

THE GREEN FEVER



Sustainability communication
in the days of fast food chains' websites

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POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

FINAL SYNTHESIS DESIGN STUDIO
LM in Communication Design
Sez. C3 — 2022/2023

GROUP 02

*The green fever: Sustainability communication
in the days of fast food chains' websites.*

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→ RESEARCH PROMPT

Greenwashing in fast food chains communication

The report explores and analyses how the major U.S.A. fast food companies are talking about sustainability on one of their main communication platforms: [websites](#).

The [IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land](#) states that 34% of all man-made CO₂ emissions are generated by the food industry and, since the US is not only the 2nd country in terms of carbon emissions but also homeland of fast foods, it was decided to choose this market as the subject of this research.

The aim is to discover [hidden common patterns](#) or any distinctive formula in digital communication strategies used by corporations in order to perpetrate the [green narrative](#), which is often deemed by news outlets as misleading, hence taking the name of [greenwashing](#).

[Greenwashing](#) can be defined as “unsubstantiated claims or activities which deceive consumers into believing that a company has a greater positive environmental impact than is true”.

[The criteria](#) by which the companies were chosen for this analysis was based on:

- annual revenue
- total number of stores opened worldwide
- website has at list one sustainbaility-related section

Largest fast food restaurant chains

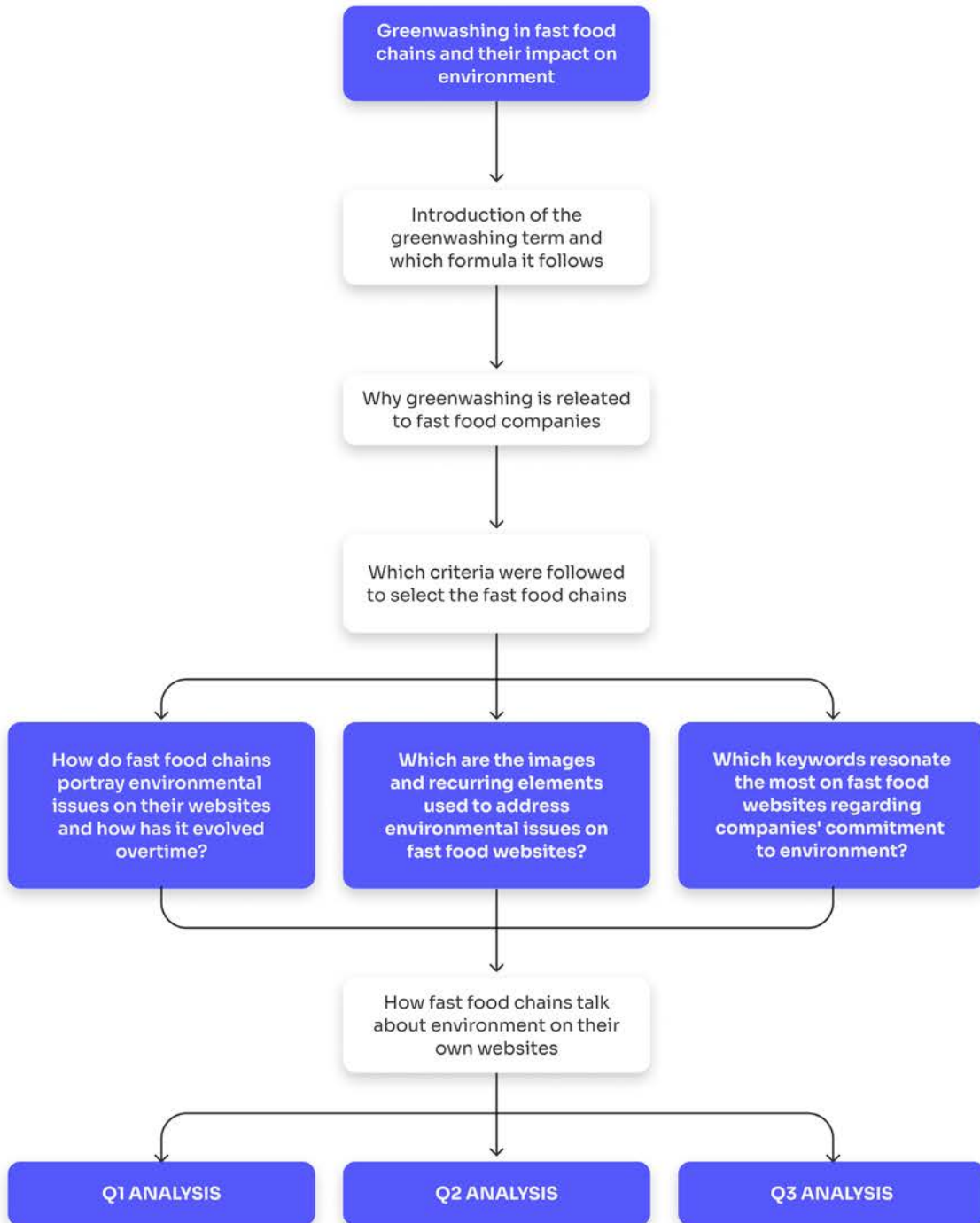
Fast food chain	Number of locations	Revenue
McDonald's	40031 (2021)	\$23.2 billion
Subway	37000 (2021)	\$16.1 billion
Starbucks	33833 (2021)	\$29.0 billion
KFC	26934 (2021)	\$31.3 billion
Burger King	19247 (2021)	\$23.4 billion
Domino's	18848 (2021)	\$17.7 billion
Pizza Hut	18381 (2021)	\$12.9 billion
Dunkin*	11300	\$1.37 billion
Krispy Kreme	10427 (2021)	\$1.38 billion
Hunt Brothers Pizza*	8000+	/
Taco Bell*	7791 (2021)	\$13.2 billion
Orange Julius*	7000+	/
Dairy Queen*	7000+	/
Wendy's	6949 (2021)	\$12.5 billion

*Chains excluded because they did not meet the criteria

Brief

Context analysis

Data collection



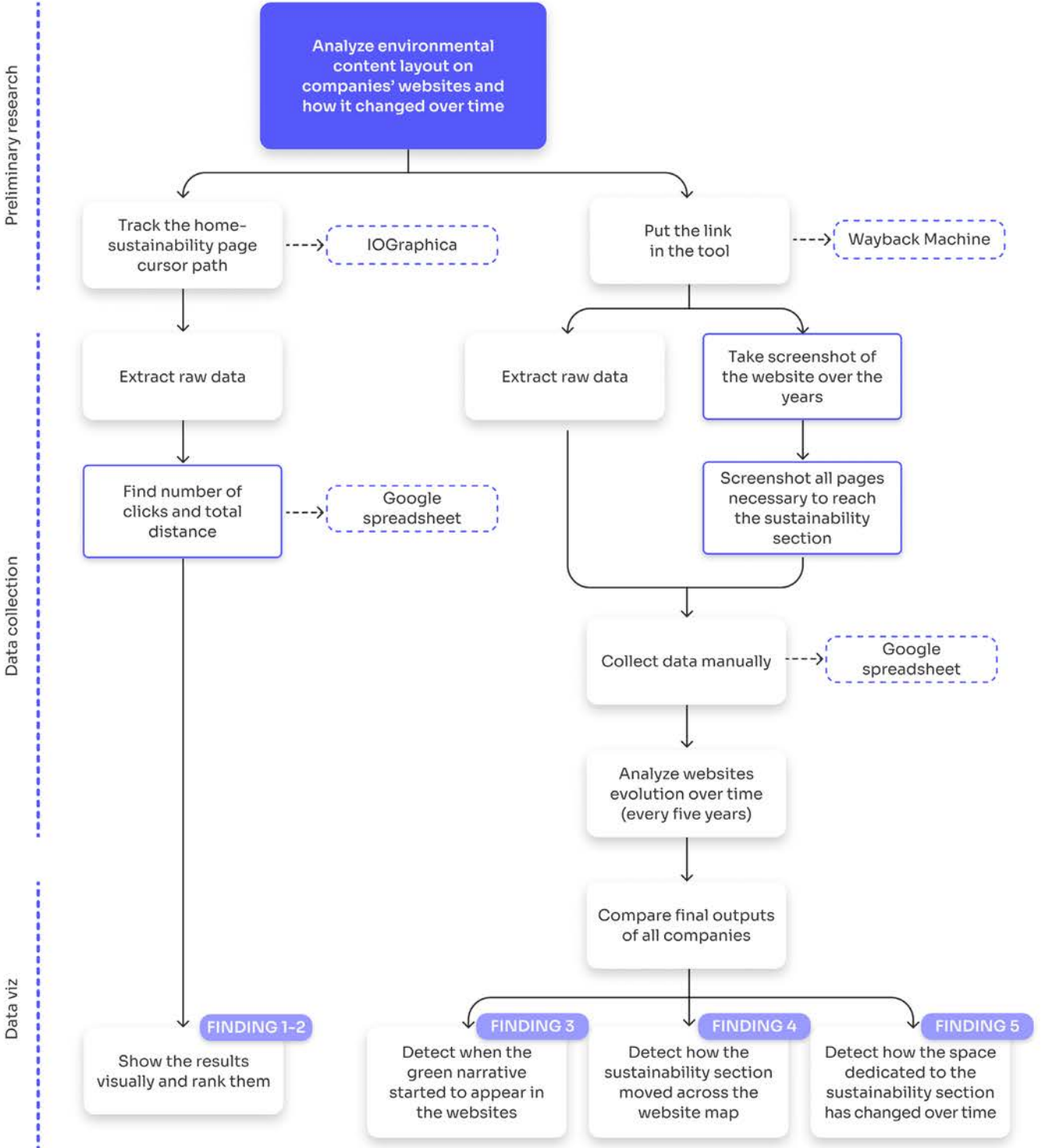
→ QUESTION 01

How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?

Websites can be considered as the official communication channels of these chains because they are easily accessible to users and usually present the brand and its values to the whole world.

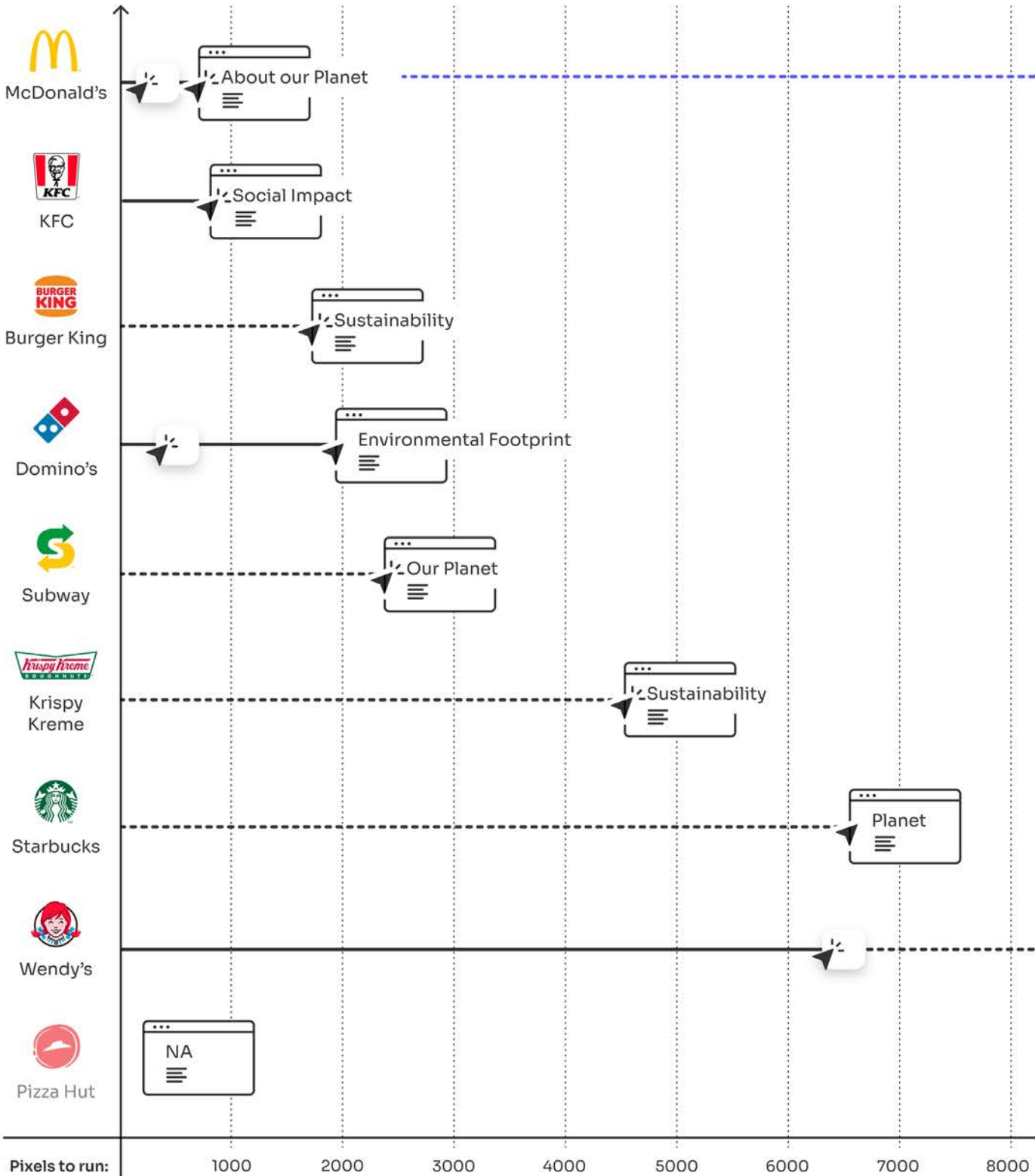
To conduct the research, it was chosen to analyze the domains [.com](#) of fast food companies in order to have not-geographically-based results.

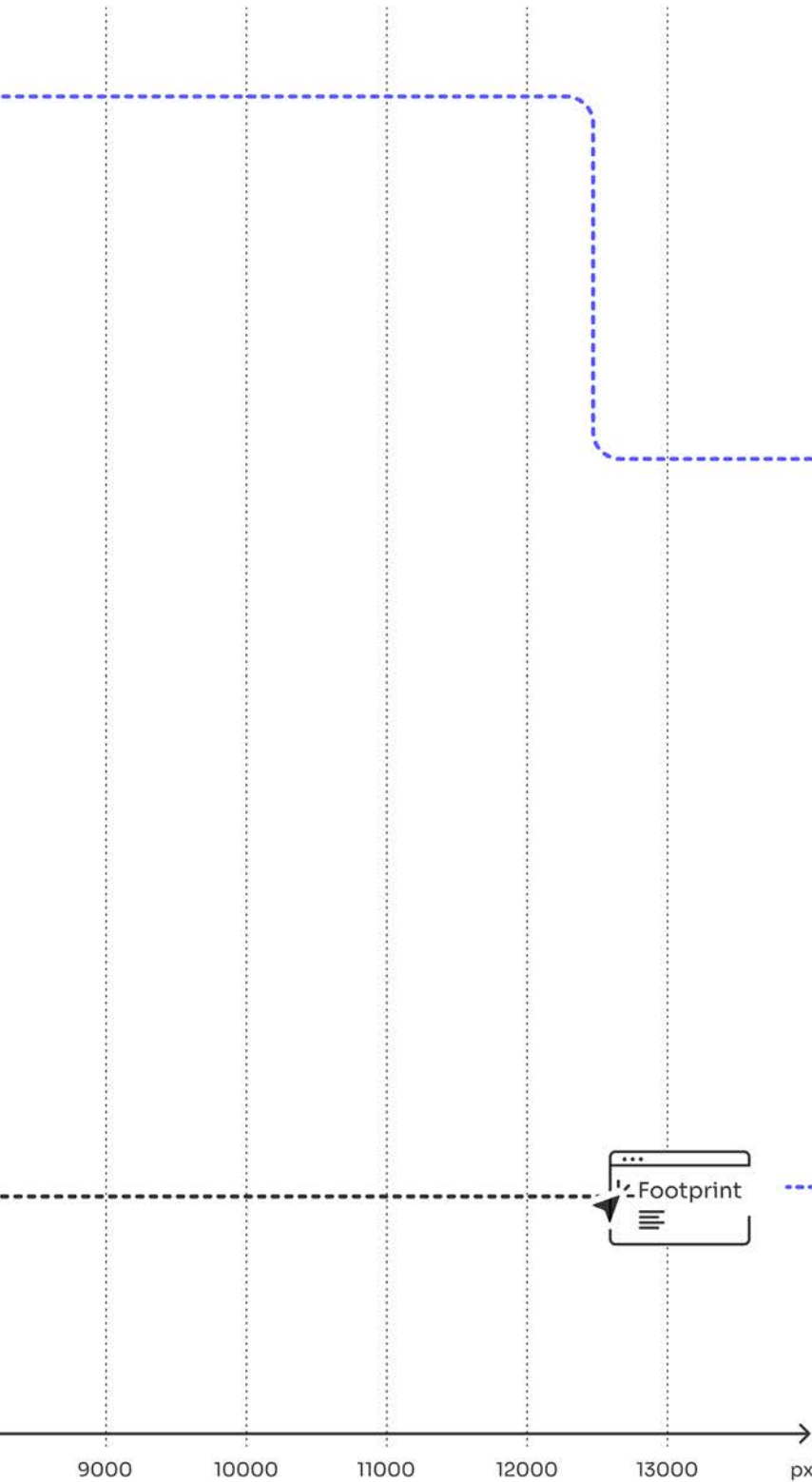
What was defined as the 'sustainability section' is namely the page that are speaking about or is strongly related to [environmental issues](#).



