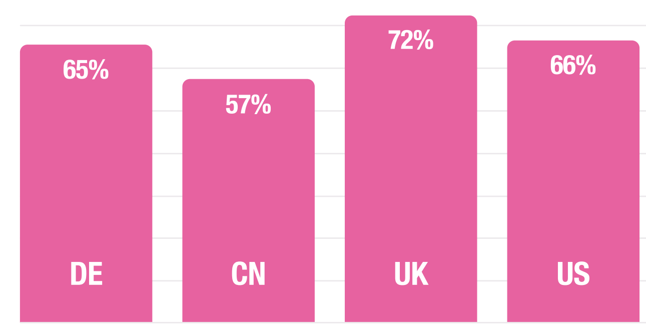
THE COST BATTLE

People still think greener products are more expensive and provide less value. Even when more affordable environmentally friendly options are available, through circularity practices, for example, over half of people across markets believe that sustainability comes with a heavier cost.

It's not all bad news. Less than half of consumers in Germany prioritise cost and lifestyle over climate change. But for most people in the US, UK and China, climate concerns translate into purchase decisions for most.

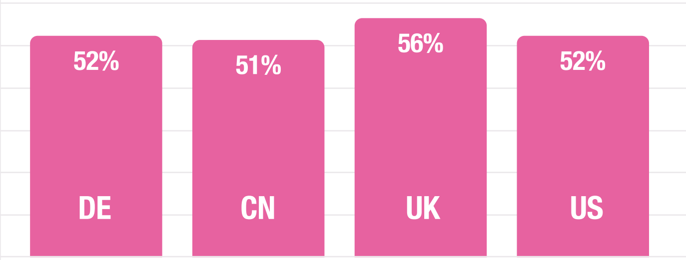
65%

OF PEOPLE BELIEVE BRANDS WILL CHARGE MORE FOR ECO-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS, EVEN IF THE PRODUCTION COSTS REMAIN THE SAME.



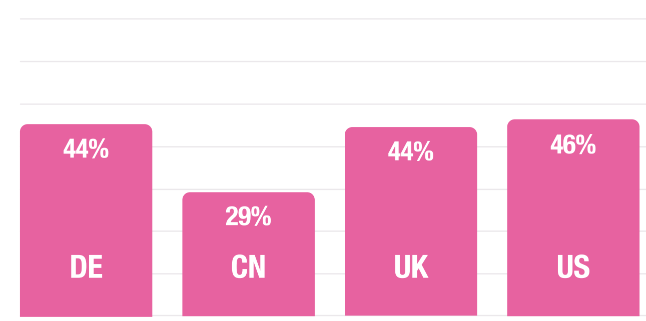
53%

IT COSTS TOO MUCH TO ACT IN A WAY THAT IS MORE 'SUSTAINABLE'



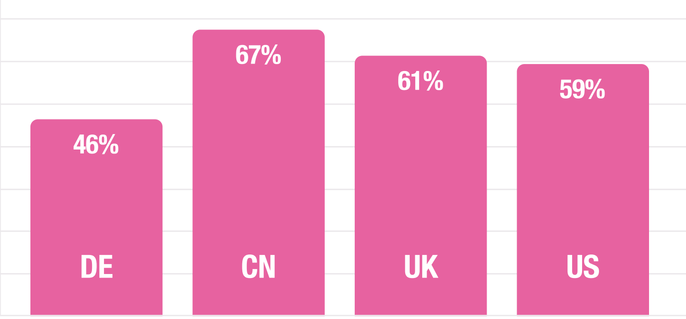
41%

BELIEVE SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS ARE MORE EXPENSIVE



54%

SAY THEY ARE CONCERNED ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE BUT PRIORITISE COST, CONVENIENCE, AND LIFESTYLE BALANCE.



Source: C Space survey (n=3894)

THE EFFORT BATTLE

Barely half the people we spoke to said they had taken more effort or paid more to become eco-friendly. Inferior quality sustainable products are considered harder to use, and there's a sense that even seemingly green behaviours may not make much difference to the problem.

"I ALWAYS TURN OFF THE LIGHT WHEN IT'S NOT NECESSARY, BUT THAT MAY NOT MAKE MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN GENERAL. SO, YOU FEEL SORT OF HELPLESS, EVEN THOUGH YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING."

Kacie, Late Majority, China

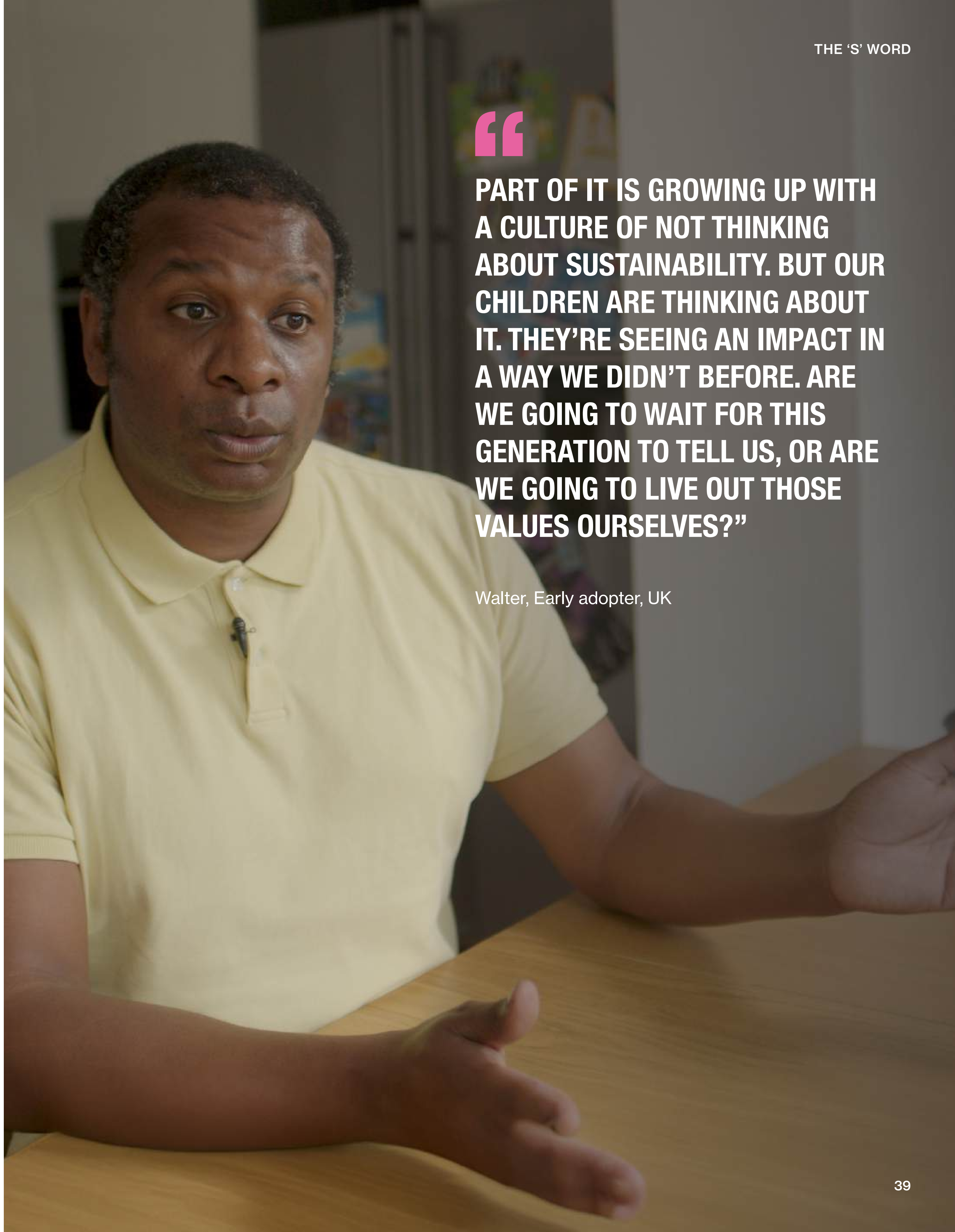
THE CLOSENESS BATTLE

"I DON'T HAVE KIDS, BUT I DO THINK ABOUT FUTURE GENERATIONS … [GLOBAL WARMING] MAY NOT AFFECT US IN THE NEXT 50 YEARS, BUT HOW ABOUT THE HUMAN RACE, OR HOW ABOUT MY NEPHEWS, WHAT ARE THEY GOING TO DO? THAT DOESN'T BOTHER ME, BUT IT DOES MAKE ME WONDER."