→ Graph 01

Ease of access to the section about sustainability





- - - - Scroll *
 ——— Run
 ↖ Mouse Click

🔍 Finding 01

The most accessible section

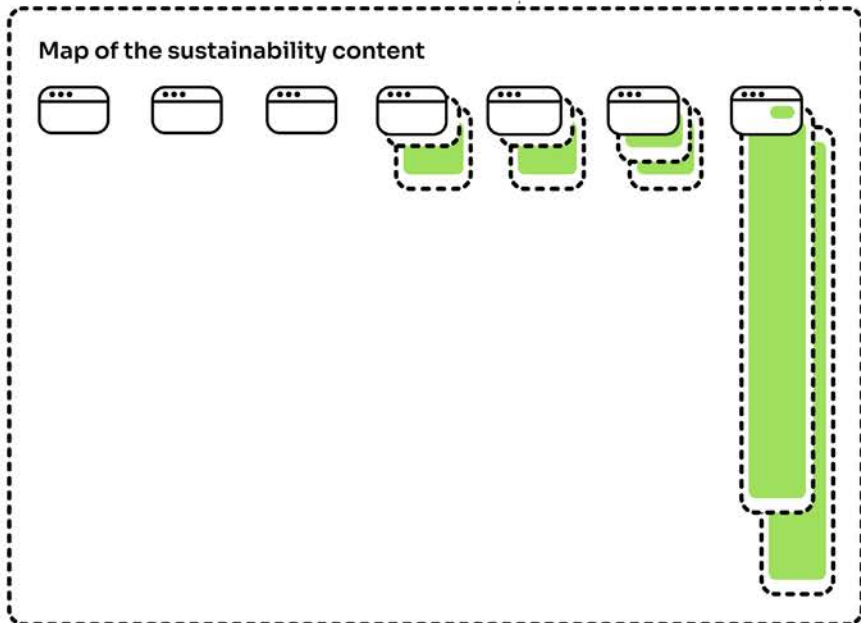
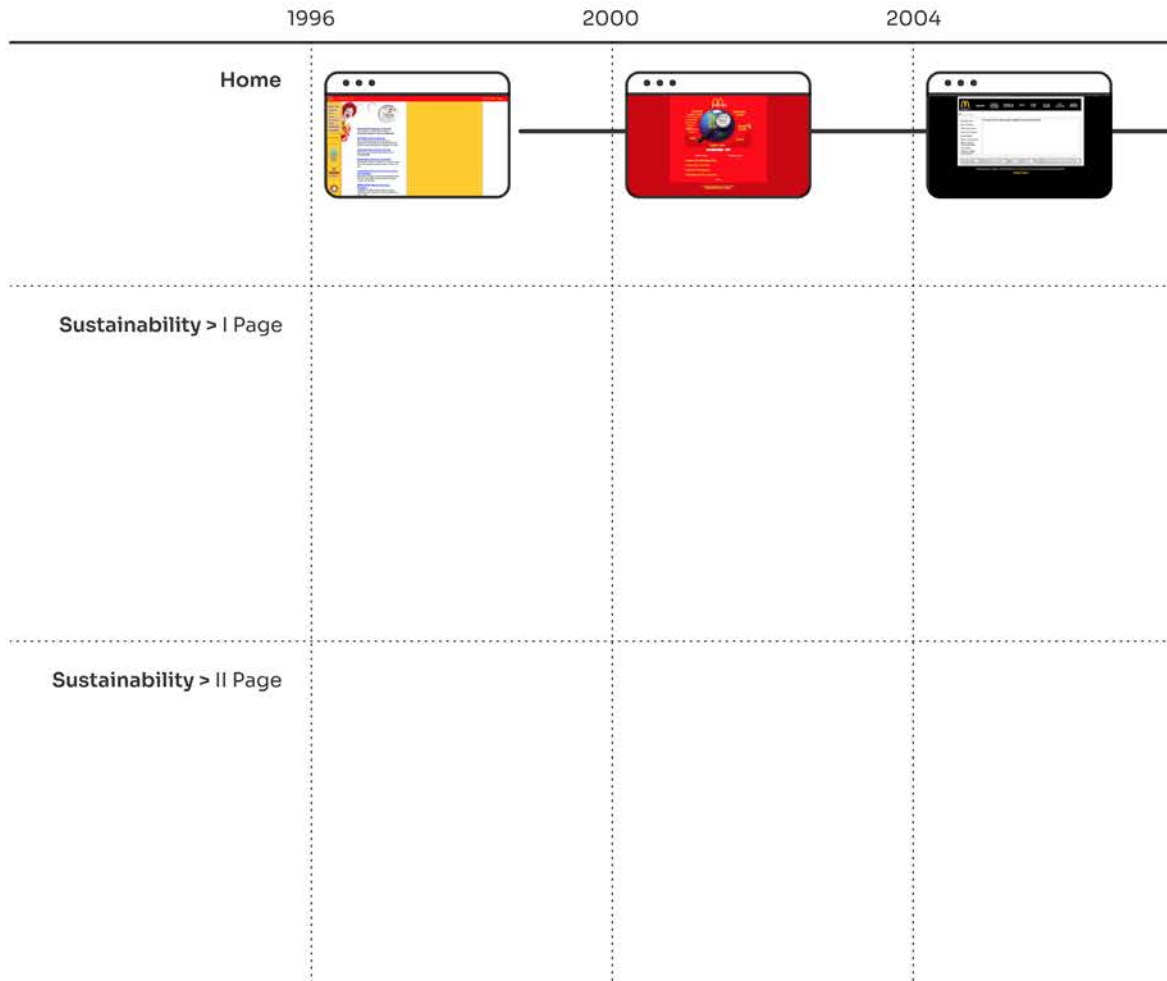
McDonald's sustainability section is the easiest to reach: it requires the minimum number of clicks and mouse distance. The company thus tries to be open about the issue, inviting the user to browse the dedicated section.

🔍 Finding 02

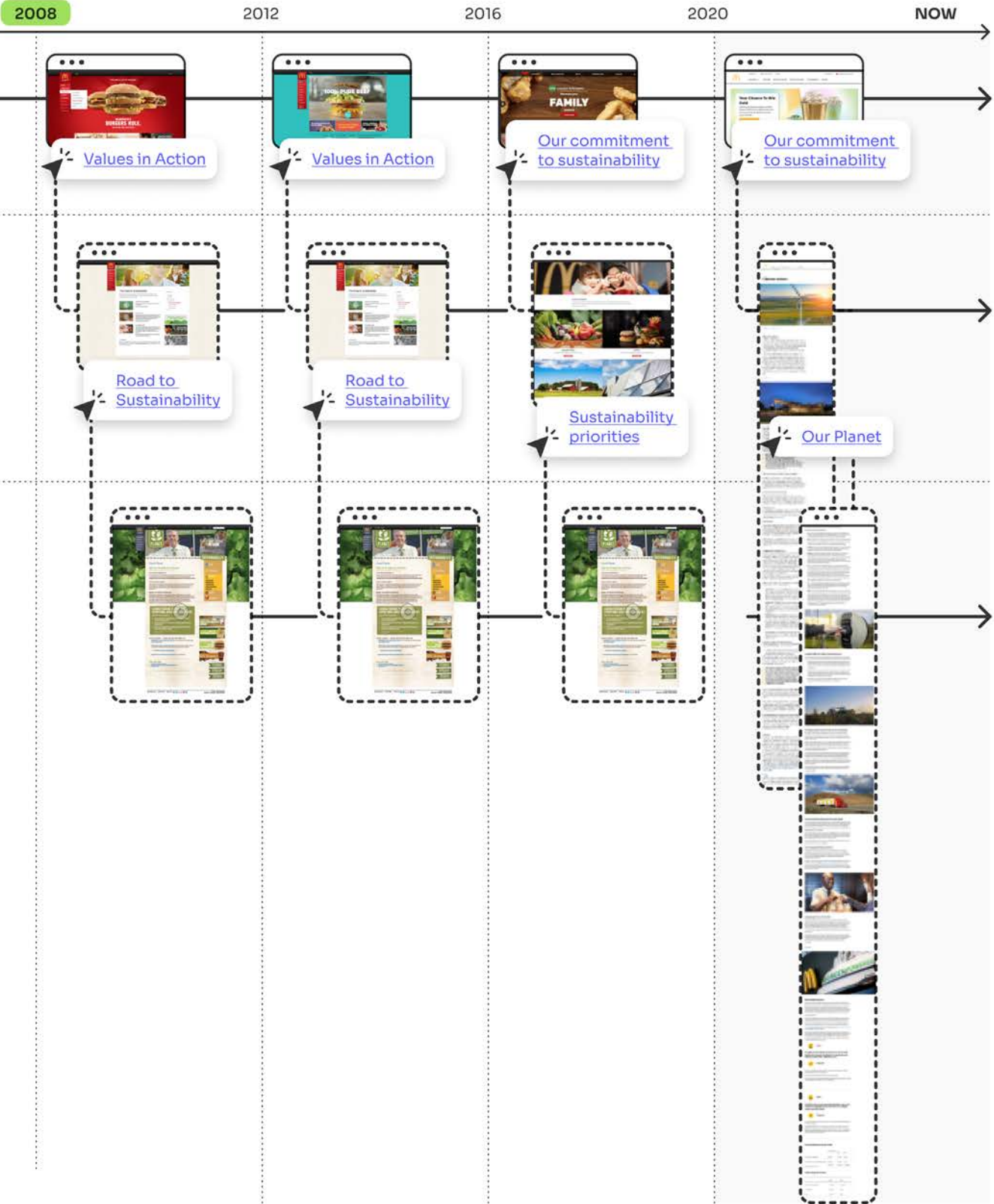
The most hidden section

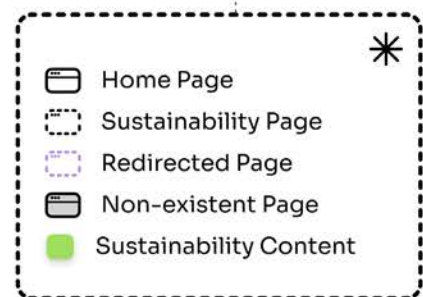
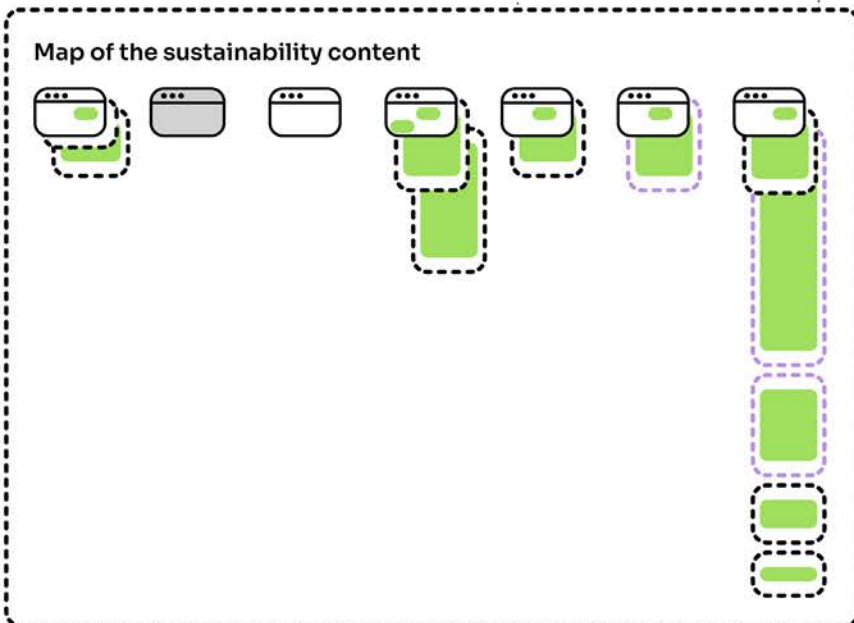
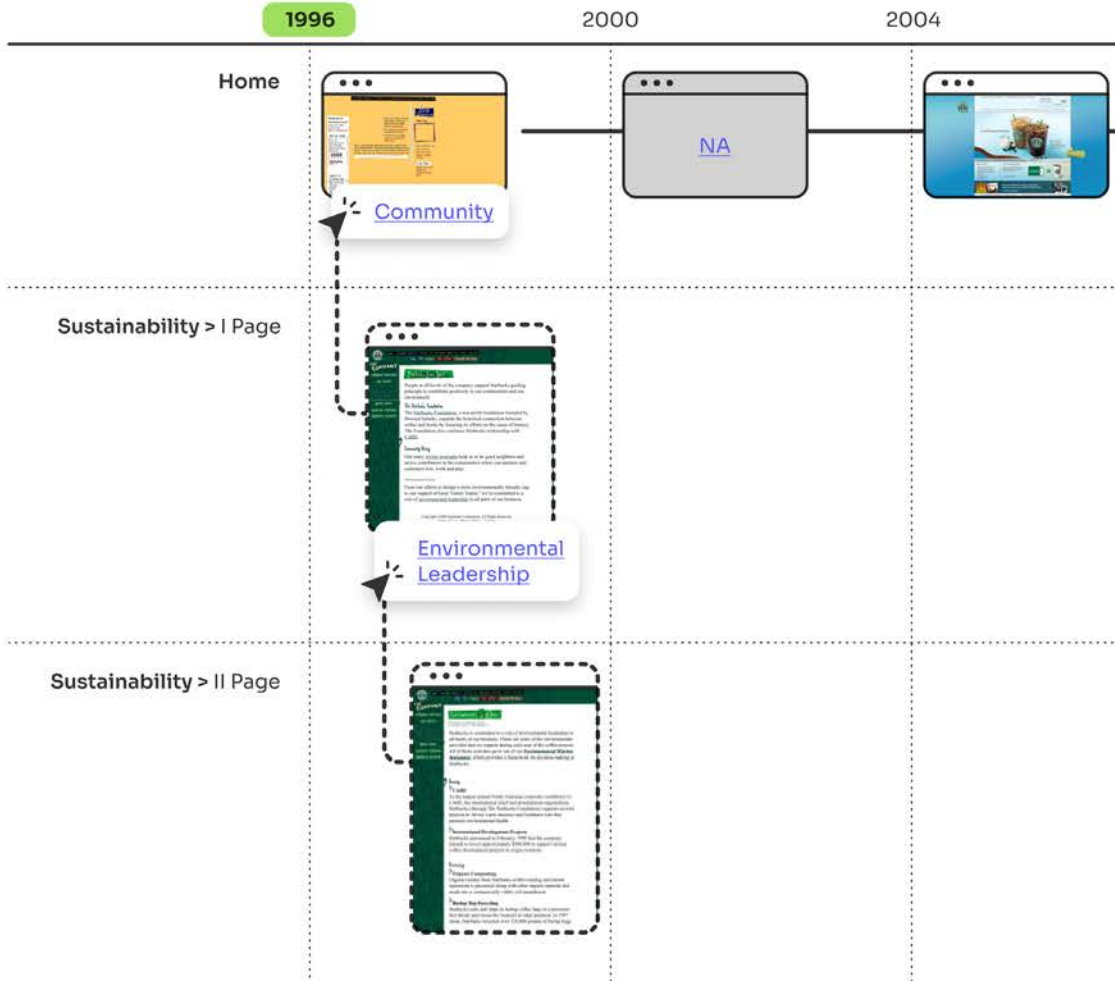
Wendy's sustainability section is the hardest to reach: it requires one click and a long mouse distance. The company thus tries to attract users towards its other focus areas first.

The evolution of sustainability sections

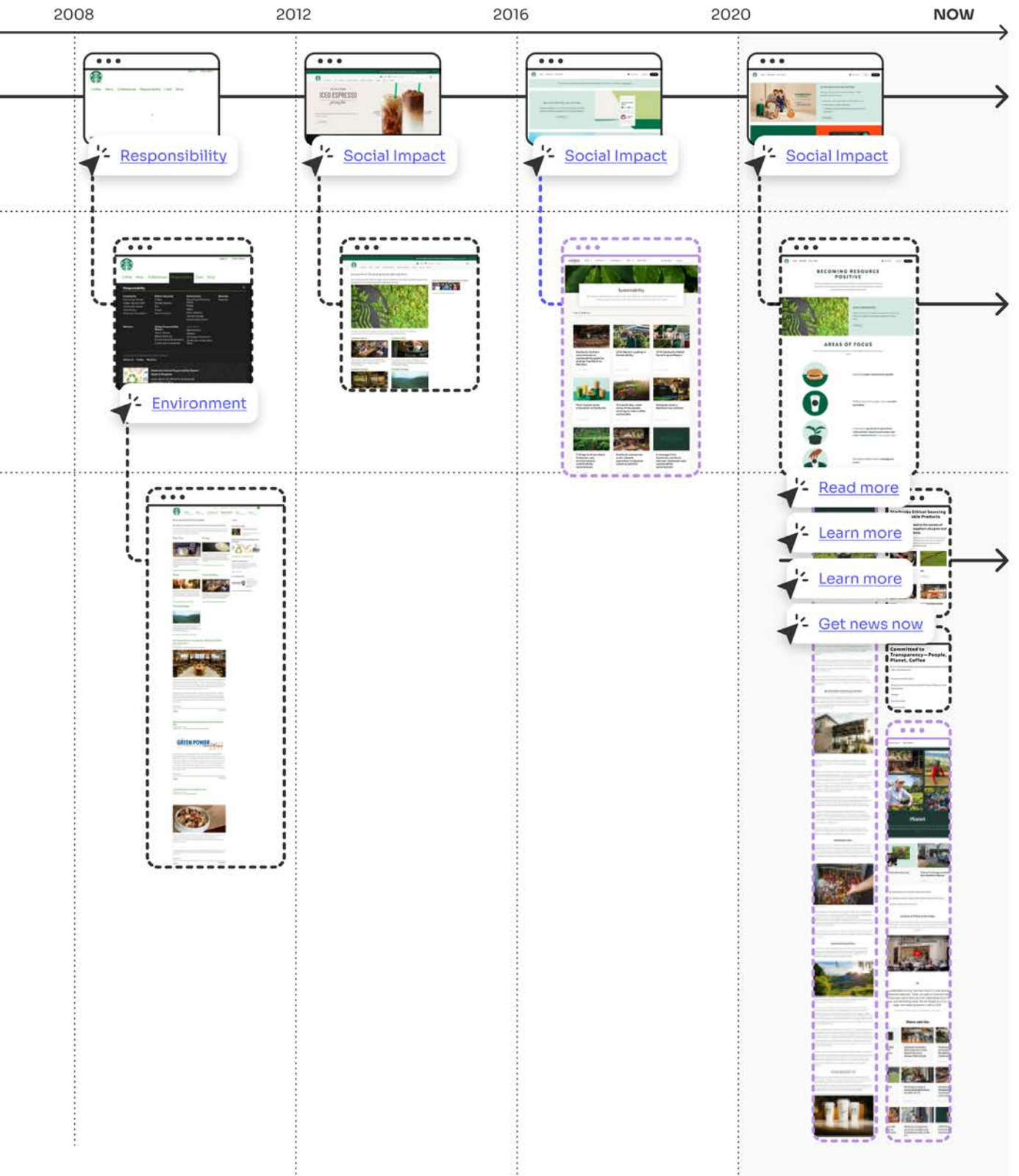


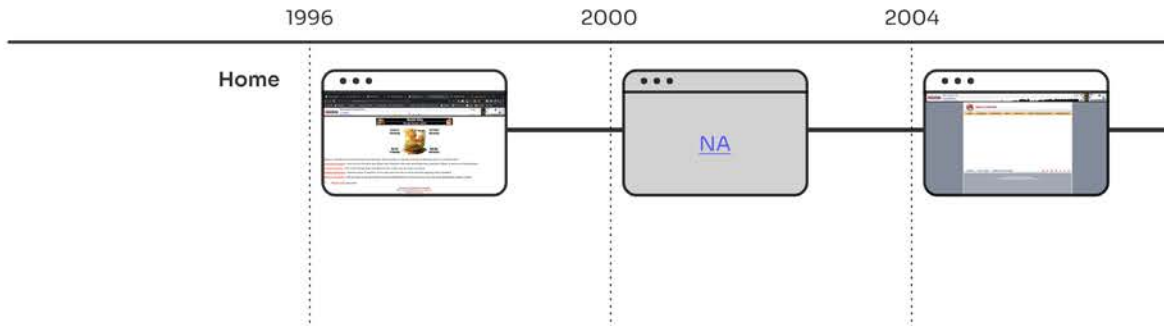
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?





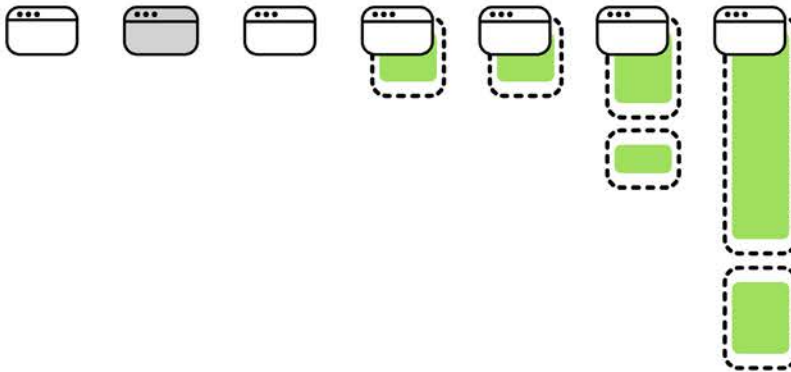
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?





Sustainability > | Page

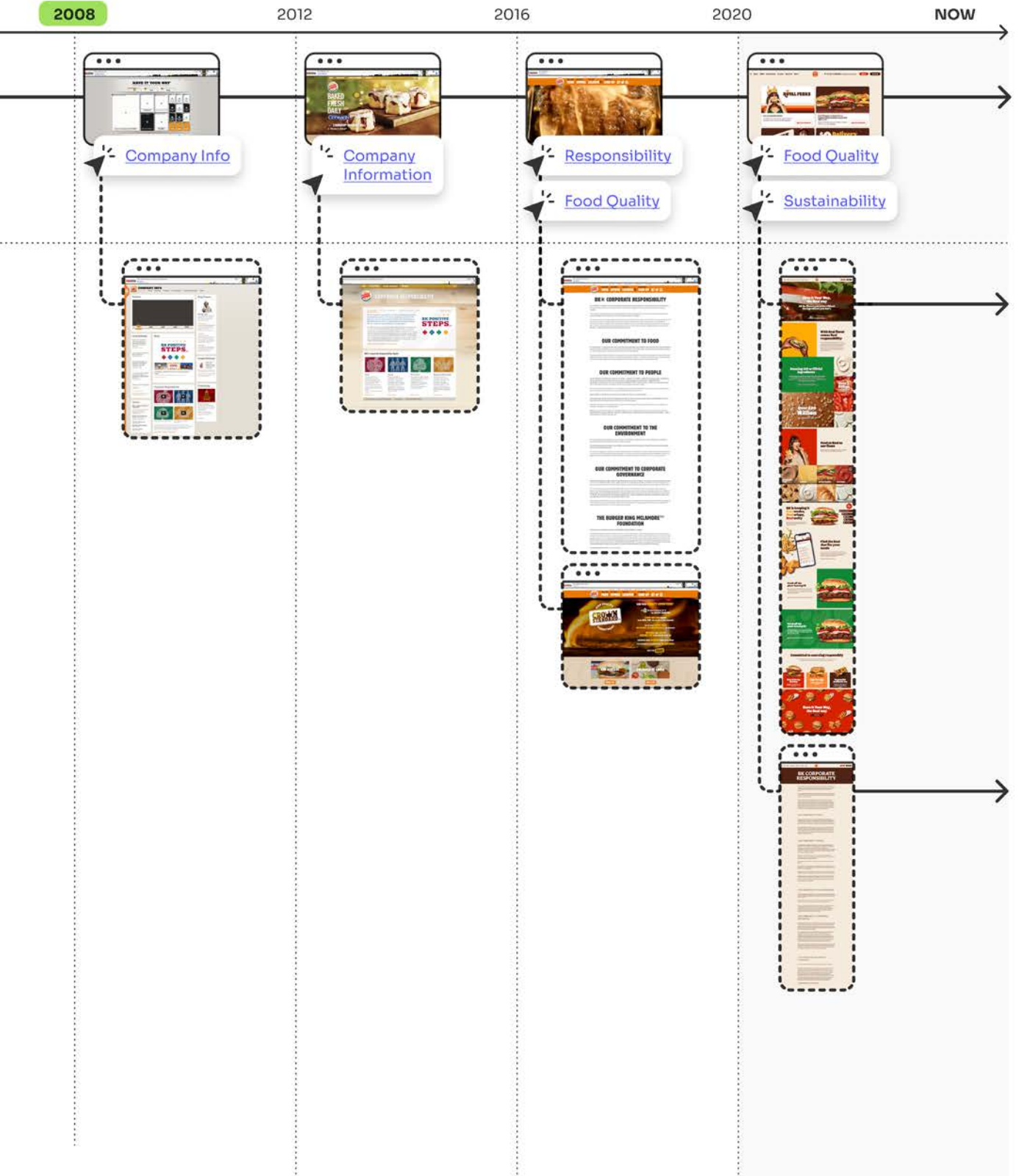
Map of the sustainability content



- Home Page
- Sustainability Page
- Redirected Page
- Non-existent Page
- Sustainability Content



Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?





Krispy Kreme

1996

2000

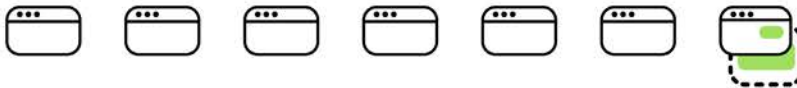
2004

Home



Sustainability > | Page

Map of the sustainability content

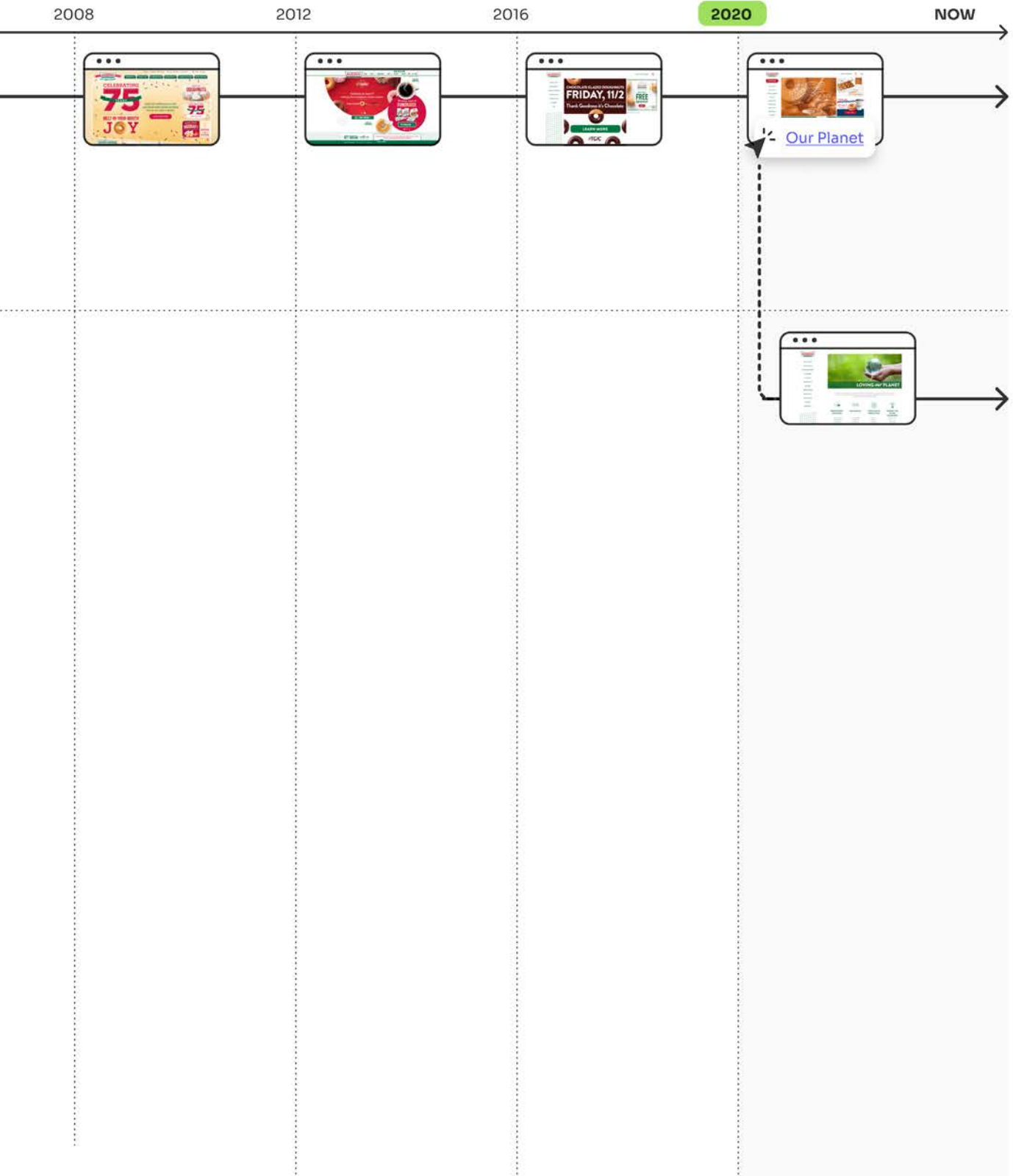


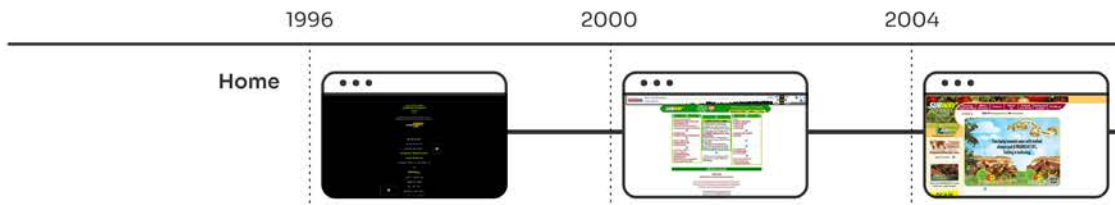
- Home Page
- Sustainability Page
- Redirected Page
- Non-existent Page
- Sustainability Content



Q1

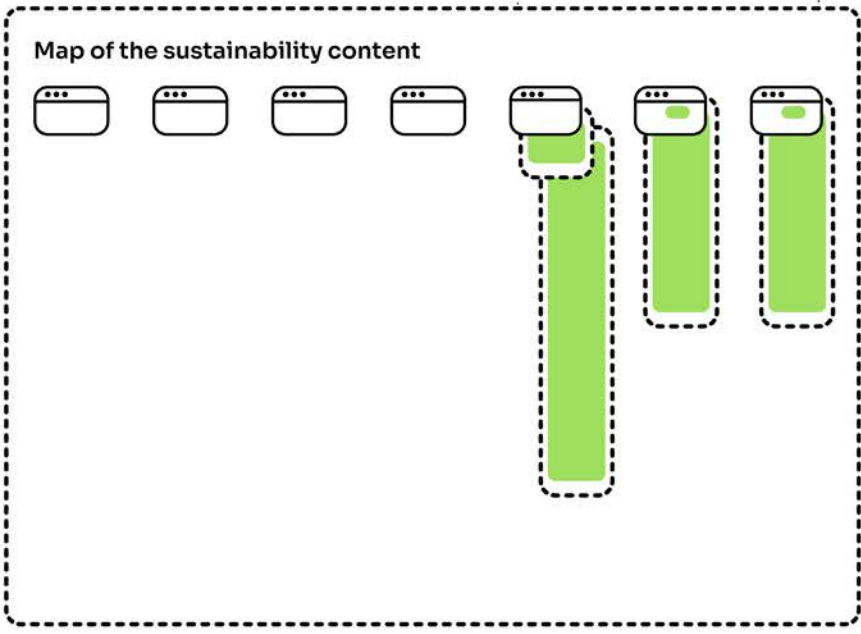
→ How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?