Kit, Early Adopter, Hong Kong

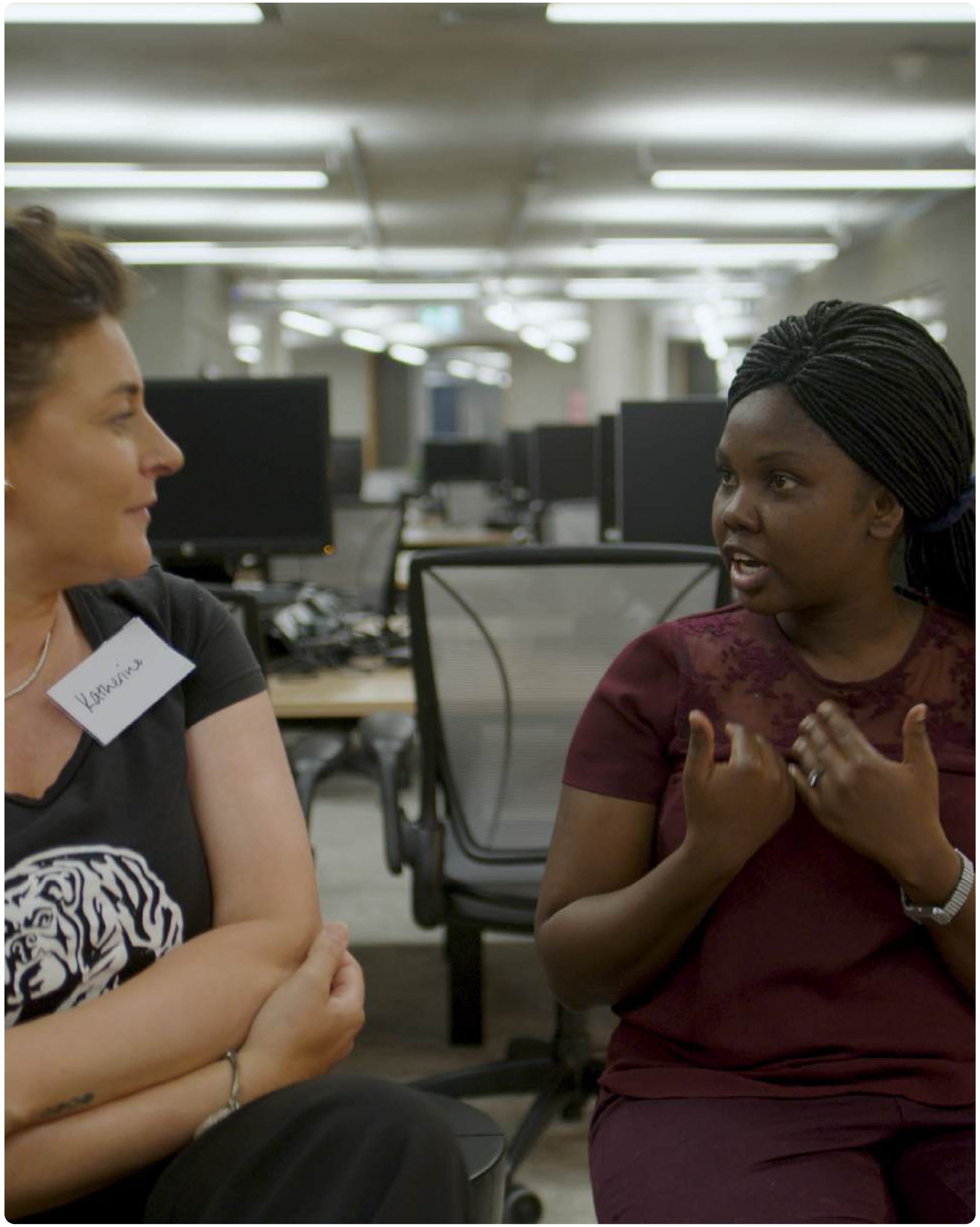
We heard this view expressed time and again across markets in our research. Affordable healthcare, scarcity of food and water, and economic crises all came up as more pressing issues than the climate emergency. The fact that climate change impacts all these issues doesn't register.

At the same time, extreme weather events in developed countries are bringing global heating and climate catastrophes ever closer to home. For Generation Z especially, proximity across time, as well as space, is of increasing concern. This is their future. And their parents and grandparents are as worried as they are.



"PART OF IT IS GROWING UP WITH A CULTURE OF NOT THINKING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY. BUT OUR CHILDREN ARE THINKING ABOUT IT. THEY'RE SEEING AN IMPACT IN A WAY WE DIDN'T BEFORE. ARE WE GOING TO WAIT FOR THIS GENERATION TO TELL US, OR ARE WE GOING TO LIVE OUT THOSE VALUES OURSELVES?"

Walter, Early adopter, UK



THE TRUST BATTLE

Compounding these concerns is a lack of trust. Consumers' confidence in government, the media, companies and NGOs around the world continues to decline. People trust companies head quartered in global powers less and less each year, and more than 61% of people worry business leaders are grossly exaggerating facts or telling outright lies.

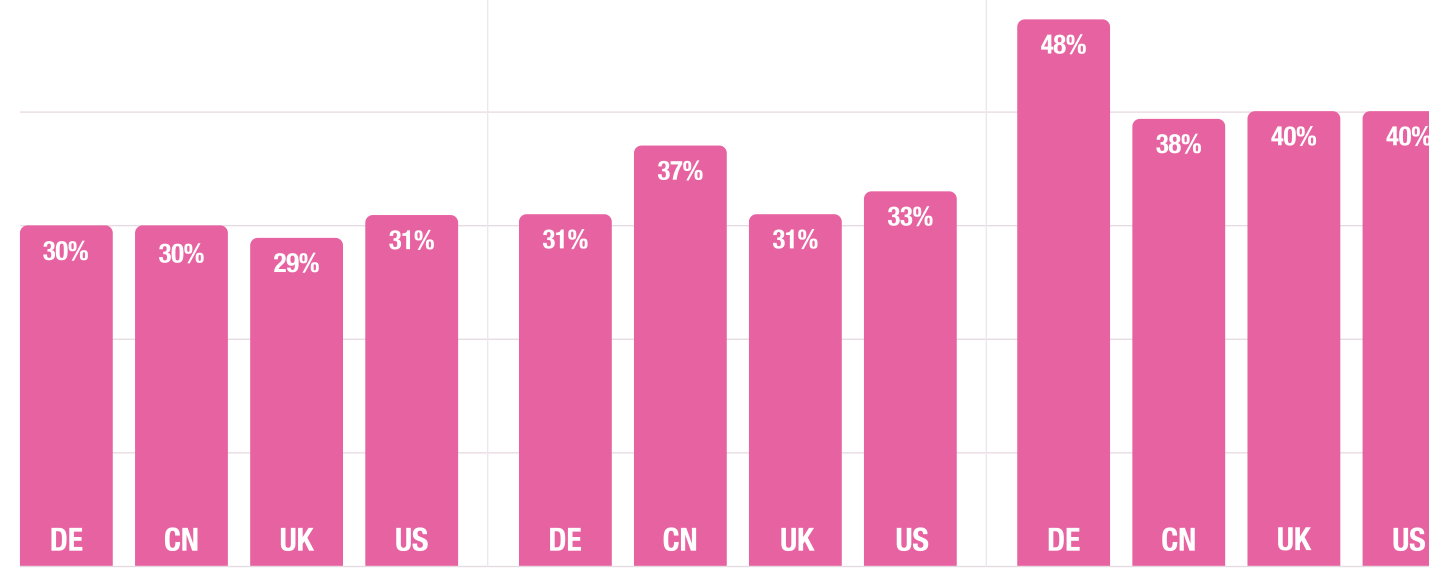
On sustainability, two-thirds of people believe brands will charge more for eco-friendly products even if the production costs remain the same, and more than half don't trust brands to tell the truth about their environmental credentials. For people already sceptical about the need for climate action, levels of trust in brands sink even deeper. →

A THIRD OF PEOPLE ARE FEELING LET DOWN BY BRANDS ON MULTIPLE FACETS OF ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOURS:

30%
DON'T TRUST BRANDS TO OWN UP TO THEIR MISTAKES

33%
DON'T TRUST BRANDS TO KEEP THEIR SUSTAINABILITY PROMISES

42%
BELIEVE THAT BRANDS DON'T CARE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT



Source: C Space survey (n=3888 / US, DE, CN and UK):

BEYOND SECTOR THINKING

Nor does the picture become less murky when we ask people to think about sectors. Consumers' ideas about a sector's sustainability don't always match the reality. Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) rate highly despite performing relatively poorly. People underestimate the environmental impact of Technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) companies but guess right when it comes to Fashion and Fossil Fuels

Despite the confusion, our research has identified some clear patterns. People are likelier to think highly of brands that speak out about their sustainability credentials. Where brands talk less about their environmental impact, customers are either indifferent (for example, in Health, where sources of emissions are not immediately obvious) or hostile (such as in Media and Entertainment, where the silence on sustainability invites suspicion).

The issue isn't consumers' responses; it's the questions they are asked. People don't think about sustainability in terms of sectors. Instead, they assemble a range of brands across sectors that align with their beliefs. Brands that gain a competitive advantage on sustainability do so by building relationships that put customers' values first.

The lesson for sustainability communications? There are significant opportunities to take charge. To break through the uncertainty and build trust, it's better to say something over nothing.

THINKING ABOUT SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOURS, WHICH SECTORS ARE DOING A BETTER VERSUS WORSE JOB? RANKING FROM BEST TO WORST:

RANK	SECTOR	CONSUMER QUALIFICATIONS FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
01	TECH, AI & SOFTWARE	Digital surely better than hardware? Aids efficiencies.
02	PACKAGED GOODS	Switch to sustainable packaging forefront of most minds.
03	ENERGY	Increased visibility of renewables.
04	HEALTHCARE	Impact difficult to identify, overall a celebrated category.
05	RETAIL (SHOPS AND SUPERMARKETS)	Switch to bags for life, reduction of delivery impact from Amazon, etc.
06	SAVINGS & INVESTMENTS	Ethical investments have decent awareness.
07	CAR MANUFACTURERS	Friction around congestion charges, EV and charge anxiety, debates around impact of batteries.
08	TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY	Impact of air travel, low association with holidays.
09	TELECOMMS	Largely invisible and mysterious.
10	FASHION	A known villain of the piece.
11	EVERYDAY BANKING	Unknown or rumours of bad practices.
12	PHARMACEUTICALS	Unknown and mysterious.
13	MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT	Unknown and mysterious.
14	INSURANCE	Unknown and mysterious.

Source: C Space research

THE JUDGEMENT BATTLE

Sustainability is personal, especially in the US. It has become a lightning rod for culture war battles, harming relationships and feeding distrust.

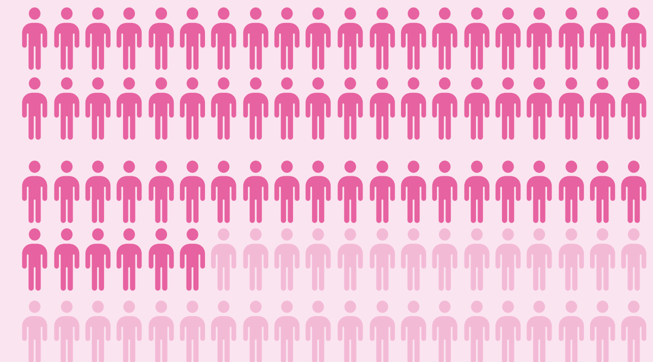
For a significant minority across the adoption curve, these attitudes are laced with a nagging guilt. People feel bad about long-held buying behaviours. Concerned they're not doing enough or feeling forced to behave contrary to their values, they are left feeling frustrated and self-critical. →

"MY MOTHER IS 70. SHE DOESN'T RECYCLE AND DOESN'T SEE A NEED FOR IT. SHE DOESN'T BELIEVE IN CLIMATE CHANGE OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT. I'M THE TOTAL OPPOSITE OF HER. WE GET INTO BATTLES ABOUT ALL THE TIME, AND SHE DOESN'T GIVE ME A REASON FOR WHY SHE THINKS IT'S MADE UP. AND MY HUSBAND WILL BE, 'OKAY, WE CAN'T HAVE THIS CONVERSATION'."

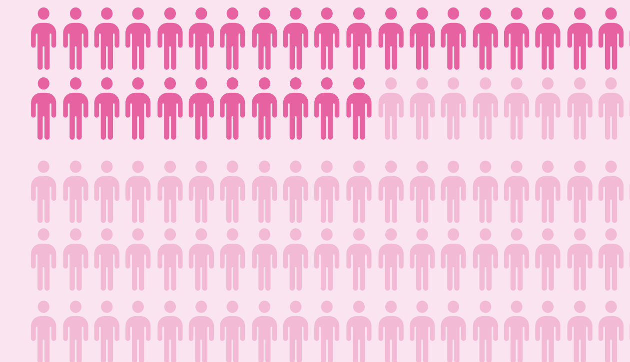
Megan, Early Adopter, US

PEOPLE SOMETIMES WANT TO DO BETTER BUT DON'T HAVE FAITH IN THE SUSTAINABILITY ACTION ON OFFER

I AM INCREASINGLY FEELING GUILTY ABOUT SOME OF THE THINGS THAT I BUY [39%]:



66% OF THOSE THAT **DON'T** BELIEVE IN SUSTAINABILITY ACTIONS, AGREE



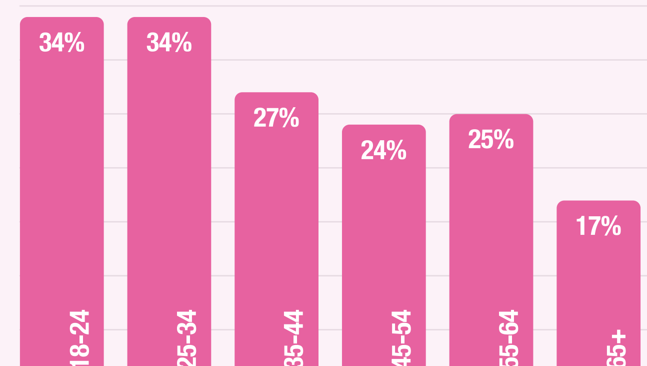
31% OF THOSE THAT **DO** BELIEVE IN SUSTAINABILITY ACTIONS, AGREE

Anti sustainable actions: agree to the statement 'sustainable activities are not worth the effort'

INTERESTINGLY, AN EQUAL NUMBER WOULD BOYCOTT A BRAND IF IT MADE AN ENVIRONMENTAL MISTAKE (WITH 18-24 YR OLDS INDEXING MORE HIGHLY) AS FORGIVE A BRAND), AND THE REST SIT SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN, UNCERTAIN.

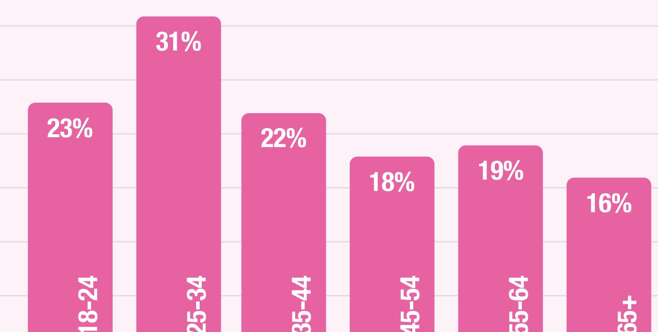
26%

I'D STOP BUYING A BRAND IF IT MADE AN ENVIRONMENTAL MISTAKE (AGREE THAT THIS STRONGLY DESCRIBES ME):



21%

I'D FORGIVE A BRAND IF IT MADE AN ENVIRONMENTAL MISTAKE (AGREE THAT THIS STRONGLY DESCRIBES ME):



Source: C Space survey (n=3894), *Guilt about purchase decisions;* 36% DE, 45% CN, 39% UK, 39% US.

It's little wonder that people look to society's institutions – government, companies, the media, NGOs – to channel their frustration and blame. People across markets want brands to cooperate with governments to provide leadership and guidance on sustainability.

The leaders who get it right are working to change systems and infrastructure. They model an openness to collaboration across and outside of their category. But until more institutions change, we will remain in a vicious cycle.

Just as we see in the Political and Brand Stories, our Consumer Story ends in inaction and paralysis. How do we break the stalemate?

"

FIRST OF ALL, YOU MAKE THE TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE. YOU WORK WITH LEGISLATORS…YOU EDUCATE CUSTOMERS … DECARBONIZE YOUR HOME AND MAKE YOU COMFORTABLE…THEN [MAKE IT] EASY TO GO CLAIM THOSE TAX CREDITS…THAT'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN SYSTEMATICALLY WORKING ON ACROSS MANY COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD. IT TAKES A VILLAGE.

Michael Lotfy Gierges,
Executive Vice President Home & Distribution,
Schneider Electric

THE SOLUTION

IT COMES DOWN TO RELATIONSHIPS

A love triangle is formed by fractured relationships.

With our partners at Wharton Customer Analytics, we've been researching brand-consumer relationships since 2017, surveying over 100,000 consumers across three continents. Our findings show that, in the Relationship Economy, we're at a critical inflection point: customer expectations are moving faster than any company's ability to respond. Short-term, incremental moves will leave you playing catch-up. Only brands that have built deep, strong, resilient relationships with their customers will survive.

We are social animals, led by our emotions and values, and open to honest, transparent interactions. We value partnerships built on empathy, understanding and a sense of shared risk and reward.

The way brands can win battles on sustainability is not by re-arming with more science, information and claims; it is by listening, understanding, and becoming allies to their customers.

"I DON'T EVER FEEL THAT BRANDS ARE ASKING ME - US - WHAT WE THINK ABOUT WHAT WE NEED OR WANT. WE CAN WORK WITH THEM TO COME UP WITH THE ANSWERS, BUT [WHEN IT COMES TO SUSTAINABILITY] IT JUST FEELS LIKE THEY ARE TELLING AND PREACHING AND LYING".

Catherine, Late Majority, US

CAPTIVE

Consumers use the brand out of necessity, but would switch if they could.

TRANSACTIONAL

The brand provides a fair, satisfactory exchange.

PARTNERSHIP

The brand gives the consumer something they value, delivering both functional and emotional benefit.

SYNERGISTIC

The brand is in step with the customer and their values, growing with them over time.

- More likely to stick with you, in spite of problems.
- More willing to pay a premium.
- More likely to recommend and advocate.

WEAK RELATIONSHIP: NOT CUSTOMER CENTRIC

STRONG RELATIONSHIP: DEEPLY CUSTOMER CENTRIC

Source: Based on the C Space CXC benchmark, in partnership with Wharton Customer Analytics, surveying over 100,000 consumers

THE GOOD LIFE

The message around sustainability is too often focused on comfortable habits you need to change, sacrifices you have to make and extra money you need to spend. At worst, it's hectoring; at best, it's saying there is a cost to creating a more balanced, hopeful future. The message rarely focuses on the individual needs and desires of the consumer. But people everywhere still want to be happy. They want to have a good life.