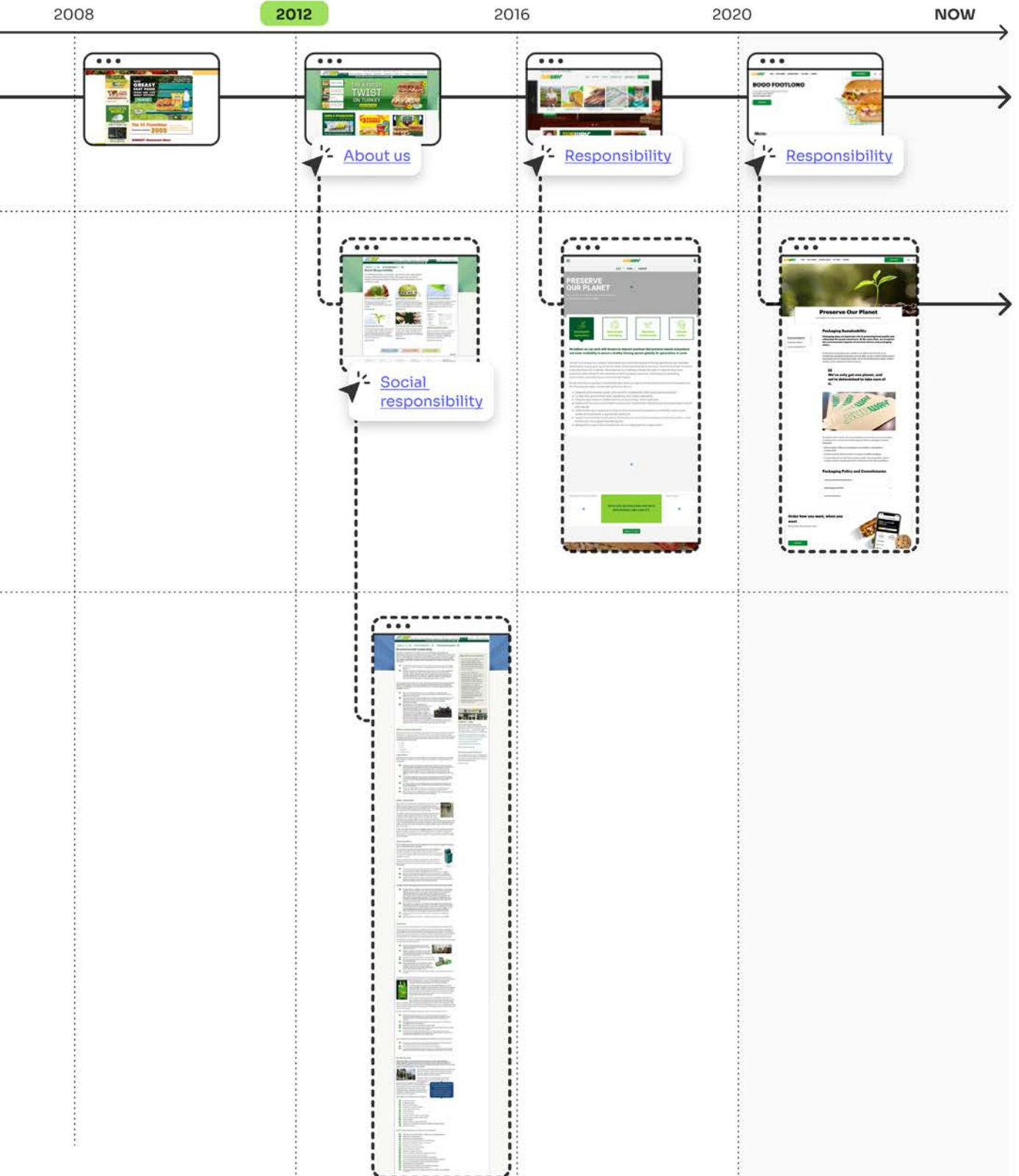




Sustainability > I Page

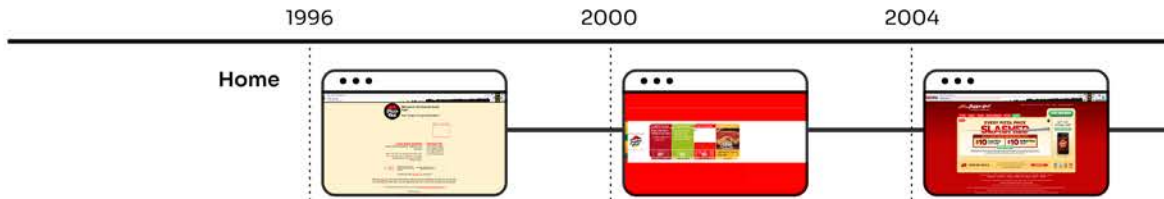
Sustainability > II Page







Pizza Hut



Sustainability > | Page

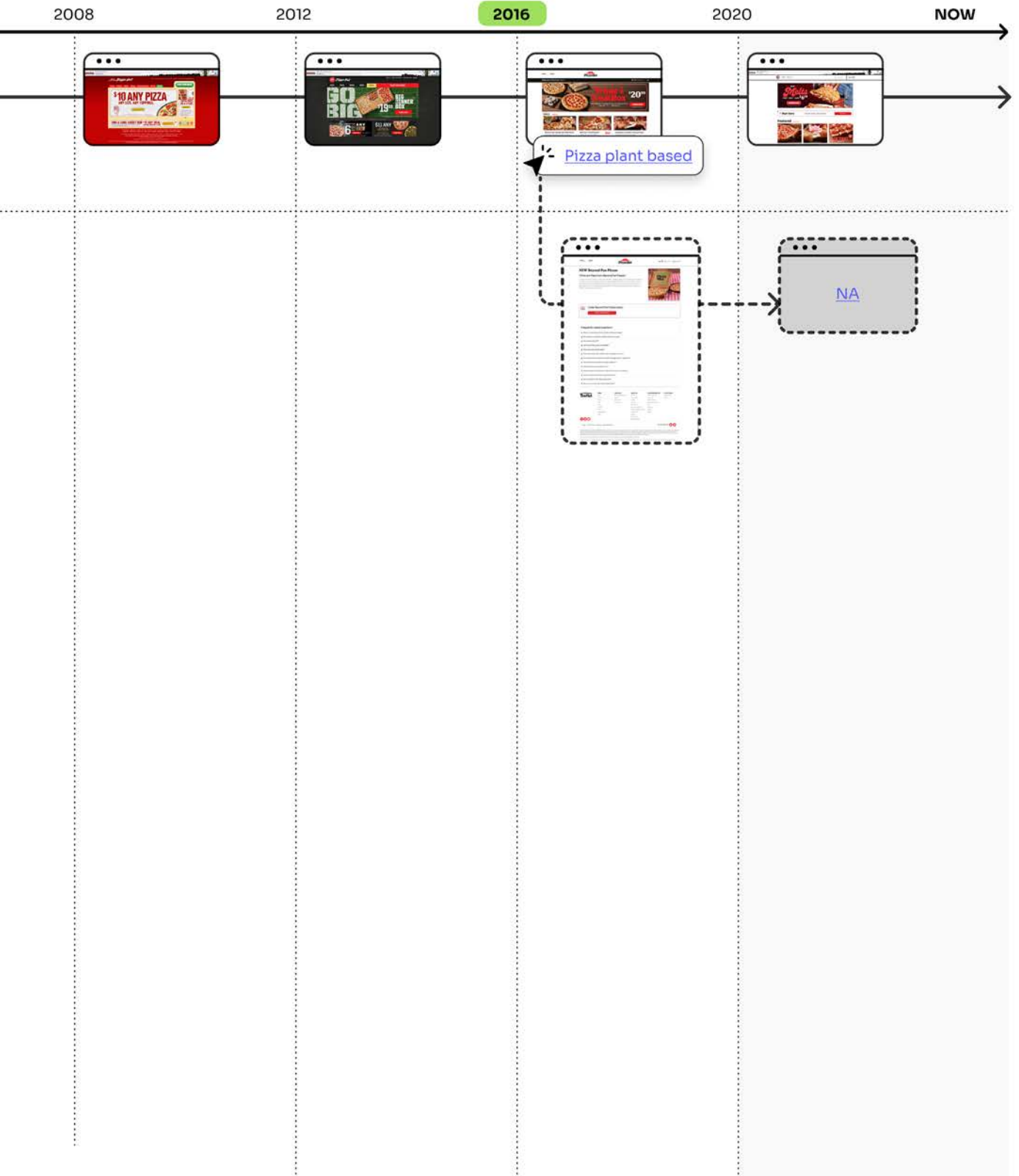
Map of the sustainability content

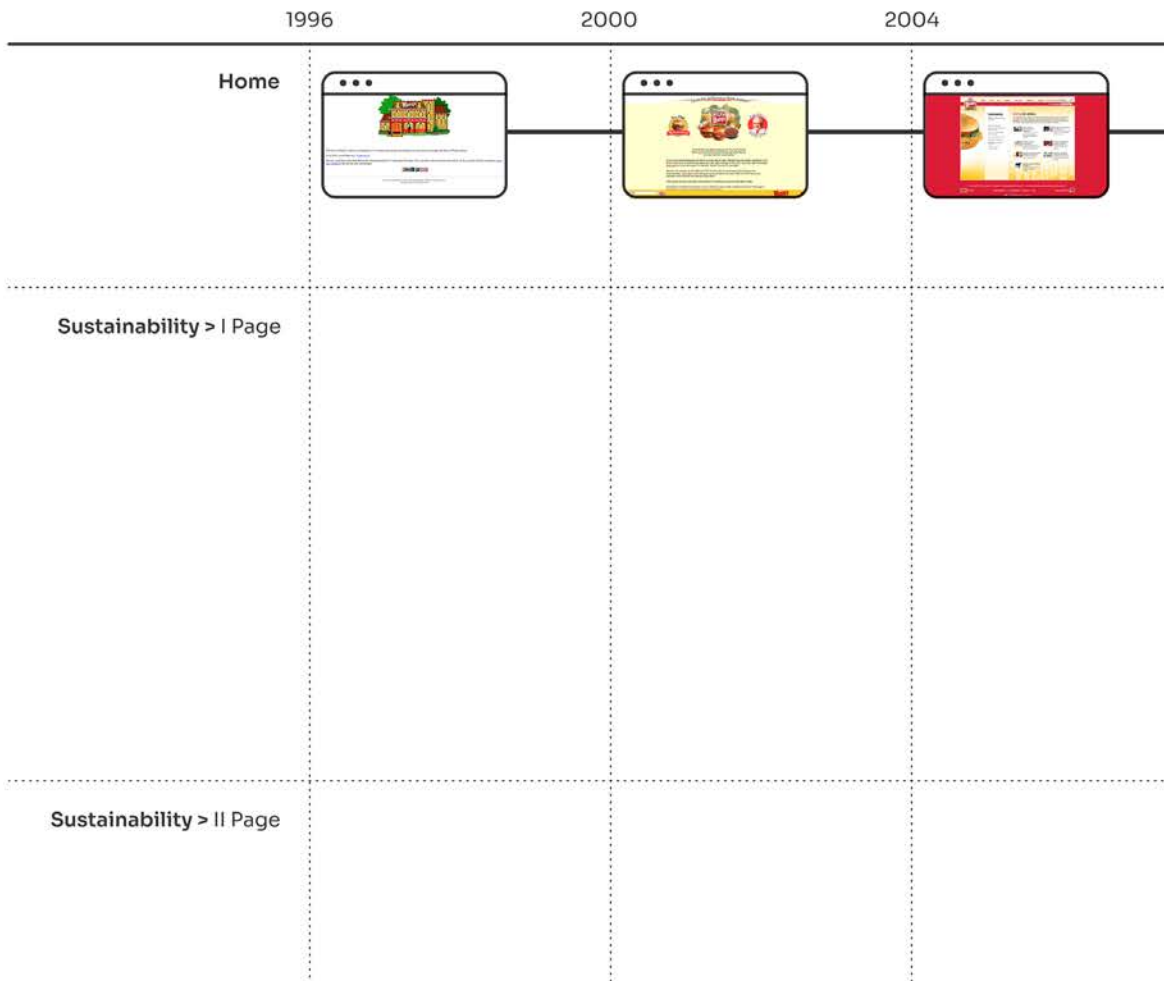


- Home Page
- Sustainability Page
- Redirected Page
- Non-existent Page
- Sustainability Content

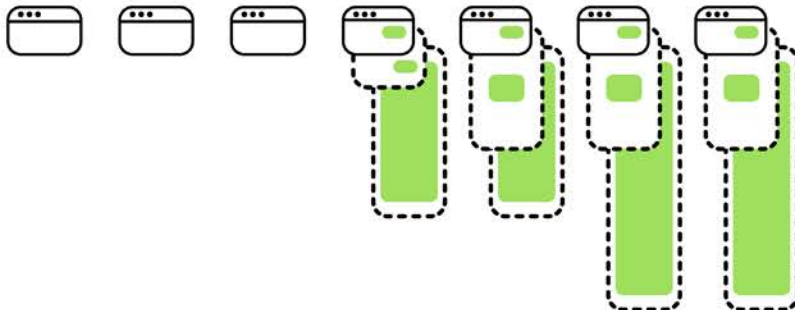


Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?





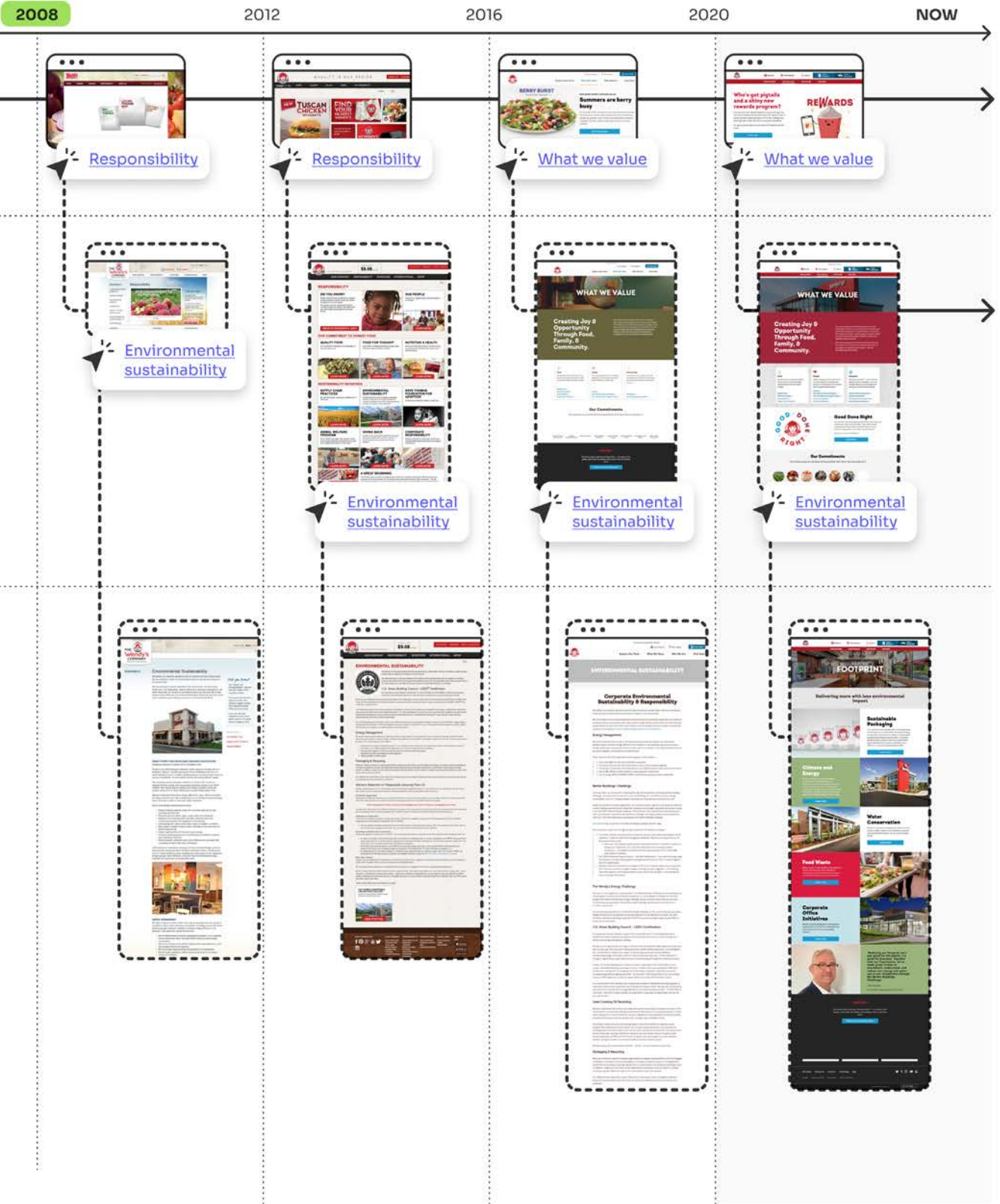
Map of the sustainability content

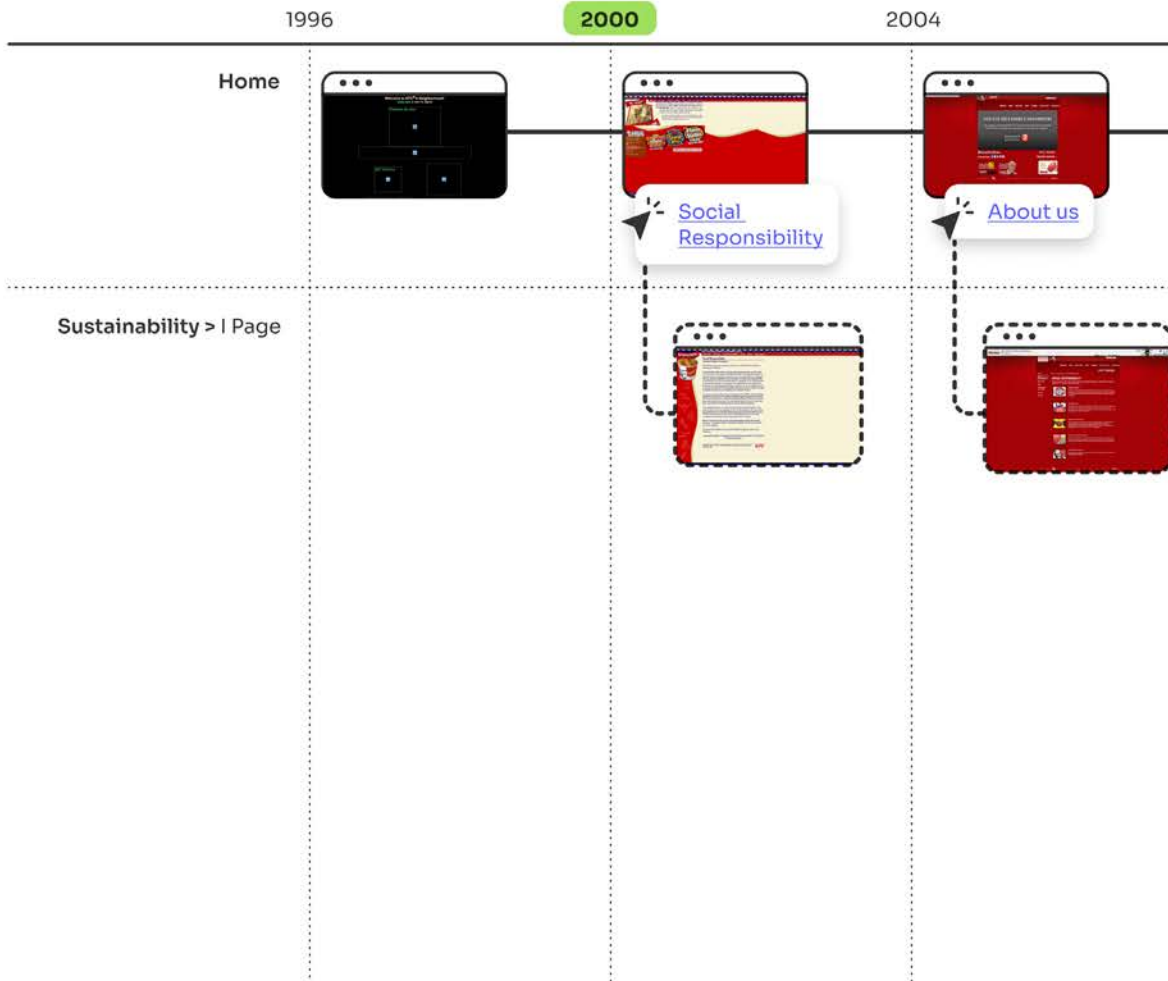


- Home Page
- Sustainability Page
- Redirected Page
- Non-existent Page
- Sustainability Content