What makes a good life has changed over time. The explosion of consumerism in the Western world during the 1950s saw the good life imagined as material luxury. More recent framings include the Good Life Goals, launched in New York in 2018 to inspire people to take action to support the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. Elsewhere, Purpose Disrupters' Good Life 2030 provides insights, tools and resources for advertisers and marketers to imagine a happier, more sustainable future.

Happiness and sustainability combined allow us to glimpse a positive future for brands. Most of us are neither voracious consumers nor green obsessives. We just want to enjoy purchases that improve our lifestyle while at the same time taking care to preserve our natural environment.

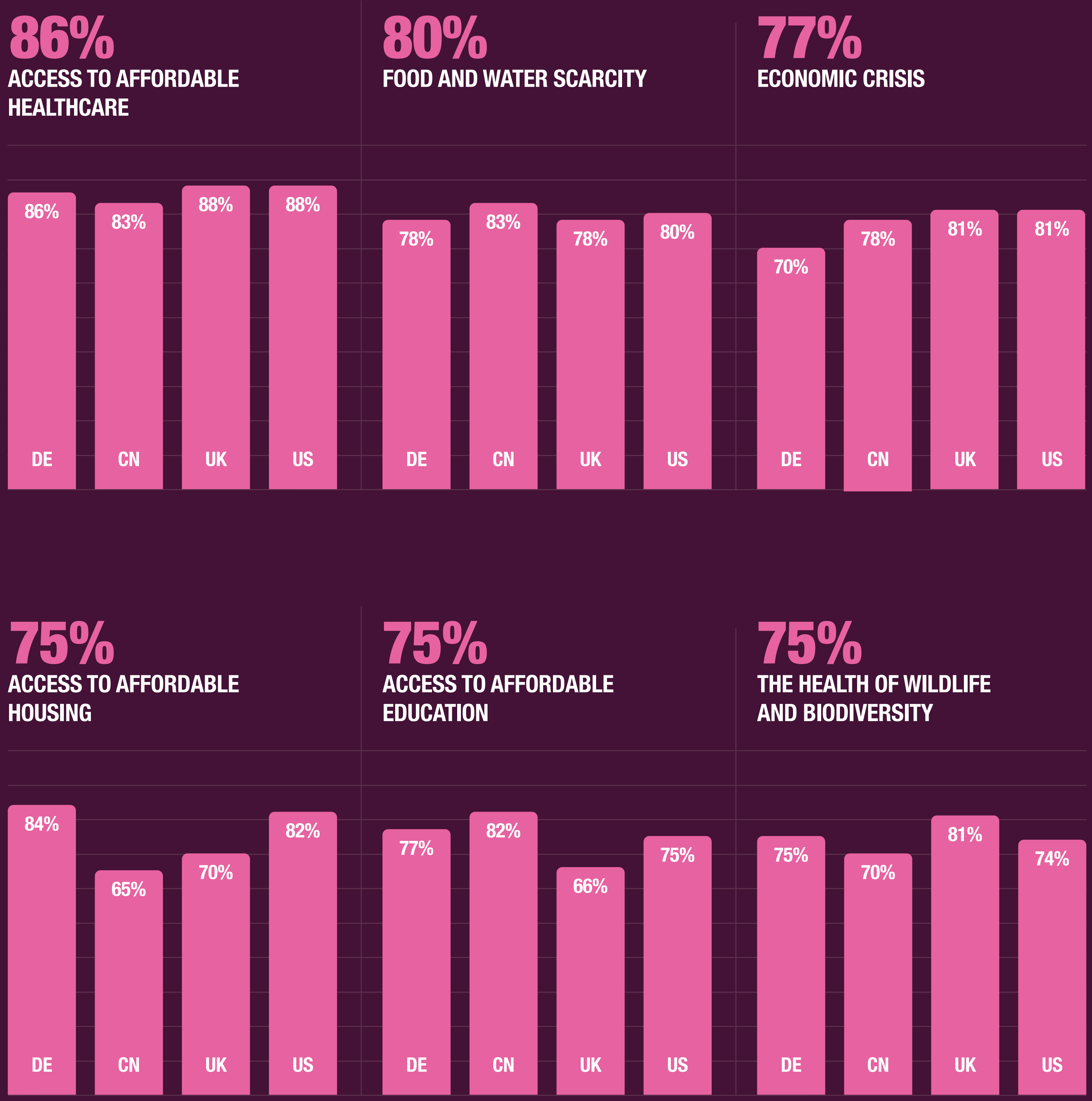
Our research shows that, whatever our views on sustainability, we have a lot in common when it comes to imagining the ideal good life for ourselves and future generations. We're all concerned about health, education, food and water, and our finances. We also value experiences and memories. Material things, but not just for the sake of having material things.

The best brand-customer relationships on sustainability will imagine a good life that puts customer needs first. A version of the good life that isn't just compatible with sustainability; it works in harmony with it. It is powered by it.

"I'M NOT CRAVING MATERIALISTIC THINGS FOR MY GOOD LIFE. IF YOU HAVE A HOUSE AND A CAR, YOU'VE MADE IT. BUT HAPPINESS, HEALTH RULES OVER ALL."

Blessing, Late Majority, Nigeria

REGARDLESS OF PEOPLE'S STANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE, THEY HAVE UNIVERSAL QUALITY OF LIFE NEEDS FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN THAT MAKE THEM MORE SIMILAR THAN DIFFERENT. KEY CONCERNS FOR PEOPLE CURRENTLY AND IN THE FUTURE:



Source: C Space research

PERHAPS A BETTER WAY TO TALK ABOUT 'SUSTAINABILITY' IS NOT TO TALK ABOUT IT AT ALL

Trying to get people to join the dots between what they care about and climate action isn't new. But our approach has been flawed. No matter how much money brands throw at sustainability marketing, most people feel forced to deprioritise purchase decisions positioned as 'green'. They don't associate sustainability with their most pressing needs and desires and think it means making unappealing compromises. Worse, they resent sustainability for making them feel guilty for focusing – entirely reasonably – on their immediate concerns. →

UP TO 70% OF CLIMATE DENIERS & SCEPTICS ACTUALLY BEHAVE 'SUSTAINABLY'

ATTITUDE	BEHAVIOUR	
Climate scepticism/denial: 'Climate change is a hoax/untrue', 'Human beings do not cause climate change', 'Sustainable behaviours are not worth it'.	Reduce plastic use by reusing bags and bottles	69%
	Choose energy efficient appliances and bulbs	69%
	Recycle household waste	67%
	Reduce water usage	58%
	Buy locally-sourced products where possible	56%
	Use a renewable energy supplier for home electricity	50%
	Choose banks/pension providers that are ethical or invest my moneh ethically	49%
	Buy secondhand or vintage	44%
	Recycle or buy refurbished tech or electrical items	44%
	Drive an EV	42%

Source: C Space survey: (for each statement, please indicate how often you engage in the described behaviour. Sample of climate deniers or sceptics: 972 in DE, CN UK, US)

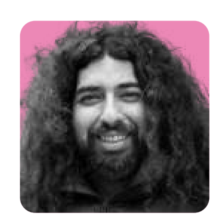
In any case, what does 'sustainability' actually mean? As we've seen, the answer is different things to different people along different stages of the adoption curve. And even different things to the same person as they embark on their sustainability journey. Depending on where you look, you can find nature lovers who don't buy second-hand, electric car drivers who don't recycle, and climate sceptics who believe they do more than most to help the environment.

'Sustainability' means everything and nothing. But the best communications propositions for individual brands are focused and specific. Gen Z and Millennial consumers, investors and employees won't stand for anything less. Having a 'new and different' sustainable product isn't enough. What impact is it making? Where's the evidence? Younger audiences want you to pinpoint the problem and tell them how you're solving it. So what claims will be most convincing?

In a world where up to 70% of climate sceptics and deniers already engage in sustainable activities, there's no need for a wholesale pivot to lab-grown meat and solar panels. Ambition is important but not every piece of comms needs to be groundbreaking to shift the mainstream. We see more potential for impact in everyday behaviours that, for example, save people money, make them feel savvy, preserve their resources and enhance their quality of life. →

"

THE WORD SUSTAINABILITY IS VERY LOADED. IT'S THIS REALLY HEAVY, CUMBERSOME WORD THAT'S HARD TO UNPACK. IT'S QUITE DRY… PEOPLE BEGIN TO ROLL THEIR EYES… WHERE IT BECOMES INTERESTING IS HOW IT CAN ENCOURAGE POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR – WITHOUT LABELLING IT 'SUSTAINABLE'.



Kian Bakhtiari,
Founder of THE PEOPLE

“

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY, MARKETERS FORGET WHAT GOOD MARKETING IS: UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE, UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY NEED, UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY'RE LOOKING FOR, PROBLEM SOLVING.

IT'S ALL VERY OUTWARD FOCUS. A LOT OF COMMUNICATION AROUND TARGETS AND REDUCTIONS; …A LOT OF JARGON WHICH THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTAND AND ISN'T GOING TO CONNECT WITH THEIR HEARTS AND MINDS. WHAT’S THE BENEFIT FOR THEM?

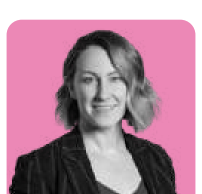
Gemma Butler,
Co-host of ‘Can Marketing Save The Planet?’ podcast, and author

The real issue isn't marketing about sustainability; it's 'sustainability marketing'. Putting the 'S' word (or 'green' or 'eco') front and centre over-simplifies the issue. It preaches to the choir. Overtly positioning something as 'sustainable' may attract the early adopters but it fails to empathise with the many mainstream consumers who are increasingly becoming disenchanted with greenwash. Deployed carelessly, it plays into culture war narratives, sows division and makes people feel bad – which is hardly meeting the needs of people or planet.

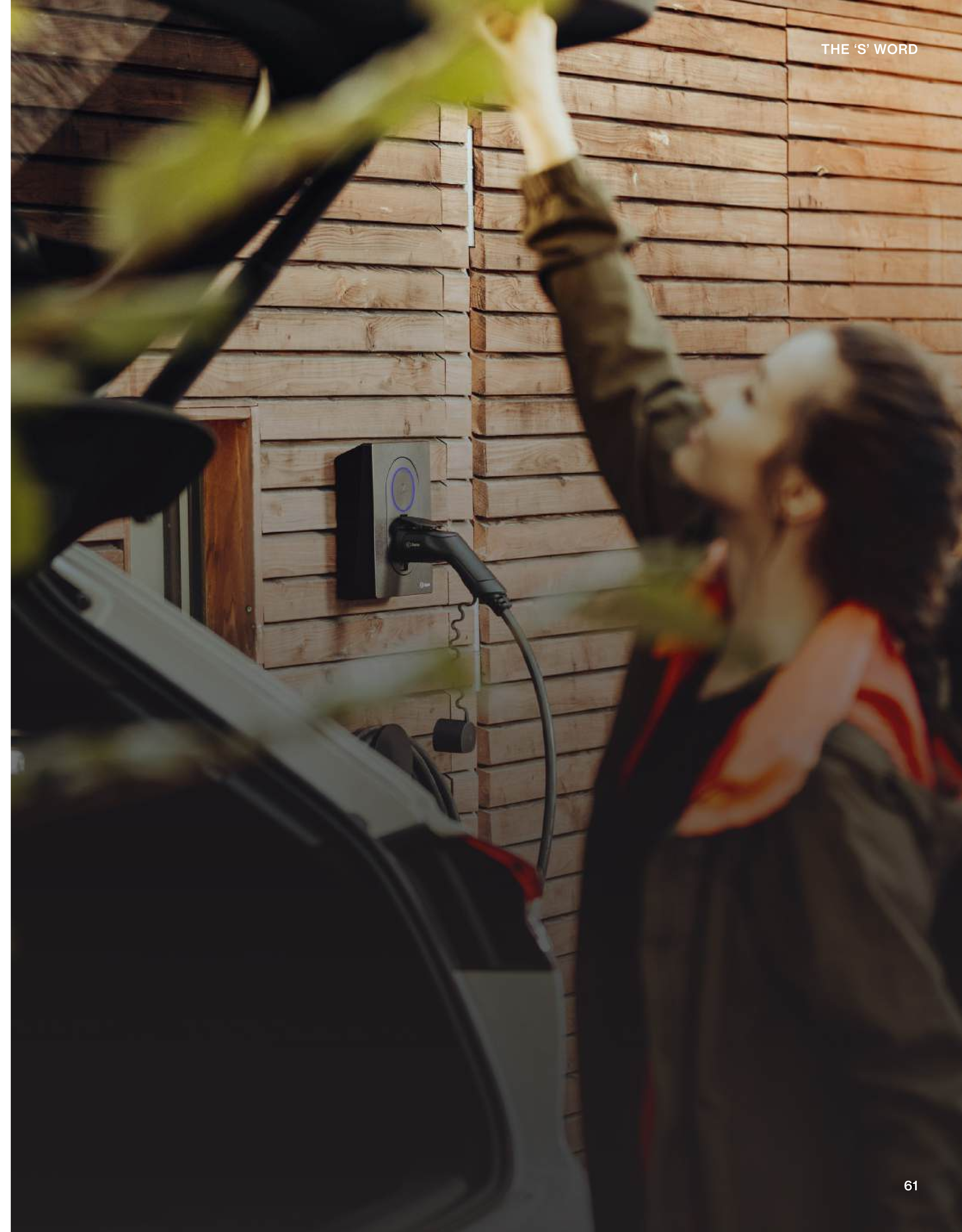
When we decouple people's attitudes and behaviours towards 'sustainability', the tension, guilt and distrust fall away. Energy-efficient appliances save people money. Reducing or avoiding meat brings health benefits. Buying secondhand or vintage is fun and adventurous. Solar panels make home energy less susceptible to unpredictable geopolitics.

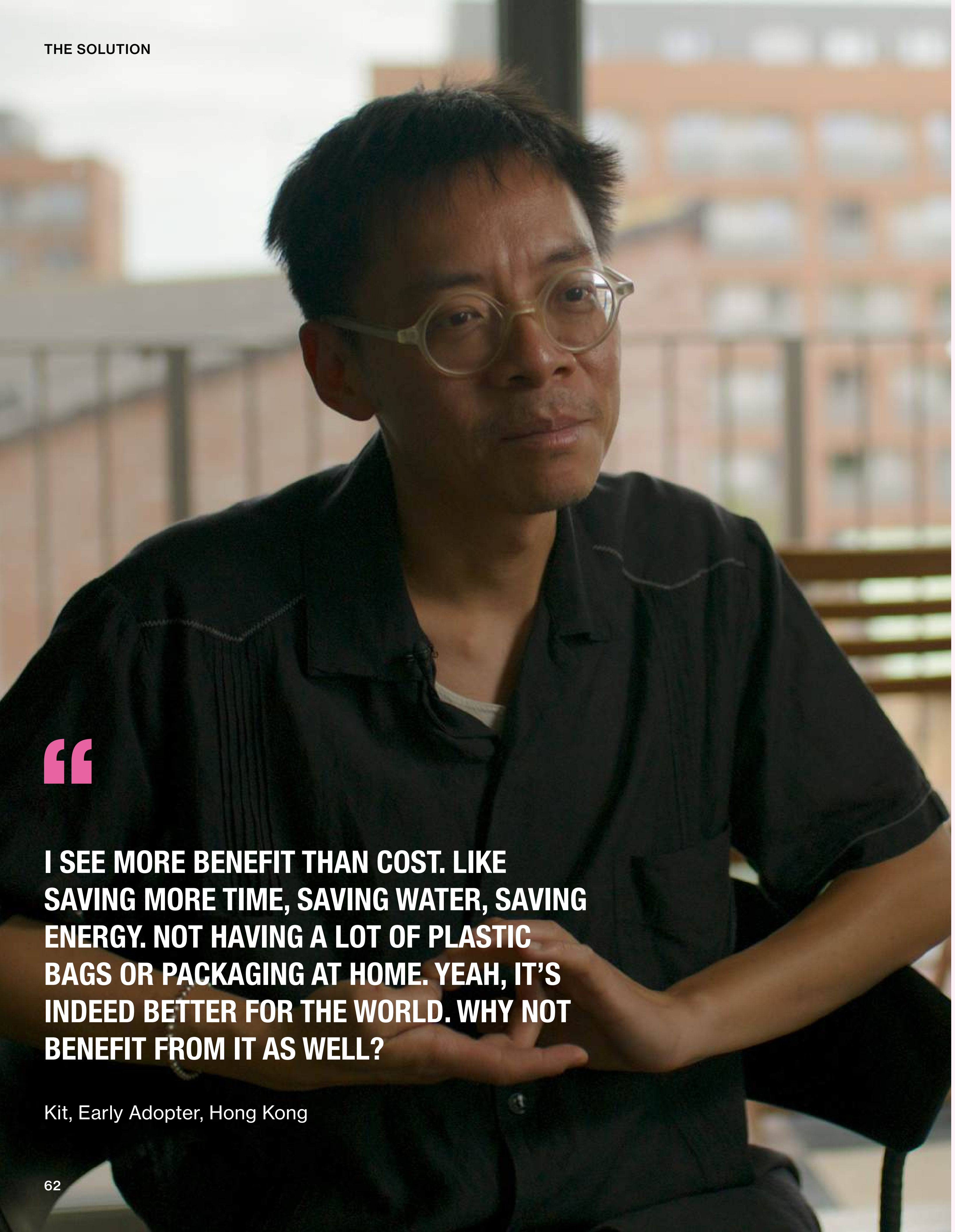
"

WE FIND THAT PEOPLE EARLIER IN THE JOURNEY SEE IT AS SOMETHING THAT IS GOING TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE THINGS THEY LOVE AND HAVE BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO - TRADITIONAL CAR ENTHUSIASTS IS A GOOD EXAMPLE - THERE IS OFTEN A VIEW THAT AN ELECTRIC VEHICLE IS JUST NOT AS GOOD AS PETROL OR DIESEL! SO, HOW DO YOU SHOW PEOPLE THAT SUSTAINABILITY DOESN'T HAVE TO TAKE AWAY FROM PERFORMANCE OR REDUCE QUALITY, BUT CAN OFTEN MAINTAIN OR EVEN ENHANCE IT?



Alison Nuttall,
Head of Sustainability Operations,
Jaguar Land Rover





“

I SEE MORE BENEFIT THAN COST. LIKE SAVING MORE TIME, SAVING WATER, SAVING ENERGY. NOT HAVING A LOT OF PLASTIC BAGS OR PACKAGING AT HOME. YEAH, IT’S INDEED BETTER FOR THE WORLD. WHY NOT BENEFIT FROM IT AS WELL?