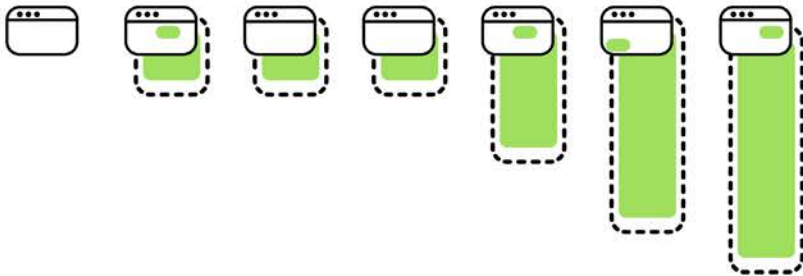


Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



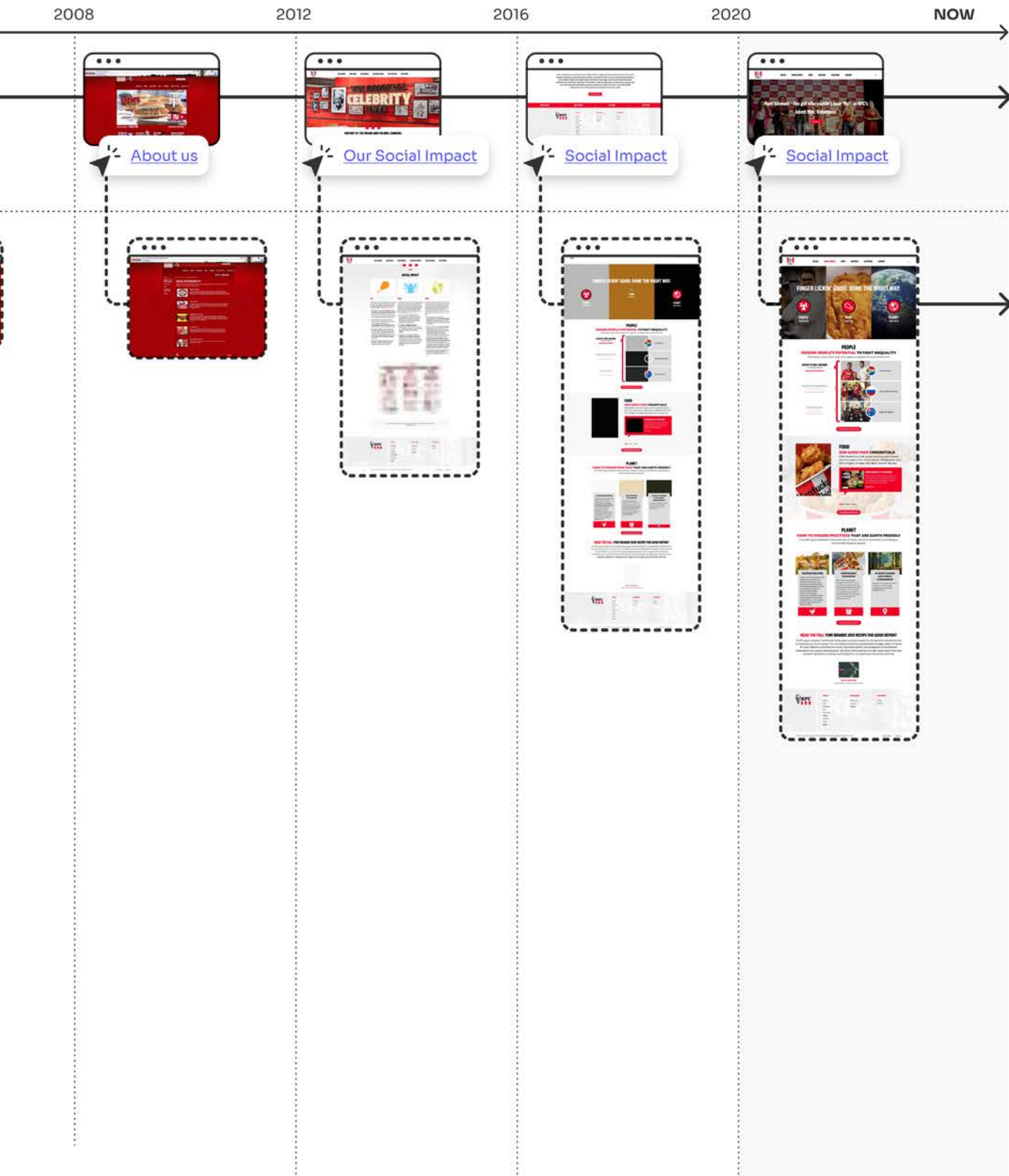


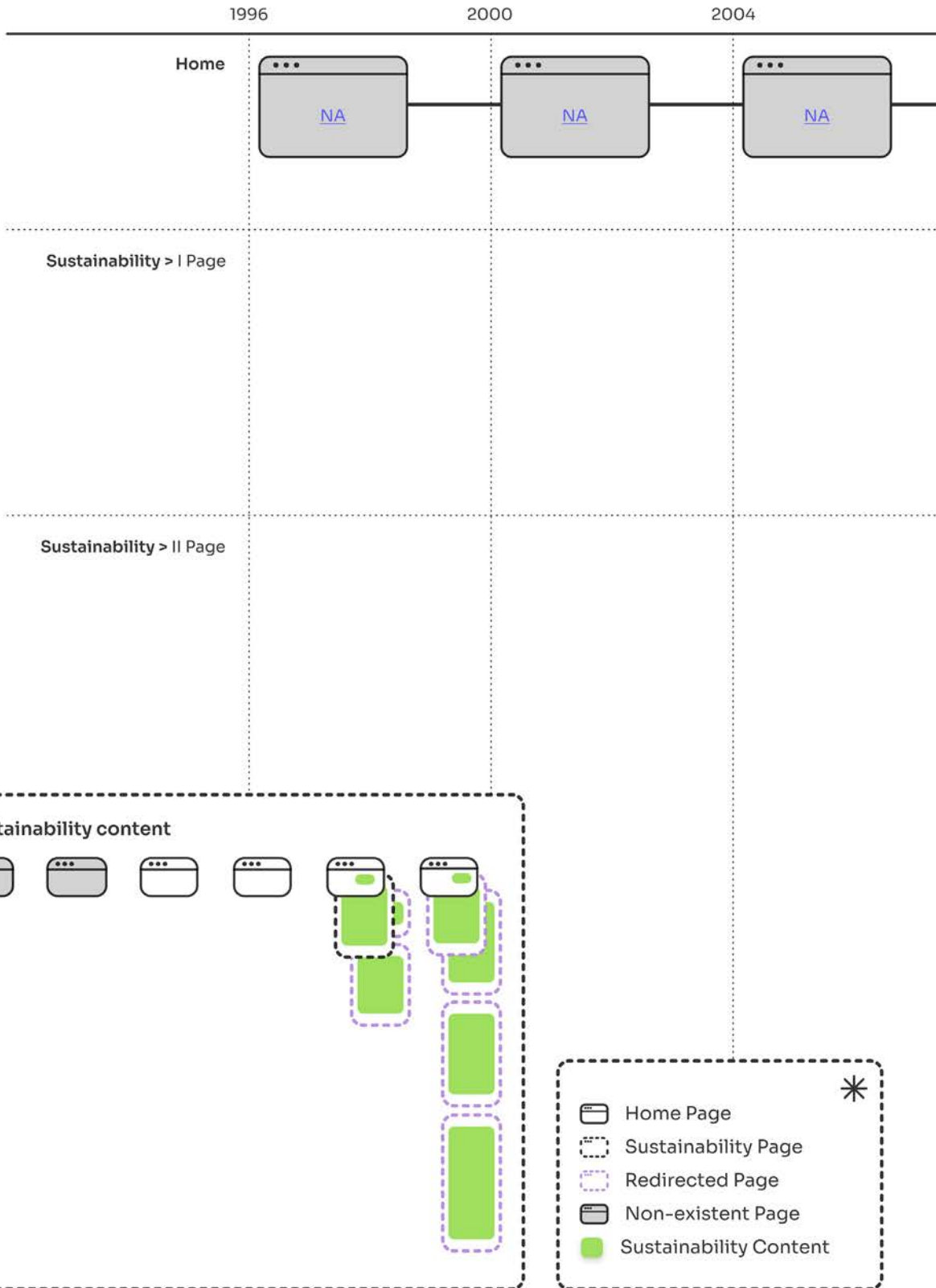
Map of the sustainability content



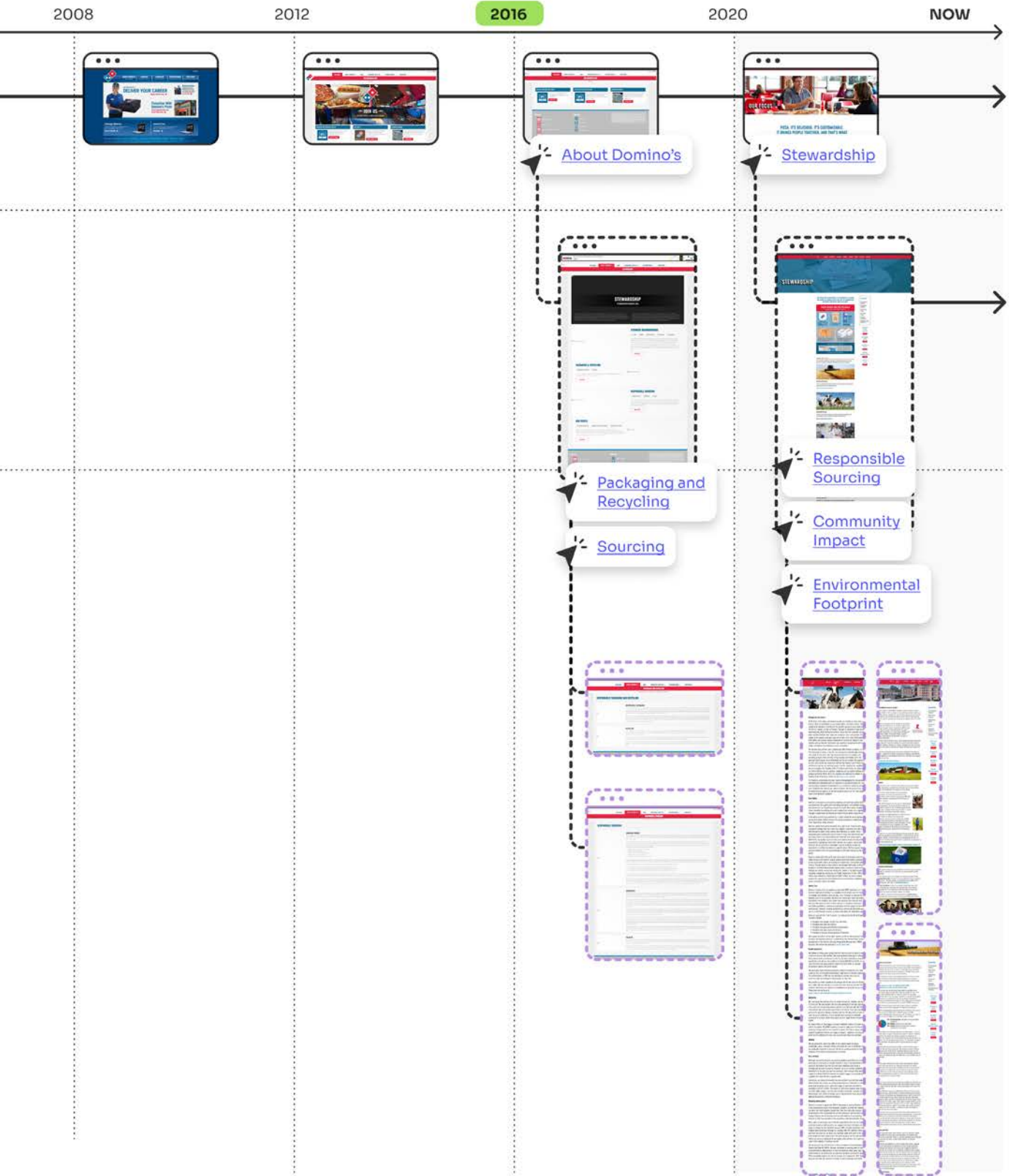
- ☐ Home Page *
- ☐ Sustainability Page
- ☐ Redirected Page
- ☐ Non-existent Page
- Sustainability Content

Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?





Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?

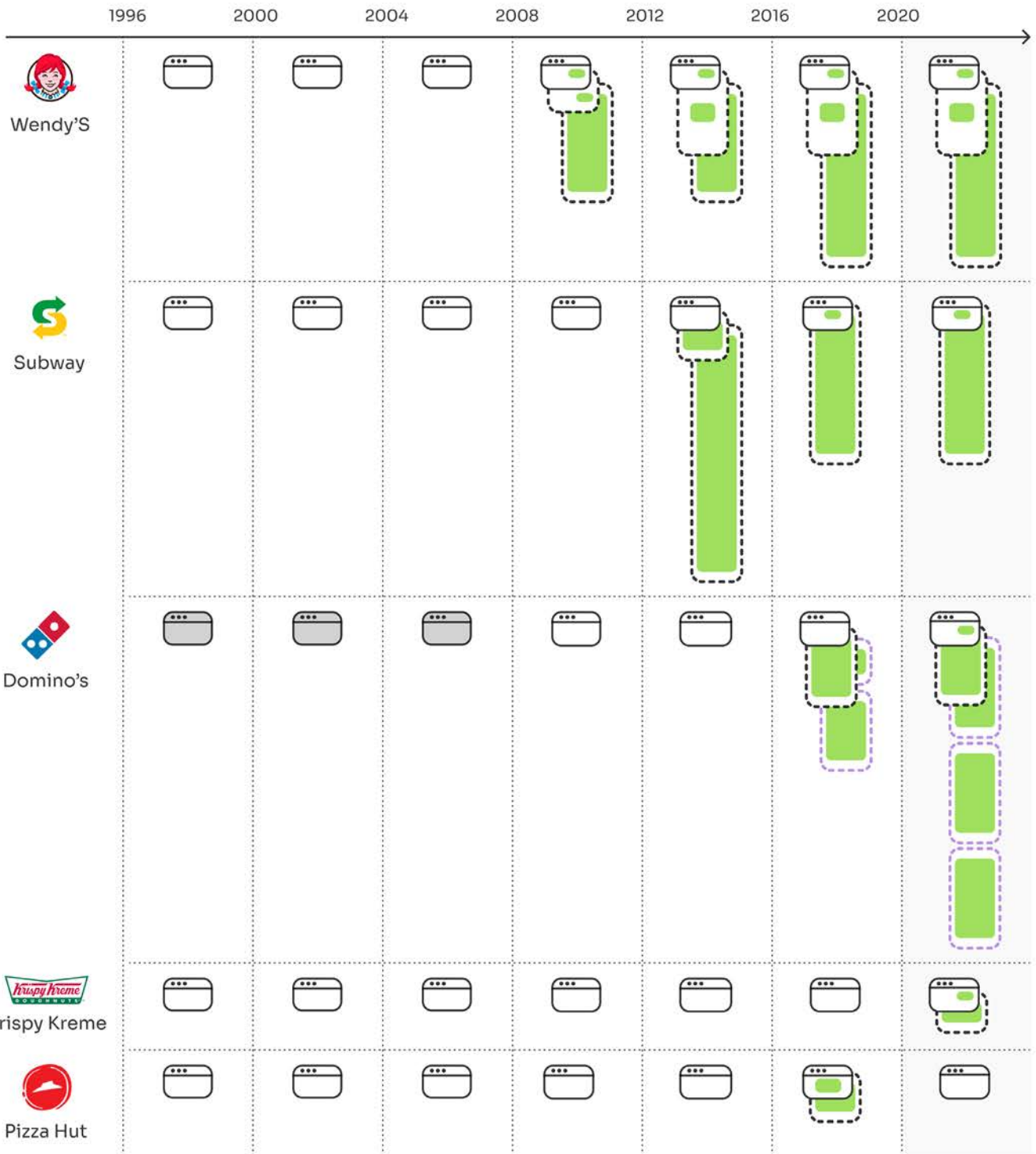


→ Graph 03

Comparison: the evolution of sustainability sections



Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



Home Page
 Non-existent Page
 Sustainability Page
 Redirected Page
 Sustainability Content
 *



✱

-  Sustainability Page
-  Other Pages
-  Not Accessible

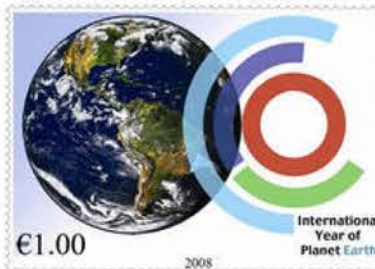
🔍 Finding 03

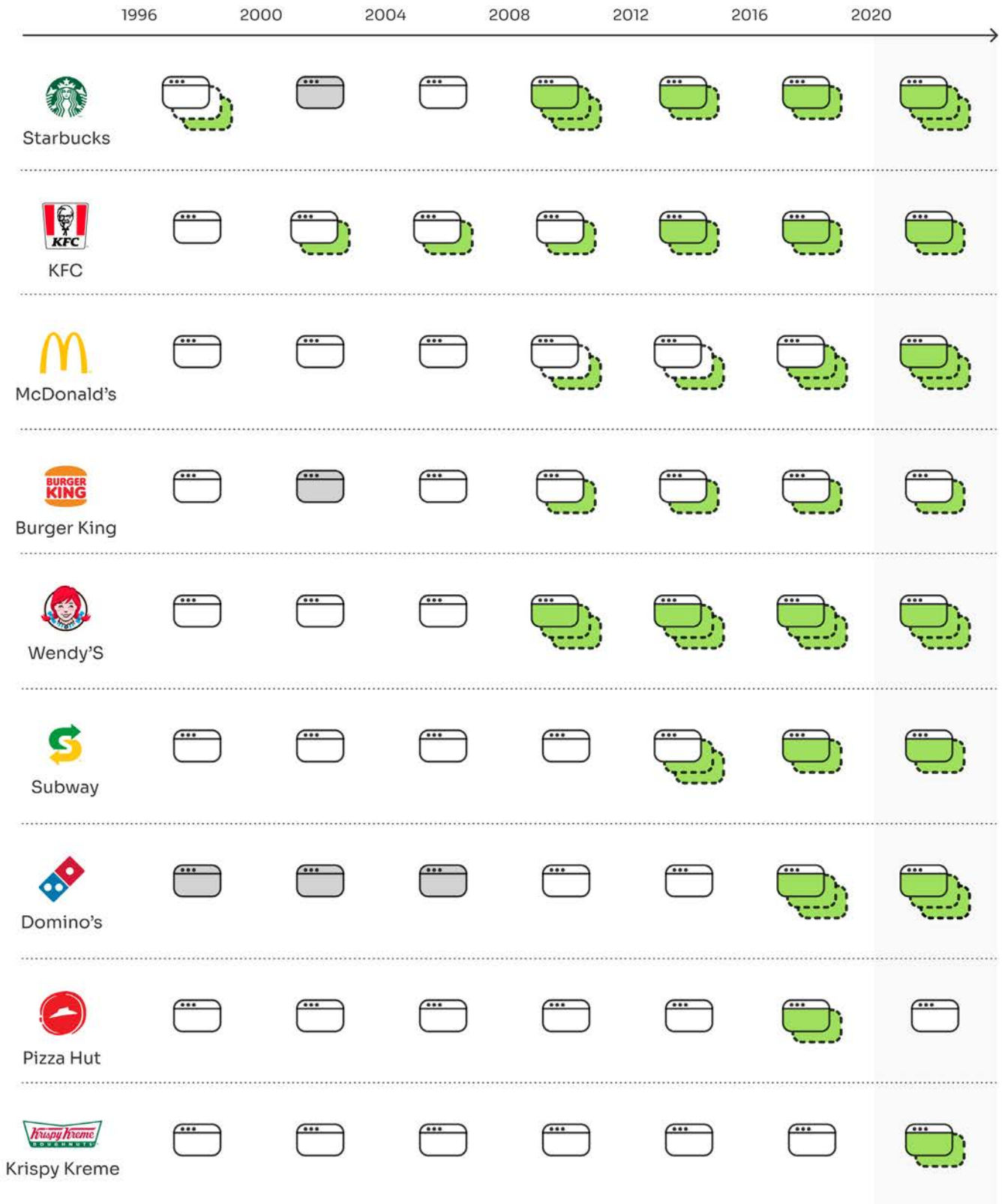
2008: the International Year of Planet Earth

Most of the food chains' sustainability sections appeared in the year [2008](#), a [milestone](#) date in the history of Climate Change awareness because the UN proclaimed it as the [International Year of Planet Earth](#).