Kit, Early Adopter, Hong Kong

THE MOST COMMONLY UNDERTAKEN ‘SUSTAINABLE’ BEHAVIOURS ARE THOSE THAT MAKE LIFE BETTER: WHAT ARE CLIMATE DENIERS OR CLIMATE SCEPTICS DOING AND WHY?

69%

ENERGY-EFFICIENT APPLIANCES & BULBS

- Cost-saving
- Preserve resources

56%

LOCALLY-SOURCED PRODUCTS

- Quality and freshness reassurance
- To support local communities and farmers

44%

HOME ENERGY SOLUTIONS (E.G. SOLAR PANELS)

- Cost-saving
- Money-making
- Self-sufficiency
- Geopolitical concerns
- Satisfaction of beating the systems!

44%

BUYING SECONDHAND OR VINTAGE

- Cost-saving
- Money-making
- Fun and discovery
- Exclusivity/rariry

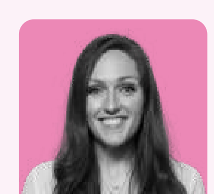
36%

AVOID MEAT CONSUMPTION

- Health and wellbeing
- Concerns over animal treatment
- Cost-saving

“

WE START AND END WITH THE CONSUMER TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND “WHAT ARE THEIR BELIEFS?” HOW CAN WE HELP AND SUPPORT, AND DRIVE THAT POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR CHANGE USING THE CONSUMER AS THE BEATING HEART OF WHAT WE DO.’



Kate Shally,
Marketing Director Pep+,
PepsiCo

Source: C Space, Behaviours that are ‘always’ or ‘usually’ engaged in by those self-identifying as climate deniers or climate sceptics. Sample size: 972 in DE, US, UK, CH. Reasons for behaviours overlaid from qualitative research.

EMOTIONAL JOURNEYS

Guilt can be a powerful driver of action, especially in cause-related marketing. But with sustainability, not everyone is feeling guilty, and some of those who are rationalise their guilt with arguments for cost, practicality and convenience. Add to this a general sense of 'crisis fatigue' around the climate emergency, and a surfeit of guilt-laden information is turning people off.

It's more effective to excite and inspire people about the benefits of sustainable activities – without using the 'S' word or painting everything green, which carries so much baggage. People are likely to tell their friends about what has made them feel good, be it a great circular alternative, savvy money-saving practice, or an inventive way to make more of what they have. 'Sustainability' can sit happily in the background, and those that are most engaged will find you anyway.

"WE'VE GONE THROUGH PANDEMICS, WE'VE GONE THROUGH COST OF LIVING CRISES, WE'VE GONE THROUGH GOVERNMENT CHANGES, WE'RE GOING THROUGH WORLD WARS, WE'RE GOING THROUGH FAMINE. UNFORTUNATELY, CLIMATE CHANGE IS ANOTHER CRISIS WHICH PEOPLE HAVE BECOME FATIGUED WITH."

Phil, Early Adopter, UK

"THERE IS AN EMERGING CONVERSATION IN SUSTAINABILITY: THINGS HAVE GONE TOO FAR, TOO MUCH DOOM AND GLOOM… HOPE BECOMES A RADICAL ACT OF ACTIVISM. BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE THINGS CAN CHANGE, YOU'VE ALREADY LOST THE BATTLE. WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO COLLECTIVELY IMAGINE A BETTER FUTURE AND WORK TOWARDS IT.

Kian Bakhtiari,
Founder of THE PEOPLE

'MORE THAN' SUSTAINABILITY

Consumers (and businesses) often perceive sustainability as 'less than'. Less convenient, less effective, less affordable, less appealing and less luxurious. Even less fun. But at the rate of innovation we're seeing, this is simply no longer always the case. Sustainability can be a vehicle for the higher-level benefits we all seek.

Costa Rican diplomat and global leader on climate change, Christiana Figueres, says that most measures to address climate change actually improve people's all round quality of life. Slowing down, connecting with nature, and feeling a sense of togetherness with our communities, are all higher-level universally valued and healthy aspirations.

These visions of a better quality of life wholly align with more sustainable ways to live. To live the good life now and for a new generation. Hope over doom. Happiness over guilt. No one knows better than brands how to communicate the promise of a better way of life, so let's do it in a way that doesn't perpetuate irresponsible consumption.

With this new approach, we can introduce richer, deeper messages about sustainability that benefits lifestyles as people move along their journey. Framed by hope, sustainability can enhance, not diminish, what we expect from brands – be it tastier local and seasonal fruit and vegetables, a more luxurious driving experience in an electric car, or kinder, more effective natural beauty products. Sustainability: not less than, but more than.

"

BEING A RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS MEANS GOING BEYOND JUST COMPLIANCE. MAYBE TALKING ABOUT LEGISLATION AND CO2 EMISSIONS ISN'T THE WAY TO DO THAT. BECAUSE THIS HAS GOT TO BE ABOUT HEARTS AND MINDS. IT'S GOT TO BE A CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AS WELL AS A TECHNICAL AND INNOVATION ONE.

Alison Nuttall,
Head of Sustainability Operations,
Jaguar Land Rover

A BETTER WAY TO RESEARCH SUSTAINABILITY

If we want to change how we talk about sustainability, then we also need to change how we research it.

For more promising, empathetic insights, we need to start by changing the question. Rather than, *'Do people care about sustainability? What should we talk about?*', ask, '*How can products that are more responsible (less wasteful, kinder in their ingredients or more energy efficient) connect with people's visions of a better quality of life?'* From this perspective, brands can hone their sustainability strategy and stay competitive and commercially viable.

We also need to rethink segmentation. We can no longer afford to reject the rejectors; we won't meet the scale of the climate challenge if we do. We've learnt in this project that the rejectors have a lot to teach us that others are nervous to admit, and just as there is greater scepticism among the seemingly engaged, there is hope among the sceptics.

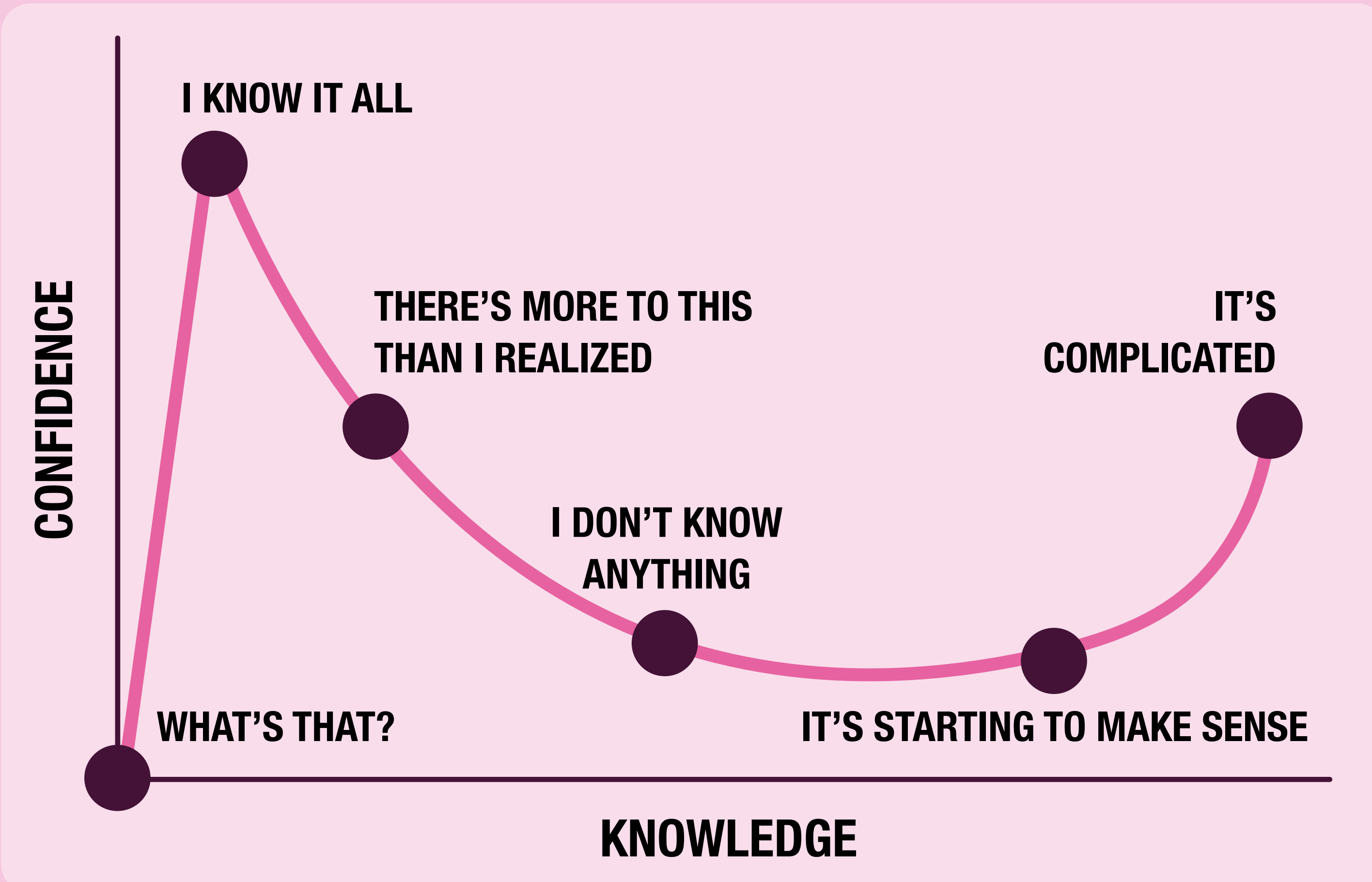
Everyone needs reassurance and outlets for brand engagement because we all feel guilty, sceptical or compromised. By creating strategies, products and offers that appeal to even the most ardent climate deniers (who, as we know, still engage in behaviours we would class as 'sustainable'), we're more likely to bring the mainstream along with us too. →

"I DON'T REALLY HAVE A PROBLEM WITH WHY THEY'RE TRYING TO DO IT, I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH HOW THEY'RE DOING IT – TELLING US WHAT TO DO, TALKING TO US LIKE WE'RE IDIOTS."