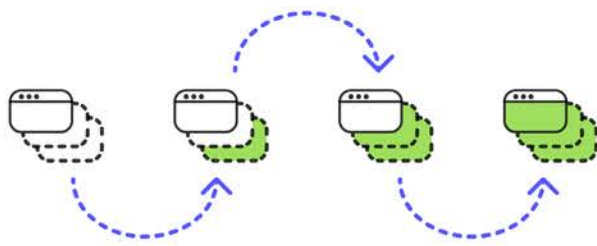
The collective commitment was to educate new generations about climate change in order to create a more prosperous and secure world. A [trend of sustainable storytelling](#) and concern for the planet followed, which many companies –including fast foods ones– rode on.

2008 : articles, coins and stamps





Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?

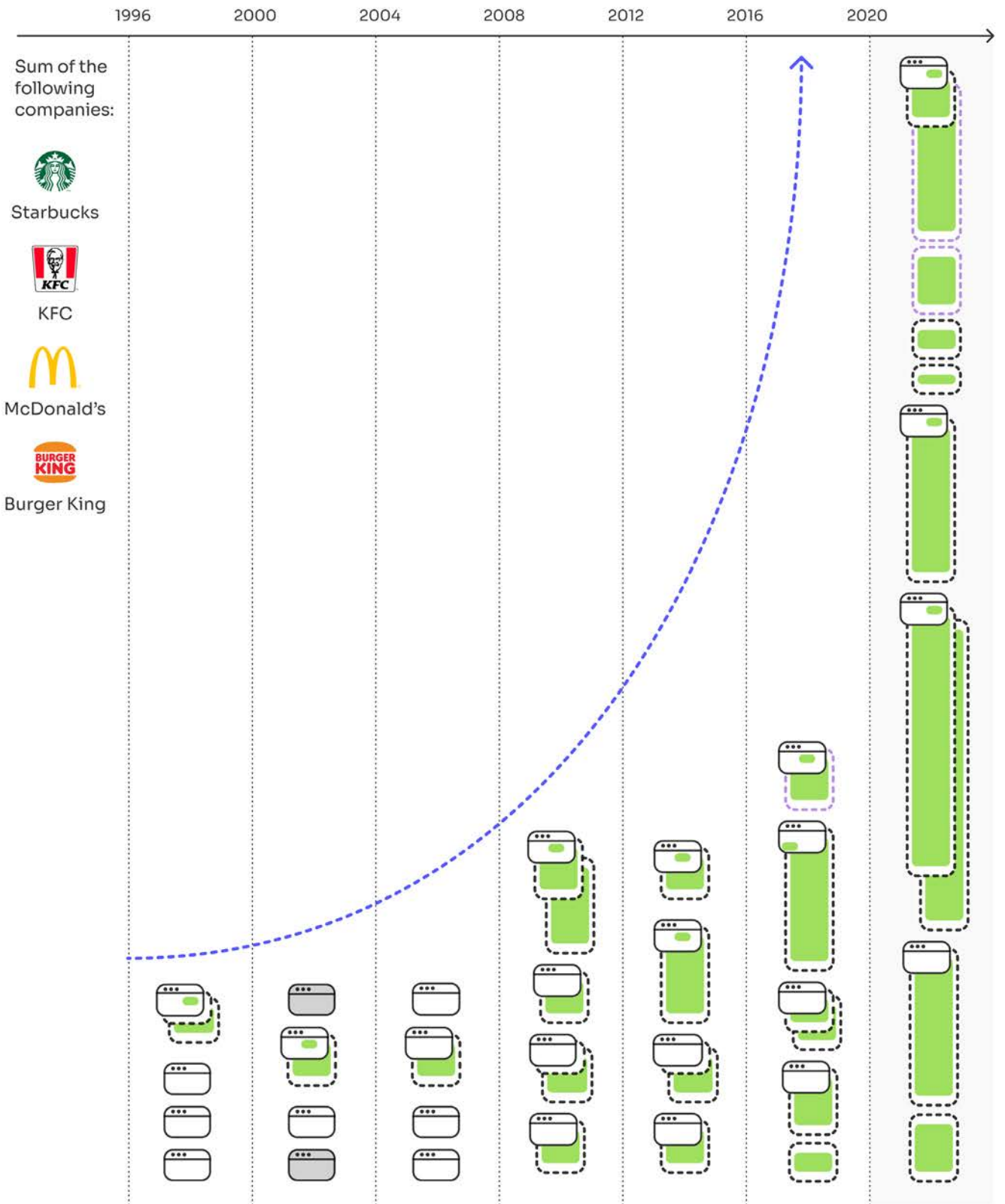


🔍 Finding 04

Trend to bring green content to the forefront

There is a clear trend to make [green narrative](#) content increasingly prominent, moving it from secondary pages to the home page. This proves the [increasing relevance](#) they assume in the company's values and their will to [promote](#) them.

*
🖥️ Not Accessible
🖥️ Home Page
🖥️ I Sustainability Page
🖥️ II Sustainability Page
🟢 Sustainability Content

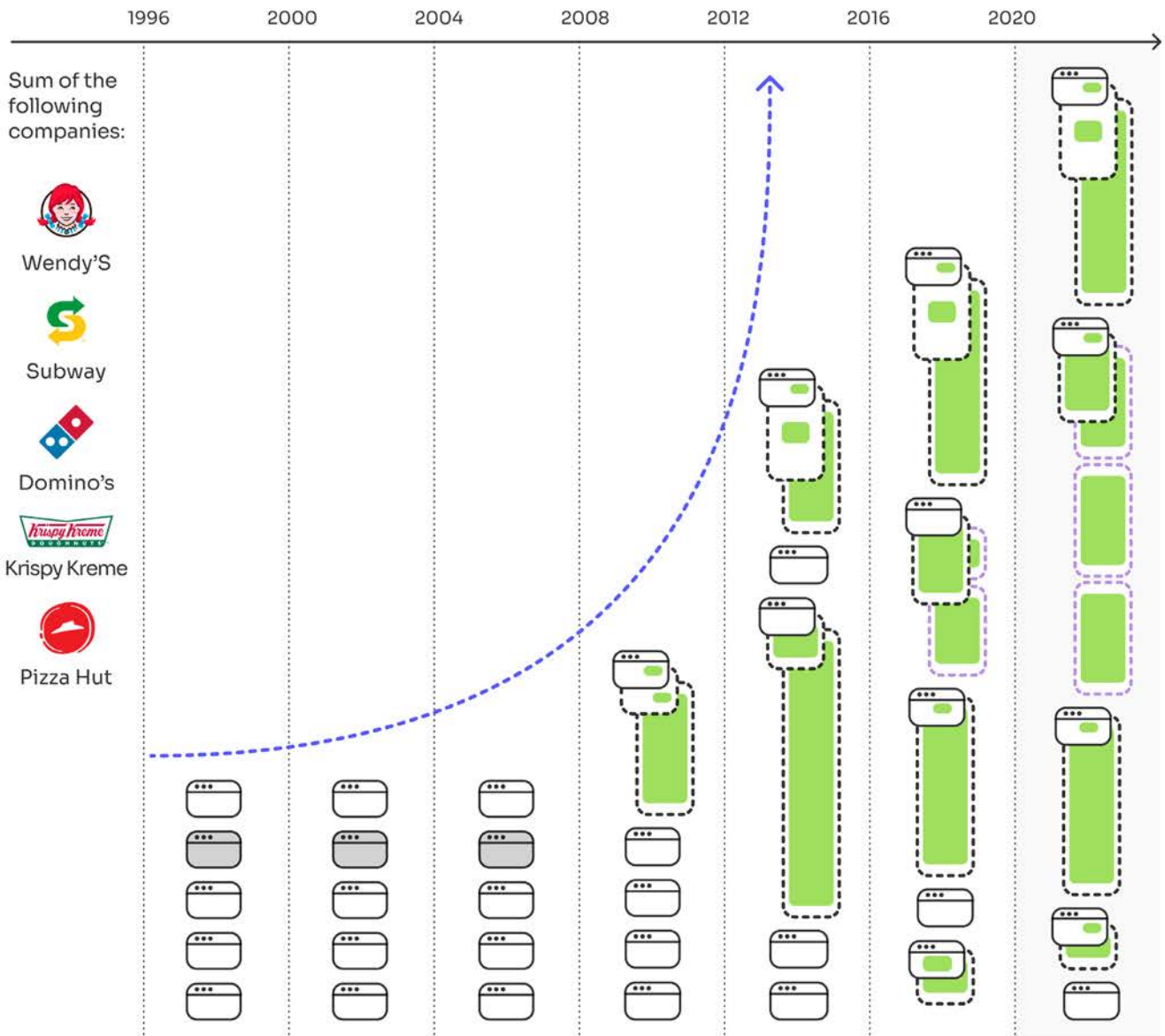


Finding 05

Amount of green content has increased exponentially

There is a clear difference in the amount of sustainability-related content between the years: overall, it has increased exponentially. It demonstrates a clear shift in brand values, which are increasingly moving towards a sustainable narrative.

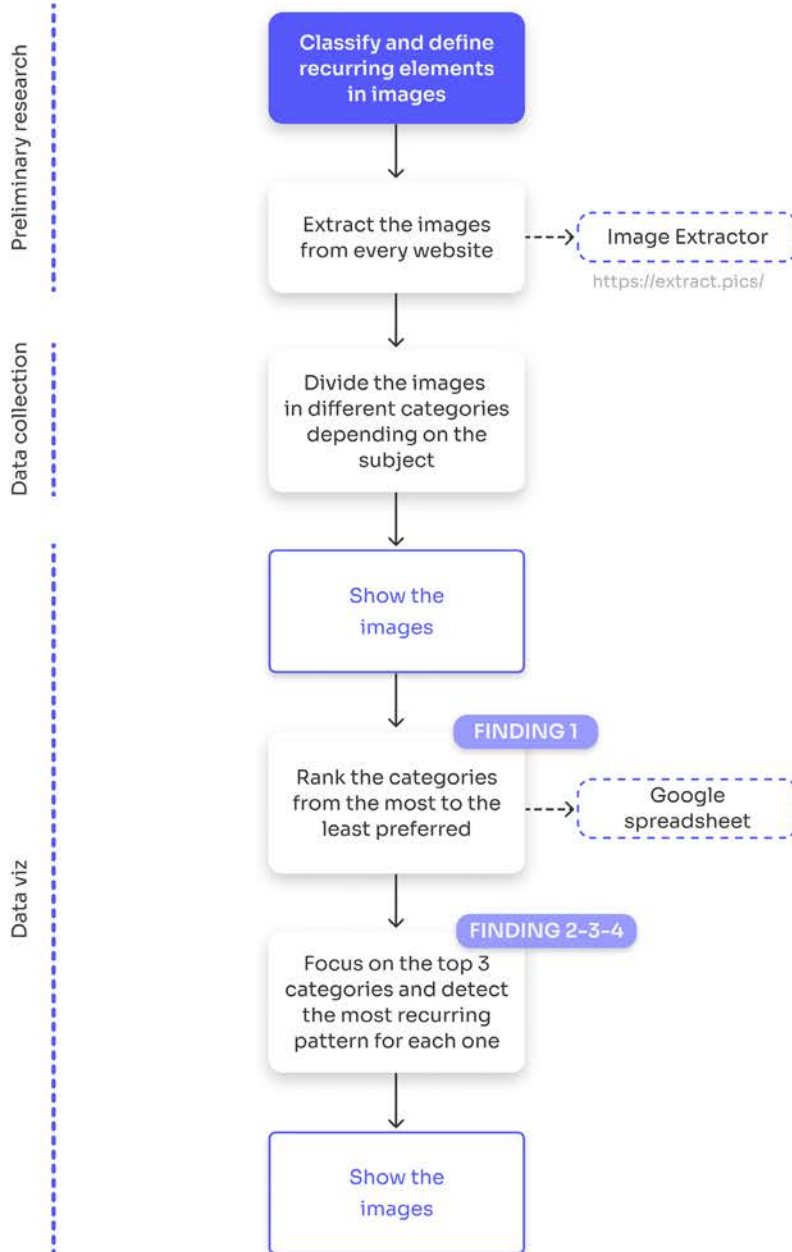
-  Not Accessible
-  Home Page
-  I Sustainability Page
-  II Sustainability Page
-  Sustainability Content



→ QUESTION 02

Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?

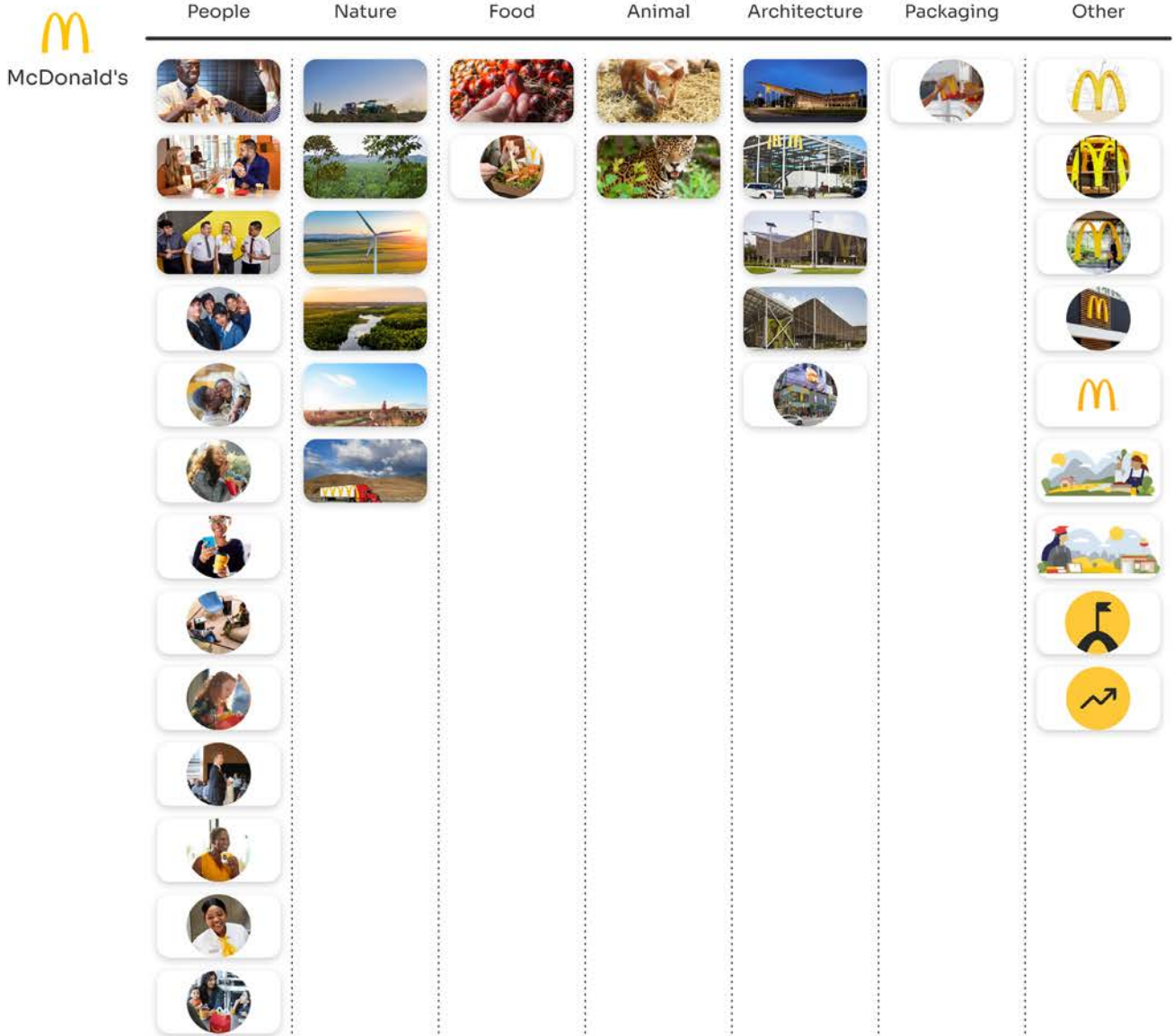
Images also greatly contribute to the green storytelling. In this step, all the pictures found in the sustainability sections were analysed and then mapped, according to the subject and the type of environment portrayed, in order to discover [recurring patterns and/or unique strategies](#).



→ Graph 01

The company's images and recurring elements used to talk about environmental issues

The images below are collected from the sustainability section of each website. Through integration and analysis, they are divided into 7 categories for further comparison and analysis.



Q2

→ Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?

People

Nature

Food

Animal

Architecture
























Packaging

Other



Burger King

Krispy Kreme

People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						
						
						
						
						
						
						
						

KFC





People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						
						
						
						
						
						
						

Pizza hut





People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other

Q2





→ Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?

People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						






People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						



People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						

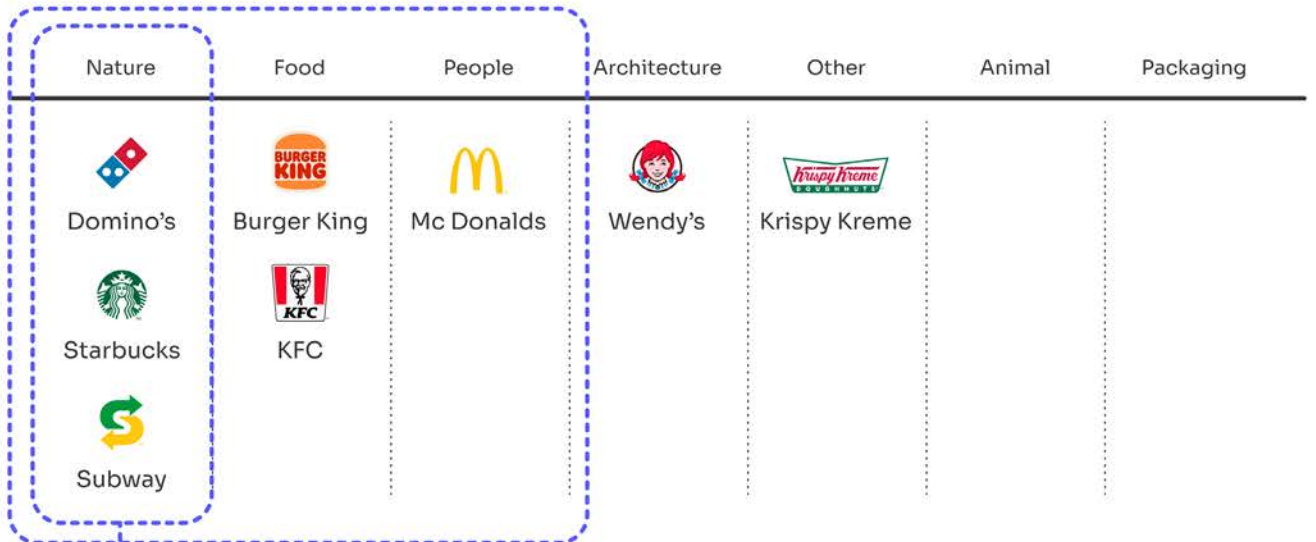


People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						



→ Graph 02

Main visual categories chosen to portray environmental issues



🔍 Finding 01

Top 3 categories: Nature, Food and People


















1. [Nature](#) > images used in order to speak about environmental issues.
2. [Food](#) > images showing a variety of meals and ingredients.
3. [People](#) > images featuring people who perform different actions.

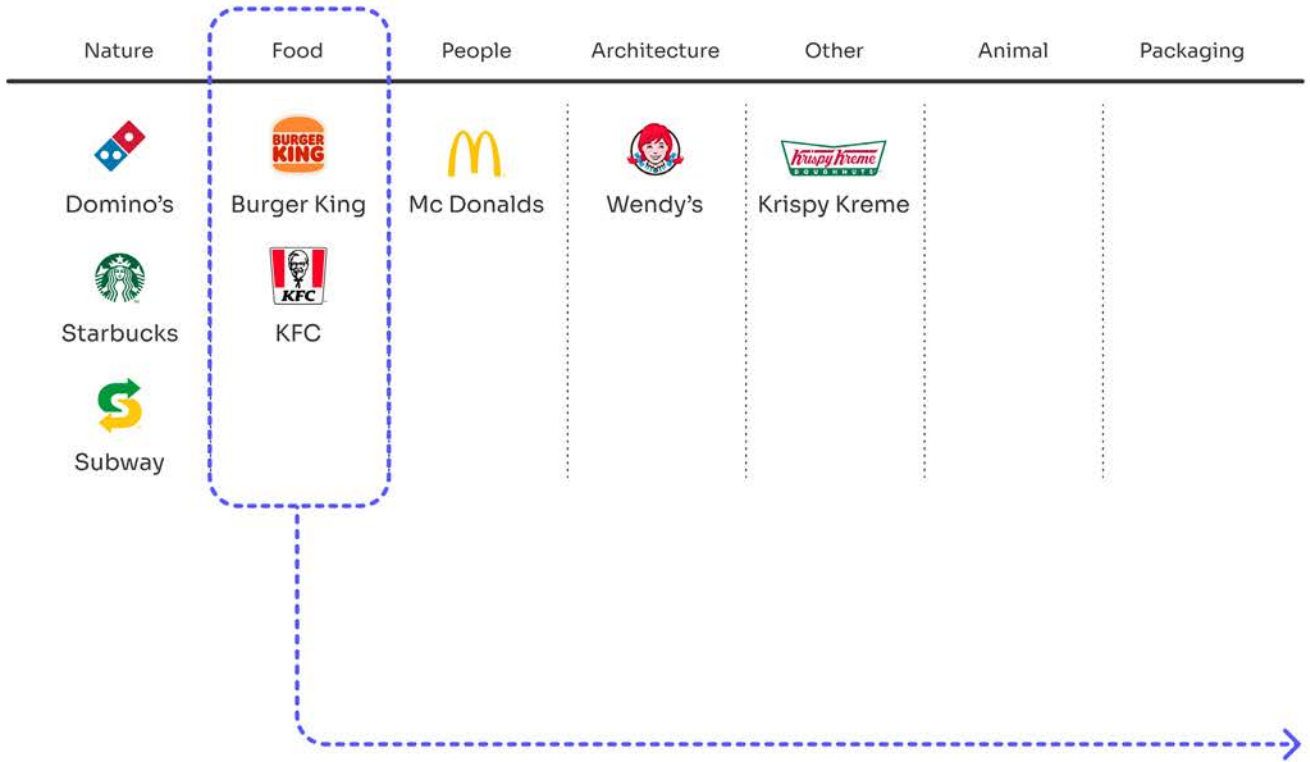
🔍 Finding 02

1st category "Nature": Focus on forests

The most common pattern is forest and [natural ecosystems](#): it directly highlights the beauty of the ecosystem and the need to preserve it.

Q2 → Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?

Forest	Crops	Plants	Planet	Renewabal energy	Other
					
					
					
					
					
					























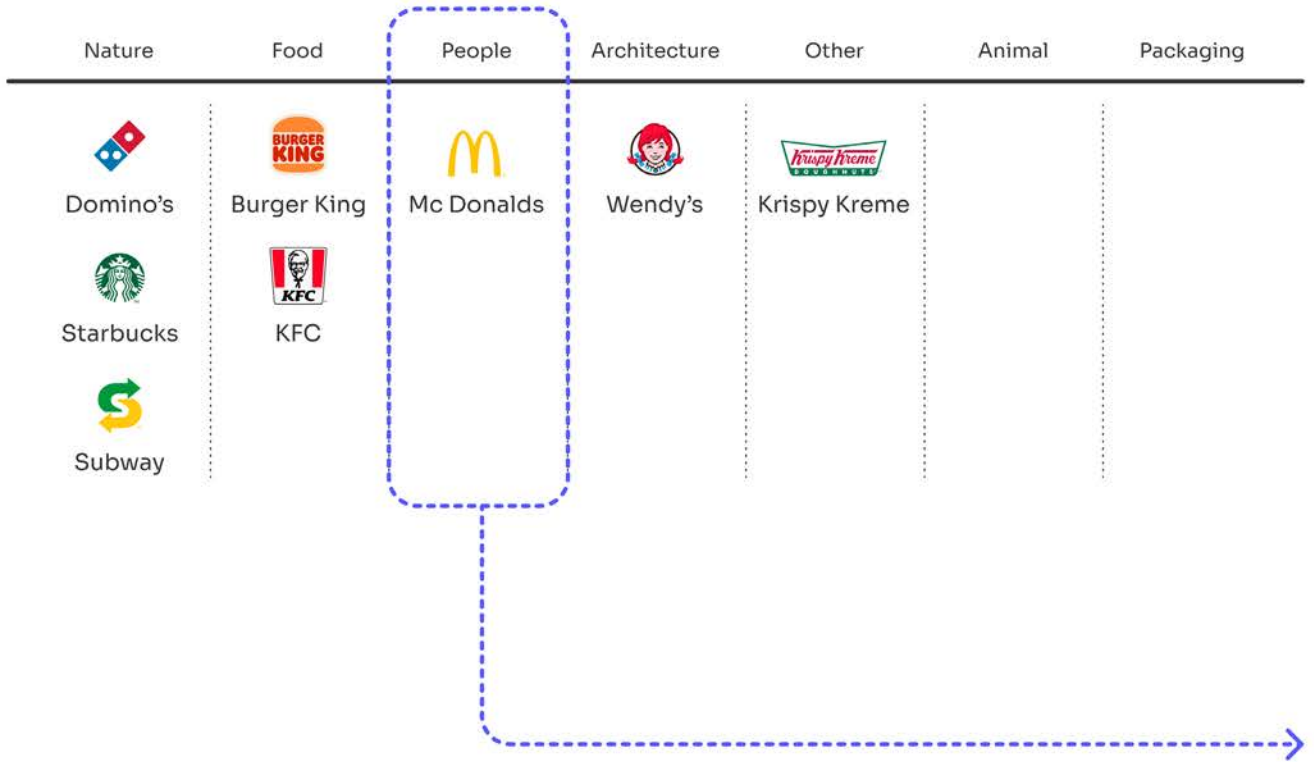
🔍 Finding 03

2nd category “Food”:
Focus on unsustainable
products

The most common pattern in the food category is the one depicting [company's products](#). Even though the photos are taken from the sustainability section, the [food represented is not always sustainable](#) (i.e. meat).

Q2 → Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?

End product	Ingredients	Food & People	Ads	Cream	Sweet	Illustration
						
						
						
						
						
						
						
						
						





























Finding 04

3rd category “People”:
Focus on the enjoyment

The most common pattern here is [staff members](#). These images represent [teamwork](#), [professionalism](#) and [enthusiasm](#) in work tasks. Thus, companies try to appear [transparent](#) about their activities.

Q2 → Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?

Eating	Staff	Social Activity	Single person	Multiple people	With products
					
					
					
					
					
					
					
					
					

→ QUESTION 03

Which keywords resonate the most on fast food websites regarding companies' commitment to environment?

The greenwashing trend features the use of green words in order to be credible. To analyse the language used by fast food companies, the first thing to familiarize with [the glossary](#). Various sources provided a glossary of [green terminology](#) and after a thorough study, the most suitable terms were selected.

The main resources were the [encyclopedia "Britannica"](#), which defined a precise list of words related to environmental topics, and the [website "Clever"](#), that provided a list of keywords linked to sustainable grocery shopping.

The final output is a list of [40 environment-related keywords](#) that are strongly connected to the fast food market and are frequently used in today's green narrative.

All keywords were searched in each company's website and the results were then counted to find out [the most used ones](#) in fast food sites. Ultimately, it was analyzed the percentage of web pages in which these keywords appear in relation to the total amount for each company.

GLOSSARY



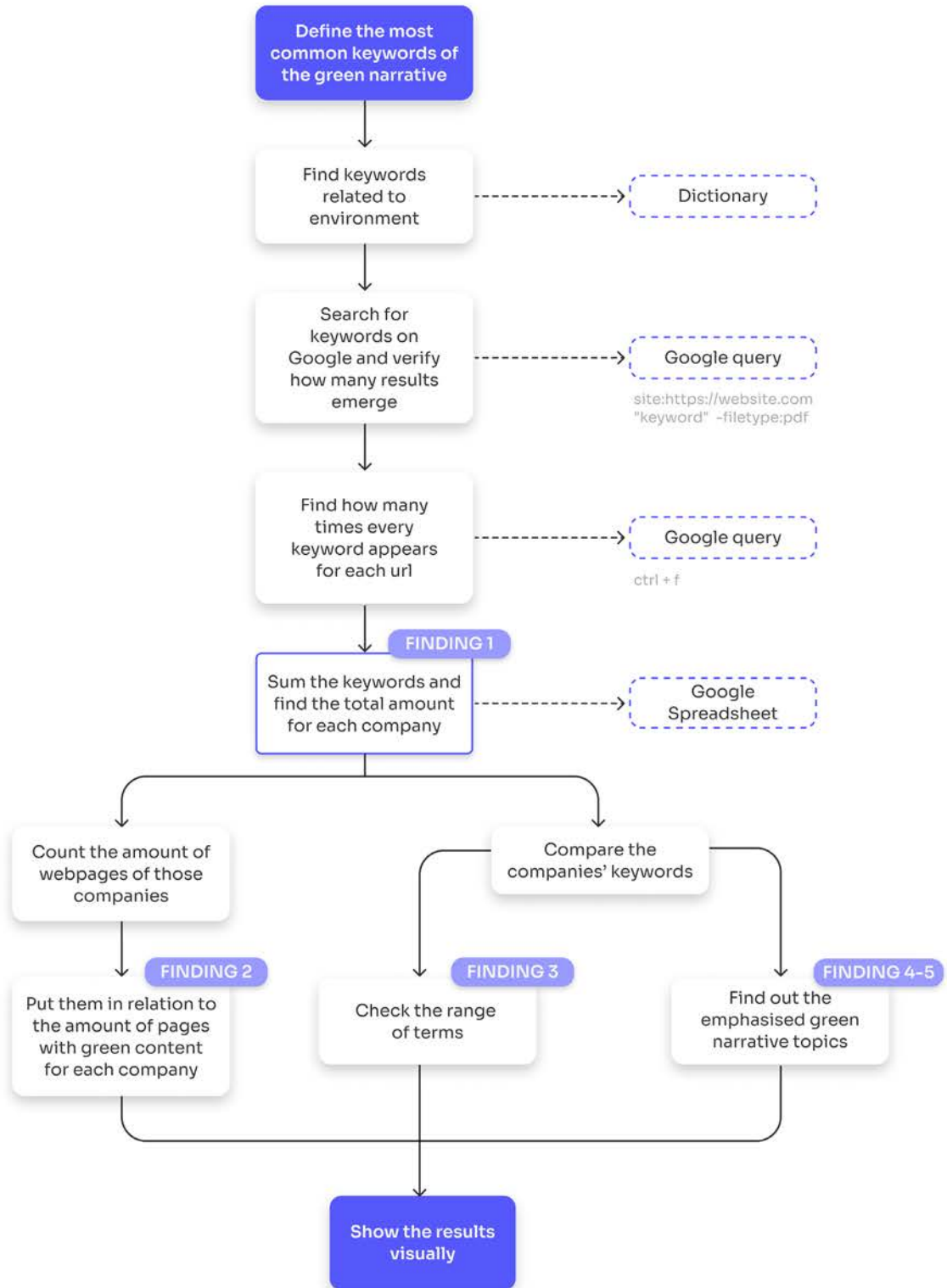
b biodegradable	effect	greenwashing	reduce
c carbon	efficient	i impact	reforestation
carbon footprint	emissions	l localvore	remineralize
circular economy	energy	n natural	renewable
climate change	environmental	net-zero	responsibility
commitment	f fairtrade	o organic	s single-use
d deforestation	footprint	p post-consumer	sustainability
e eco-conscious	g green	preservation	v vegan
eco-friendly	greenhouse	r reclaimed	w warming
ecological	greenhouse gas	recycle(d)	z zero-waste



Preliminary research

Data collection

Data viz



→ Graph 01

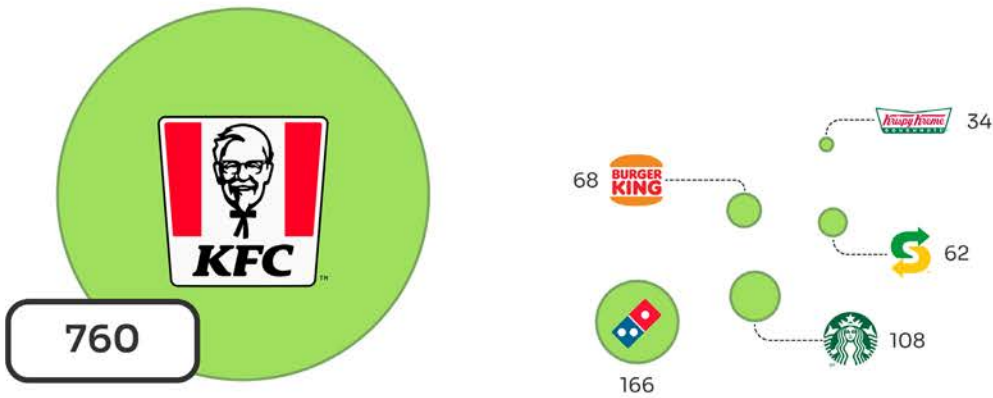
Amount of keywords about sustainability for each company's websites



🔍 Finding 01

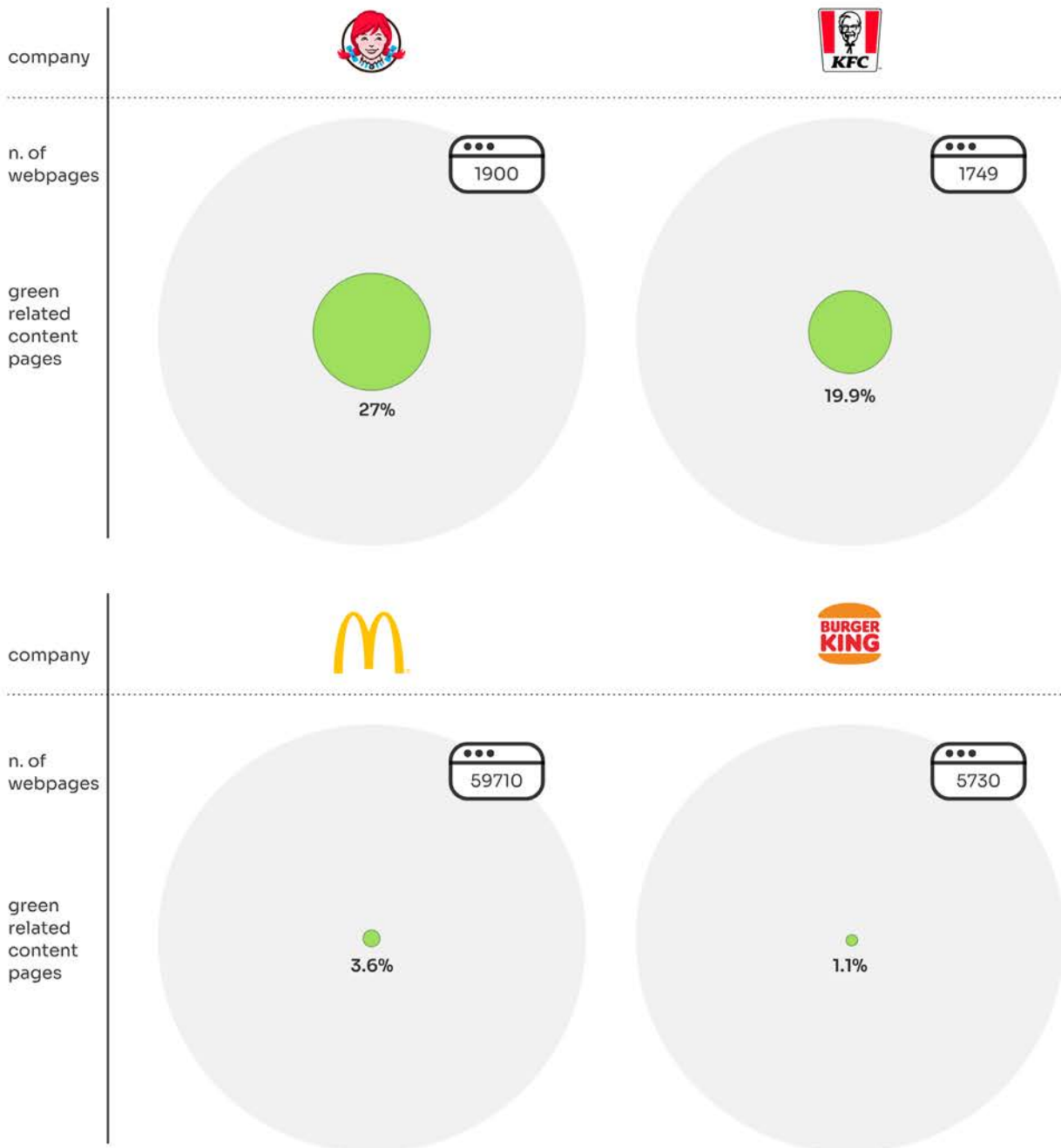
Biggest amount of keywords

McDonald's is the company that uses the largest amount of keywords for its website (2926). This is the result of a deep [rebranding operation](#) focused on giving the perception of a company that took an active position.