Alec, Climate Sceptic, UK

"WE'VE SPENT ALL OF OUR CAREERS GOING, 'HOW DO WE GET PEOPLE TO HIT THE PURCHASE BUTTON AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE? HOW DO WE MAKE OUR WEBSITE JOURNEY AS SEAMLESS AS POSSIBLE?'… WE'VE GOT TO PUT THAT RESPONSIBLE LENS OVER IT AND ASK THAT DIFFERENT SET OF QUESTIONS; HOW DO WE GET PEOPLE TO ENGAGE WITH US LONGER TERM BECAUSE THE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THAT WE'RE OFFERING ARE ESSENTIALLY BETTER FOR PEOPLE, BETTER FOR PLANET, BETTER FOR PROFIT?

Gemma Butler,
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author



THE DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT

Two in every three people feel they don't really understand what it means to be sustainable. As researchers, this means we can think we're speaking to a particular group based on their claimed attitudes and behaviours, when the underlying truth points to something else.

One way this pattern shows up is with something called the Dunning Kruger effect: less knowledgeable people consider themselves further along the curve than they really are, while those more knowledgeable think they're further behind due to their greater understanding of the scale of the problem.

To keep pace with this volatile category, we need our research to work smarter, dig deeper and stay for longer. Static snapshots in time, as with classic qualitative groups or surveys, are problematic and struggle to capture the evolving nature of the topic or the nuances of attitude versus behaviour. We need more sophisticated recruitment strategies, and more longitudinal studies such as ongoing online communities and trackers; ethnographic research to understand how people really are behaving; semiotic studies to pull apart the codes that are dominant or emerging in different sectors. We must also acknowledge and understand the nuanced differences between products and sectors in the sustainability space. Research itself must use more refined interpretive techniques – such as our C Space Way magic cards and 'Art From Within' art therapy methods, all which help unravel what people won't, can't, or don't want to say.

We must use surveys with care. When data tells us simply that "people don't act on intention" or "people don't prioritise sustainability", we must probe deeper. Well-written surveys will provide contradictory and confusing data because topics are abstract and humans are messy. Only with supporting qualitative research can we begin to unpick the 'why' and uncover the most telling insights.

For brands to succeed in sustainability, we need research that takes 'sustainability' as a value judgement out of the equation. As we've learned, the vast majority of people don't buy sustainability, so let's stop trying to sell it to them.

THE PROBLEM WITH PATAGONIA

The saint-like impression of Patagonia casts the rest of us as sinners. But brands are like people, facing the same battles and negotiating different stages along their sustainability journey. This space is changing fast, and the brands that thrive will be those humble, empathetic and agile enough to acknowledge that no person or organisation can claim perfection and an end to the story.

While every business must transition, there is a distinction between what we do as businesses, versus how we communicate with people. Emulating Patagonia isn't credible or realistic for the vast majority of mainstream brands in particular, and could risk accusations of greenwashing and overclaim. Likewise, 'greenhushing' can be equally damaging.

The brand roles in the pages that follow are not fixed. They are starting points for thinking about how your brand can talk about sustainability. Spaces to play in as you develop and evolve the way you appear in your customers' sustainability stories. Each role has particular rules of engagement, tone of voice, and ways of marketing its sustainability commitments. You might even change and blur your roles over time.

Where does your brand sit now? Where does it aspire to be? Does your parent brand show up differently from your product brand? Are you playing a different role for different segments?

Answer these questions, and you can begin to stake your place in the sustainability landscape.

INTRODUCING THE BRAND ROLES:

THE PIONEER

THE LEADER

THE CHALLENGER

THE REFORMER

THE PRAGMATIST

THE PIONEER

PIONEER BRANDS IN SUSTAINABILITY BOLDLY REDEFINE INDUSTRY NORMS, PLACING ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS AND SOCIAL IMPACT AT THEIR CORE, WHILE OFTEN ALIGNING WITH LIKE-MINDED NON-PROFITS.

- Pioneers take on the world and make a statement.
- Sustainability and/or social impact is front and centre and defines the brand.
- Manifestos and big proclamations transcend category rules.
- Often connected to not-for-profit or other partner organisations and causes.
- Well-established (unlike Challengers, who Pioneers are sometimes mistaken for).

PATAGONIA

Patagonia are the poster-child for getting it right. As a typical activist brand, sustainability/social impact are front and centre of what the brand is known for. Various initiatives launched encourage and incentivise customers to be more sustainable. With comms such as ‘Earth is now our only stakeholder’, they transcend category to reiterate their big ambitions.

> **PATAGONIA WAS ABOUT SOCIAL IMPACT. YVONNE CHOUINARD SAID ‘LEAVE NO TRACE’ …TO ACTUALLY IMPROVE THE LANDSCAPE RATHER THAN TAKE FROM IT. THAT WAS AT THE BASE OF HIS IDEA FOR PATAGONIA…THEY ARE REAL ACTIVISTS..THEY EVEN TEACH ACTIVISTS HOW TO WIN CAMPAIGNS.**

Michelle Carvill,
Co-host of ‘Can Marketing Save The Planet?’ podcast, and author

TOMS

TOMS blazed trails with their One for One model, donating shoes to those in need, epitomizing corporate philanthropy. Embracing sustainability, they’ve evolved, committing to earth-friendly materials and practices. TOMS’ identity intertwines with social responsibility, as they continuously seek eco-conscious solutions, reducing their carbon footprint, and promoting mindful consumption, setting a benchmark for others.

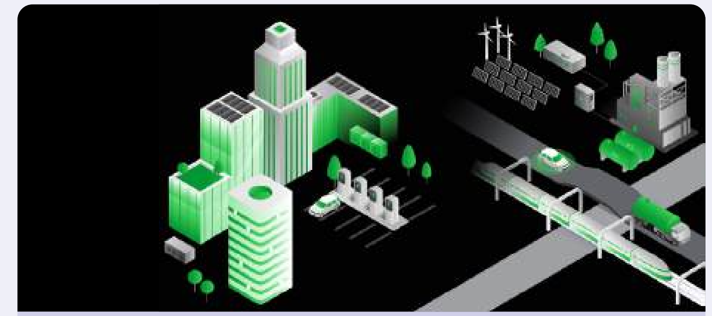
HITACHI

Hitachi champions sustainability through cutting-edge technologies and responsible practices. Its Social Innovation Business integrates advanced IT with infrastructure expertise to address global issues like climate change. Emphasizing environmental management, Hitachi invests in renewable energy and efficient systems, making sustainability core to their identity and ensuring a greener, smarter future.

THE LEADER

CATEGORY LEADERS IN SUSTAINABILITY ARE BRANDS THAT LEVERAGE THEIR INFLUENTIAL STATUS AND FINANCIAL POWER TO INITIATE LARGE-SCALE, INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES.

- Seeking to lead from the front and dictate terms.
- Often utilise large sector-wide partnerships.
- Tend to focus on their industry and product portfolio.
- Well-established brands with the voice and status to influence others.
- Financial weight and backing to invest in changes at scale.



SCHNEIDER ELECTRIC

External credentials give confidence: by being voted as the world’s number one sustainable company by Time Magazine, Schneider gets a stamp of approval giving consumers reassurance that there are safe bet. They live their sustainability values throughout, dialling up AI-integration that will enable smarter customer decision-making, agility, and decarbonisation.

I CAN TELL YOU, WE’RE COMMITTED TO IT... WE’RE MEASURED ON IT. WE’RE COMPENSATED AS AN EXECUTIVE TEAM ON IT. SO WE’RE IMPLEMENTING IT …I TRULY MEANT IT WHEN I SAID AT SCHNEIDER IT’S PART OF THE DNA OF THE COMPANY.

Michael Lotfy Gierges,
Executive Vice President
Home & Distribution,
Schneider Electric

IKEA

While many would argue it’s a brand built on the idea of short-term disposability, IKEA has managed to lean heavily into the circular economy and the idea of reuse and refurbishment. This new thinking is fully baked-in throughout the brand experience. As industry leaders, they have the voice and the status to influence others.