→ Graph 02

Percentage of green pages in relation to the total amount of web pages



Finding 02

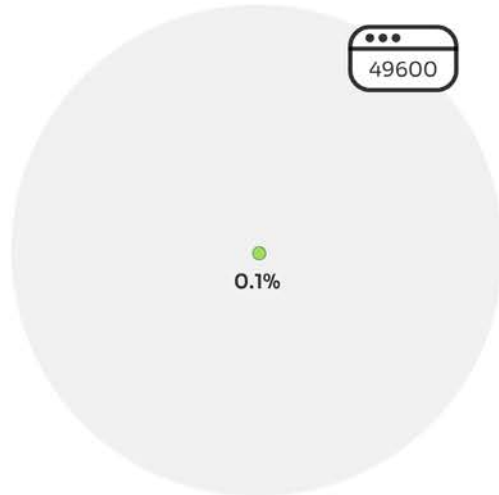
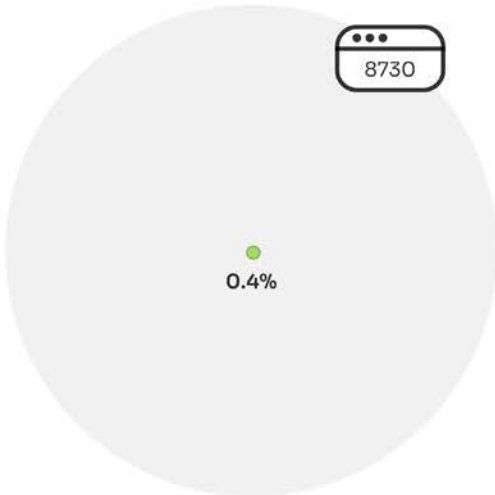
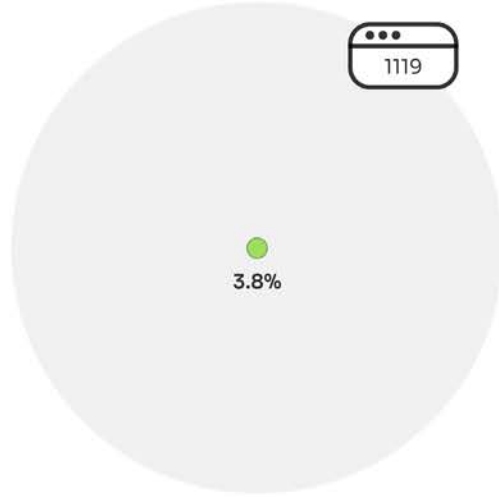
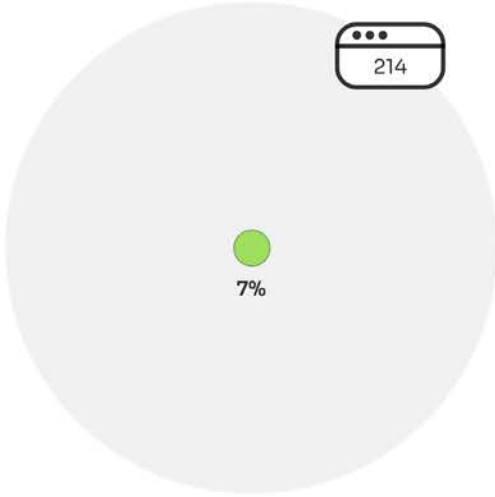
More focused content

Although McDonald is the company that uses the most keywords, in relation to the amount of web pages is [Wendy's](#) that has the highest percentage of pages about sustainability (27%).

This data indicates a lower dispersion of content in favor of [richer sustainability](#) sections.

Q3










→ Which keywords resonate the most on fast food websites regarding companies' commitment to environment?



amount of websites total company webpages company's green pages *

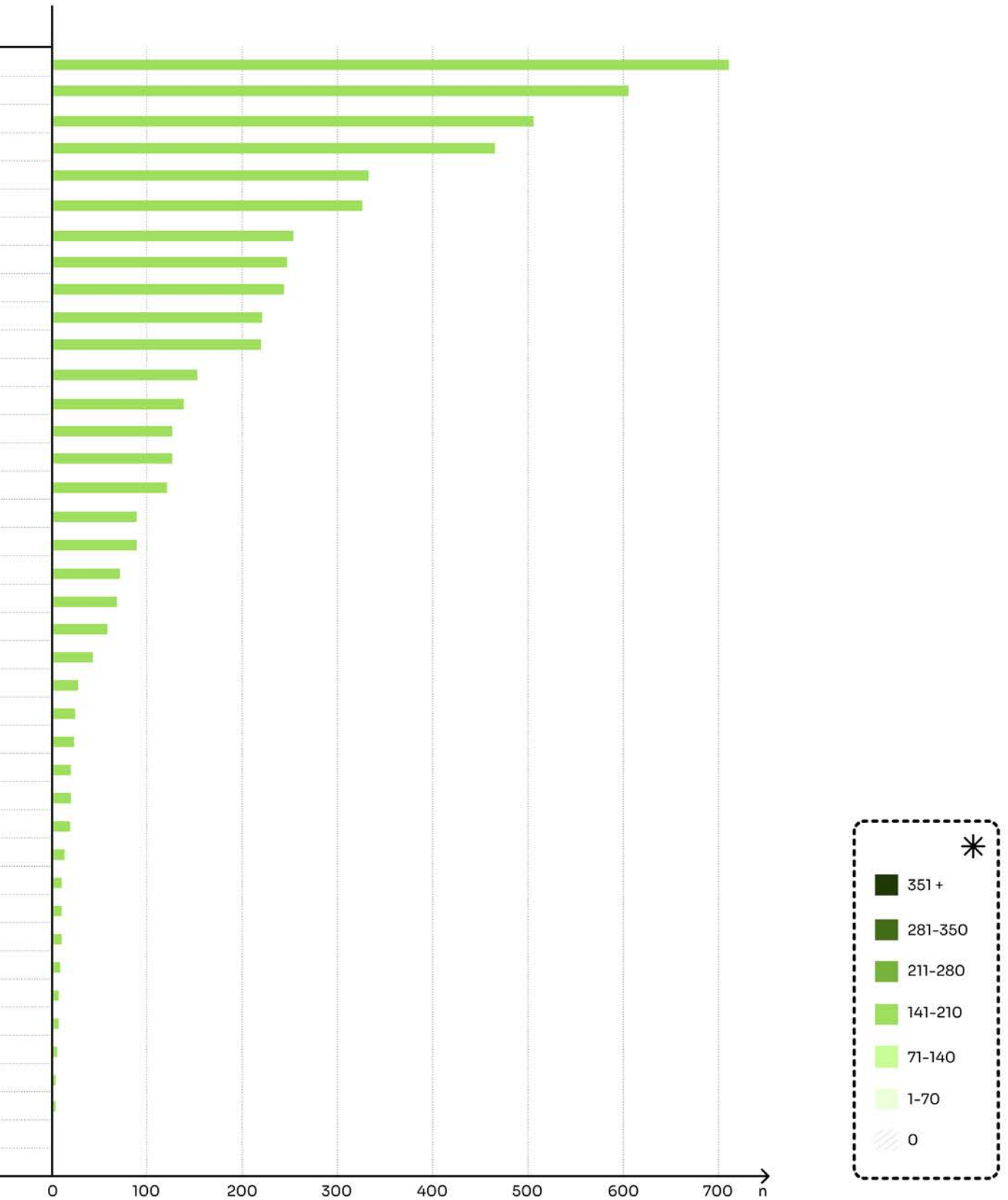
→ Graph 03










Recurring keywords to spread environmental commitment

										Keywords resonance
impact	Light Green	Light Green	Dark Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	711
sustainability	Dark Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	606
commitment	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	508
energy	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	488
reduce	Dark Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	337
responsibility	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	332
environmental	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	268
recycle	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	242
emissions	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	241
natural	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	220
footprint	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	218
greenhouse gas	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	156
deforestation	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	144
green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	123
greenhouse	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	122
effect	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	118
climate change	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	88
carbon footprint	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	87
efficient	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	70
carbon	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	66
renewable energy	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	56
circular economy	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	39
single-use	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	28
organic	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	17
eco-friendly	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	16
fairtrade	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	12
vegan	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	12
post-consumer	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	10
reclaimed	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	6
biodegradable	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	5
net-zero	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	5
reforestation	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	5
warming	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	4
eco-conscious	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	3
zero-waste	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	3
preservation	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	2
ecological	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	1
greenwashing	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	1
localvore	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	0
remineralize	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	0
total word count	2926	1246	760	166	108	68	62	33	0	

Q3

→ Which keywords resonate the most on fast food websites regarding companies' commitment to environment?




										Keywords resonance
impact	125	119	423	17	11	4	8	4	0	711
sustainability	421	111	34	4	7	7	16	6	0	606
commitment	194	156	98	0	21	35	4	0	0	508
energy	251	207	17	5	1	0	4	3	0	488
reduce	215	84	14	9	2	1	8	4	0	337
responsibility	103	174	25	0	15	14	1	0	0	332
environmental	166	56	23	8	6	2	6	1	0	268
recycle	169	16	1	36	18	1	1	0	0	242
emissions	181	32	5	18	0	0	3	2	0	241
natural	129	68	11	1	0	0	2	9	0	220
footprint	63	70	39	39	6	0	1	0	0	218
greenhouse gas	133	10	5	7	0	0	0	1	0	156
deforestation	133	1	2	4	1	0	2	0	0	144
green	99	22	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	123
greenhouse	61	61	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	122
effect	98	10	9	0	1	0	0	0	0	118
climate change	75	17	7	0	2	1	2	0	0	88
carbon footprint	69	3	0	16	1	1	0	0	0	87
efficient	37	29	1	1	0	0	2	3	0	70
carbon	50	3	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	66
renewable energy	48	4	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	56
circular economy	38	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	39
single-use	18	5	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	28
organic	9	4	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	17
eco-friendly	4	1	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
fairtrade	11	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	12
vegan	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
post-consumer	5	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	10
reclaimed	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
biodegradable	0	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	5
net-zero	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
reforestation	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	5
warming	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
eco-conscious	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
zero-waste	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
preservation	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
ecological	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
greenwashing	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
localvore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
remineralize	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
total word count	2926	1246	760	166	108	68	62	33	0	

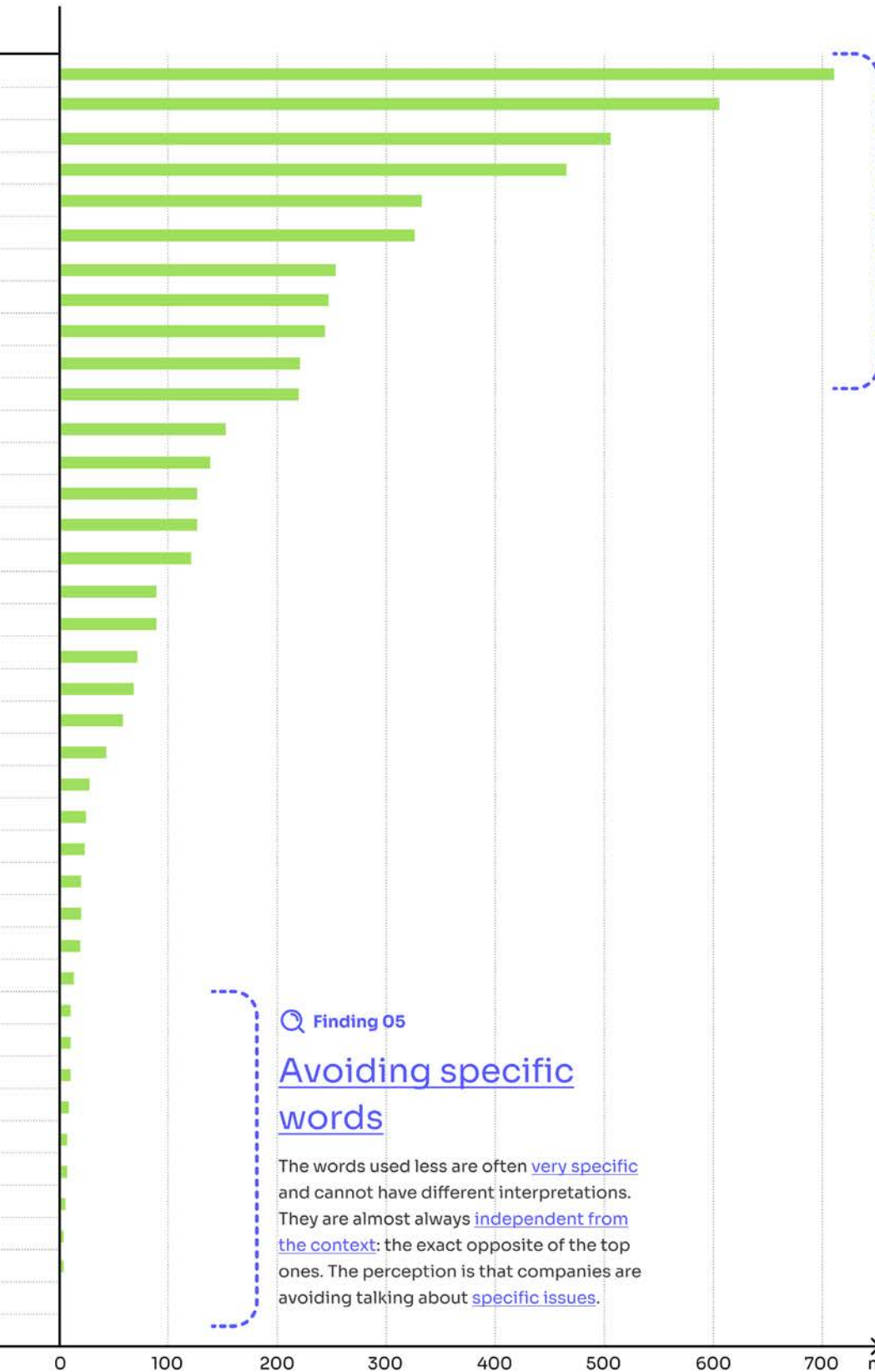


Q Finding 03

Limited vocabulary

It appears that multinational companies tend to use the [same keywords](#) over and over again. The chart points out the lack of language variety when discussing this topic: only a dozen words are virtually [present on every website](#).

										Keywords resonance
impact										711
sustainability										606
commitment										508
energy										488
reduce										337
responsibility										332
environmental										268
recycle										242
emissions										241
natural										220
footprint										218
greenhouse gas										156
deforestation										144
green										123
greenhouse										122
effect										118
climate change										88
carbon footprint										87
efficient										70
carbon										66
renewable energy										56
circular economy										39
single-use										28
organic										17
eco-friendly										16
fairtrade										12
vegan										12
post-consumer										10
reclaimed										6
biodegradable										5
net-zero										5
reforestation										5
warming										4
eco-conscious										3
zero-waste										3
preservation										2
ecological										1
greenwashing										1
localvore										0
remineralize										0
total word count	2926	1246	760	166	108	68	62	33	0	



Q Finding 04

Strategic words use

The top 10 used words are all related to different themes, such as company conduct and eco-friendly choices. But generally, all keywords are very generic and can possibly change meaning depending on the context (like the most used "impact").

Q Finding 05

Avoiding specific words

The words used less are often very specific and cannot have different interpretations. They are almost always independent from the context: the exact opposite of the top ones. The perception is that companies are avoiding talking about specific issues.

→ FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conclusion

As one of today's most important topics, [the environment appeared on 8 out of 9 analysed fast food chains' websites](#). Most of the companies started talking about it in 2008 promising their commitment to take part in preserving the planet. In the following decade, the green content on their websites has exponentially increased.

Furthermore, companies' contribution to the environmental issues are mostly portrayed by images of [unpolluted forests, placed side by side with tasty products from their menus](#). While some of them prefer to focus on displaying their staff with a joyful and smiling demeanor.

When it comes to words, it was shown that fast food companies repeat [evocative and popular terms](#), such as impact and sustainability to prove their concern.

In conclusion, the US fast food chains considered in the analysis showed their involvement in this global topic. What can be noted is that they tend to follow [the same patterns](#) providing the same or similar linguistic register of how they are treating and contributing to the environment.

Enjoy your meal!