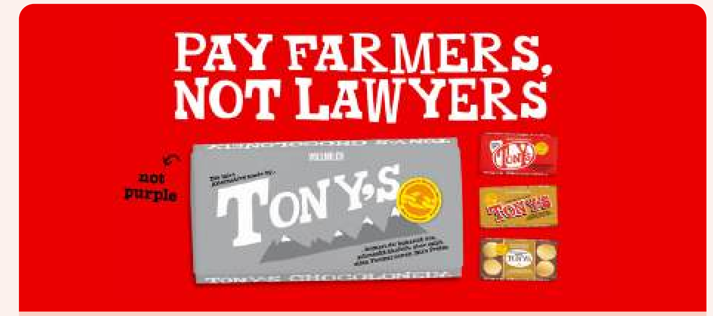
TRADER JOE’S

Trader Joe’s is leading the sustainability charge with its Neighborhood Shares Program to cut food waste and benefit communities, alongside ramping up recycling. The company’s Green Mission sets a proactive example for others in the industry to make environmental responsibility a priority.

THE CHALLENGER

CHALLENGER BRANDS IN SUSTAINABILITY DISRUPT TRADITIONAL MARKETS WITH INNOVATIVE MODELS AND A BOLD STANCE AGAINST INDUSTRY GIANTS' ECO-UNFRIENDLY PRACTICES, ENERGIZING GROWTH, OFTEN WITH AN IRREVERENT TONE.

- Taking on the big guns, often with new business models.
- Firing potshots at industry norms and targeting irresponsible ways of work.
- Relatively new or young – may be a start-up or still growing from a smaller scale.
- Often using a more confrontational or provocative tone of voice.
- Deliberately youthful in marketing communications.



TONY'S CHOCOLONELY

Tony's Chocolonely, a Dutch confectionery brand, sets itself apart by staunchly combating slavery and child labor in chocolate production. Their ethical sourcing and traceable, Fairtrade ingredients challenge industry norms, advocating for a sustainable and socially responsible cocoa supply chain. Tony's transparent practices and bold mission differentiate it in a market often criticized for exploitative labour practices.

> **WHEN THEY MERGED AND THEY TOOK ON SOME LARGER SUPPLIERS, THEY IDENTIFIED PRACTICES THAT DIDN'T COMPLY WITH THEIR STANDARDS. THEY VERY OPENLY SAID 'THIS IS WHAT'S HAPPENED…NOW WE KNOW IT, WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT'. SO THAT ABILITY TO BE REALLY HONEST …NOT MANY ORGANIZATIONS ARE COURAGEOUS ENOUGH TO DO THAT IN THE PUBLIC EYE.**

Michelle Carvill,
Co-host of 'Can Marketing Save The Planet?' podcast, and author

BACKMARKET

Backmarket has emerged as a leading global marketplace for refurbished electronics, requiring fewer resources and emissions. The company claims its space by leading with messaging around savviness, trust, and cost savings, while lightly mocking industry norms.

SURI TOOTHBRUSHES

Suri Toothbrushes challenge the oral care industry with eco-friendly, recyclable materials and a repair/recycling program to reduce waste. Their communications emphasize transparency and responsible consumption, with educational messaging that often contrasts their sustainable products against plastic alternatives, reinforcing their commitment to eco-conscious innovation.

THE REFORMER

REFORMER BRANDS STRIVE FOR SUSTAINABILITY AMIDST SCRUTINY, AIMING TO RECTIFY PAST PRACTICES WHILE NAVIGATING THE TIGHTROPE OF AUTHENTICITY AND GREENWASHING CONCERNS. TRUST MUST BE EARNED HERE.

- Businesses in industries with historically poor reputations for sustainability.
- Starting on the wrong side of history and looking to make amends.
- Be mindful of high risk of scepticism and perceptions of greenwashing.
- Transparency and humility are essential as a way to build trust.
- Often reassuring for customers that are on their own journey.

FASHION

The fashion industry grapples with hefty carbon emissions, over production and resource depletion. With trends and seasonality driving disposability, habits are hard to break but many brands are focusing more on quality and durability. Fast fashion brands need to show transparent supply chains, ethical labour practices, and innovative technologies.

> **JUST BE VERY HONEST ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE ON THAT JOURNEY...WE'RE NOT PERFECT, BUT HERE'S WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO DO. AND PEOPLE APPRECIATE THAT.**

Kian Bakhtiari,
Founder of THE PEOPLE

AUTOMOTIVE

Historically a significant emissions contributor, the automotive industry is transitioning to electric vehicles (EVs) but poses hurdles including battery disposal and limited infrastructure. Leaders in the field are innovating in energy efficiency, developing sustainable materials, and circularity across the supply chain.

AVIATION

The aviation industry is responsible of between 2 – 3.5% of GHG emissions. Awareness is still increasing among consumers but mainstream consumers, in particular, are keen not to compromise on leisure travel. The industry is working on fuel-efficiency, the use of sustainable aviation fuels, and the implementation of carbon offsetting schemes.

THE PRAGMATIST

PRAGMATIST BRANDS SUBTLY INTEGRATE SUSTAINABILITY INTO THEIR OPERATIONS, EMPHASIZING STRONG ACTIONS OVER MARKETING WHILE DELIVERING PRACTICAL BENEFITS. THEY MAINTAIN THEIR CORE FOCUS, WITHOUT COMPROMISING TRANSPARENCY IN THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS.

- Continues to invest in strong organizational actions and commitments behind the scenes.
- Treats sustainability as a secondary, supportive feature in marketing.
- Leverages sustainability more for customer-facing benefits and cost savings.
- Highlights sustainability in specific communications rather than main campaigns.
- A likely role for many mainstream brands as compliance becomes more widespread.

OCTOPUS ENERGY

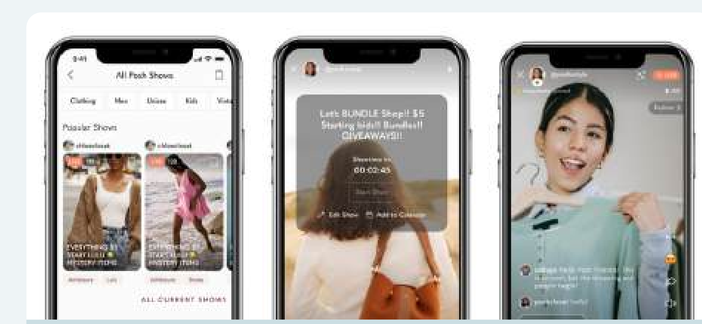
Octopus Energy is particularly known for providing competitively priced energy with award-winning customer service. While their stance 100% renewable energy is well known, only those that more engaged in sustainability will know that they are one of the few offering export tariffs to help customers sell solar energy back to the grid.

> **"THEY'RE CHEAPER. AND OF COURSE THEY'RE SUSTAINABLE. I DON'T HAVE TO CARE ABOUT IT, BUT I'M JUST SAYING IT IS. IT'S ALSO THAT THEIR TARIFFS ARE VERY GOOD. THEY TREAT YOU LIKE AN ADULT… KINGS OF SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE TAKE THEMSELVES FAR TOO SERIOUSLY…BUT [OCTOPUS] MAKE ALL SORTS OF JOKES, AND IT'S FUN. THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT IT, IT'S FUN!**

Clive, Climate Sceptic, UK

AXA

AXA Insurance demonstrates its commitment to sustainability through their AXA Climate Solutions, robust climate-focused investments and divestment from coal. It champions green insurance products and supports sustainable development projects. Nevertheless, AXA maintains a low-key approach in mainstream communications, focusing on substantive action over marketing chatter.



POSHMARK

When it comes to in second-hand ecommerce marketplace Poshmark business model, there is a clear sustainability value-add due to its circular economy nature. However, this is rarely featured in its comms/ website, which circle more around community, realizing your individuality and the value add of selling and buying – cash. The 'green' element of using the platform is often simply positioned more as an added bonus.

WHAT'S YOUR 'S' WORD?

Our 'S' word research is about reframing the conversation on sustainability marketing. It's about breaking the inaction and paralysis our politics, brands and consumers face. It's about discovering the real insights that inform consumers' attitudes towards sustainability by asking better questions in better ways. It's about fishing out the 'S' word and discovering a recipe for hope, collaboration, commercial success and greener future. It's about everybody living the good life.

Above all, our 'S' word research is about relationships. The dysfunctional love triangle is battered but not broken. The opportunities to rebuild connections with consumers are there for brands smart enough to take them. And that's where C Space can help.

Interested in carrying on the conversation? We'd love to hear from you.

Growth@cspace.com

Your C Space team.

Navigate complex issues - whether sustainability or beyond - with C Space's advisory services. Our extensive research, expert guidance and tailored strategies help you better understand your customers and move forward with confidence using Insight Communities, Co-Creation and Brand Tracking. Let's craft a dynamic strategy for your brand.

Insight Communities: Uncover evolving consumer perspectives with ongoing dialogues that provide rich, actionable insights. Discover how communities improve customer engagement to drive growth.

Co-Creation: Build impactful propositions, products and strategies by collaborating directly with consumers and stakeholders. Let's co-create your next big idea!

Brand Tracking: Benchmark your brand against competitors and market leaders with real-time insights to get ahead of shifting expectations. Find out how brand tracking can help you outpace the competition.

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C Space work with multiple sectors. All are on their own journey to decarbonisation and we are actively involved with helping many of them to execute against their sustainability strategies alongside other business and brand objectives, in a way that best builds relationships with customers and other stakeholders.

C Space and its parent company, Escalent, have committed to decarbonising our own operations in a way that is aligned with the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi). C Space EMEA are signatories of the Climate Pledge of the MRS (the UK-based Market Research Society).

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