

THE GREEN FEVER



Sustainability communication
in the days of fast food chains' websites

D E N -
S I T Y
G N +



POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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

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

AUTHORS
Ana Doric
Jessica Moreschi
Lucrezia Valentini
Matteo Repetto
Martina Paggi
Silvia Altamura
Wanlin Li

Faculty
Michele Mauri
Ángeles Briones
Gabriele Colombo
Simone Vantini
Salvatore Zingale

Teaching assistants
Elena Aversa
Andrea Benedetti
Tommaso Elli
Beatrice Gobbo
Arianna Bellantuono

D E N -
S I T Y
G N +



POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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

→ INDEX

#0	<u>Greenwashing in fast food chains communication</u>	04
#1	<u>How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?</u>	
	Research protocol	06
	Ease of access to the section about sustainability	08
	The evolution of sustainability sections	10
	Comparison: the evolution of sustainability sections	28
#2	<u>Which are the images and recurring elements used to address environmental issues on fast food websites?</u>	
	Research protocol	36
	The company's images and recurring elements used to talk about environmental issues	38
	Main visual categories chosen to portray environmental issues	42
#3	<u>Which keywords resonate the most on fast food websites regarding companies' commitment to environmental issues?</u>	
	Green keywords and research protocol	48
	Amount of keywords about sustainability for each company's websites	50
	Percentage of green pages in relation to the total amount of web pages	52
	Recurring keywords to spread environmental commitment	53
#4	<u>Conclusions</u>	60

→ 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”.

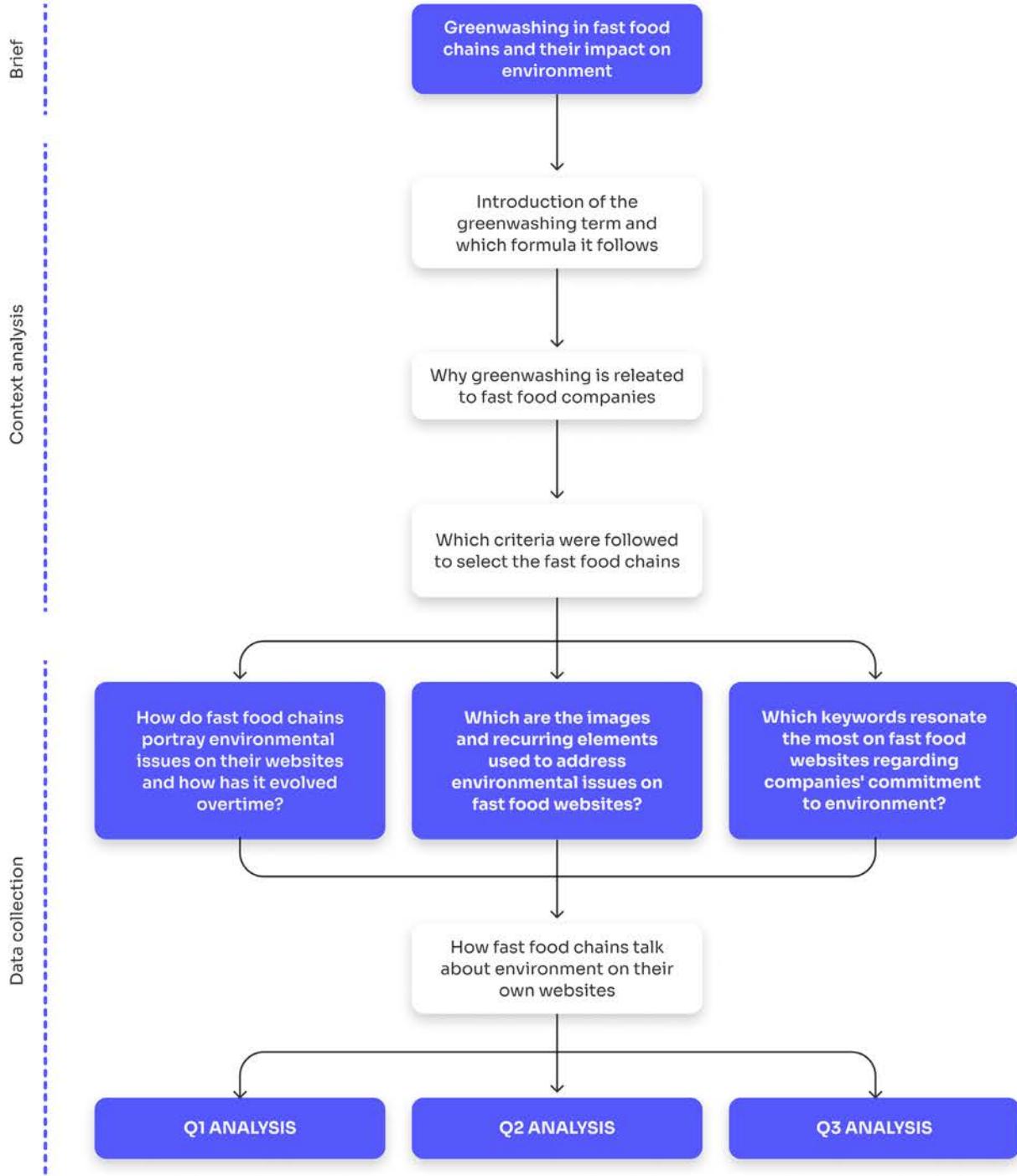
[The criteria](#) by which the companies were chosen for this analysis was based on:

- annual revenue
- total number of stores opened worldwide
- website has at least one sustainability-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



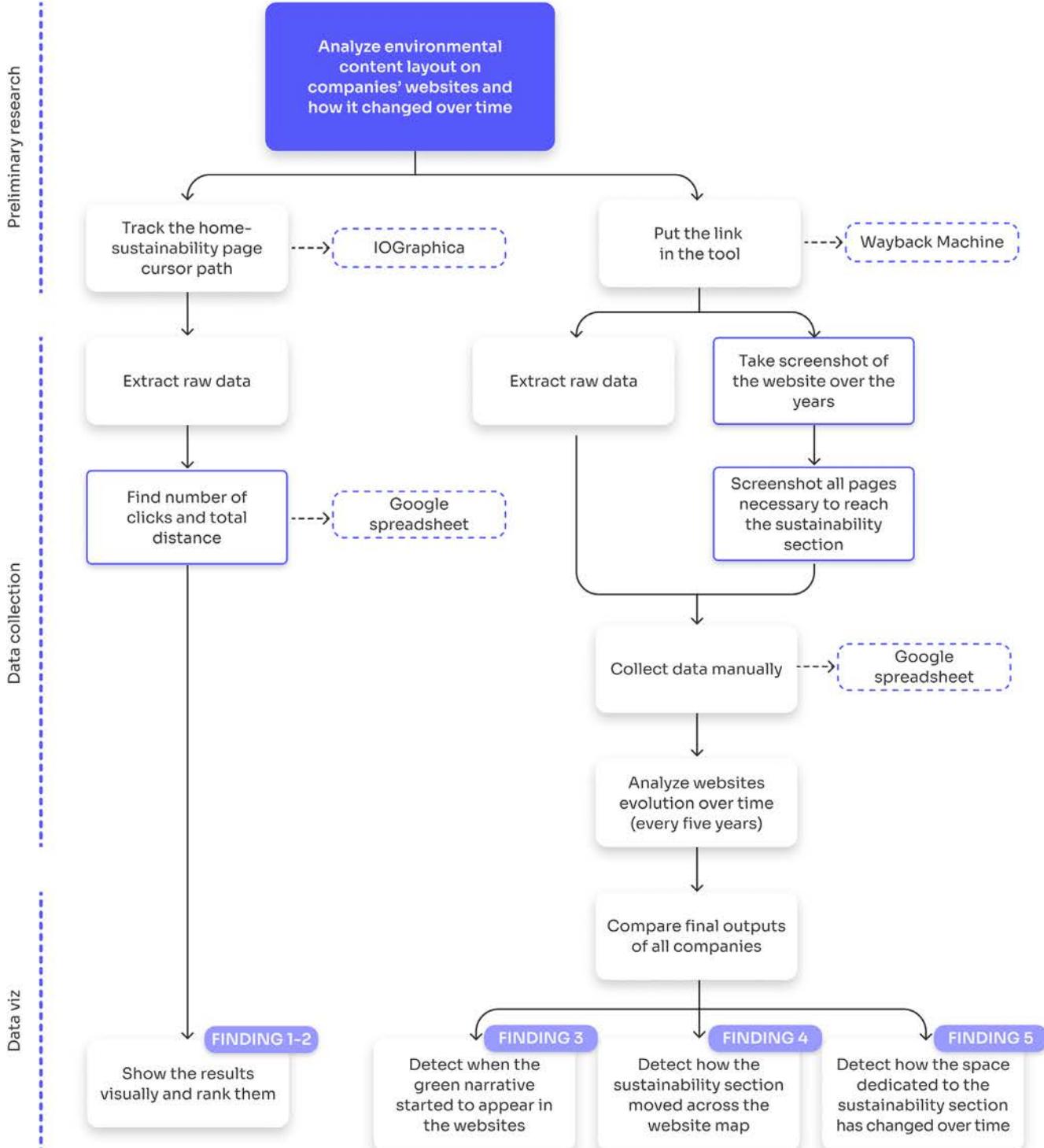
→ **QUESTION 01**

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.

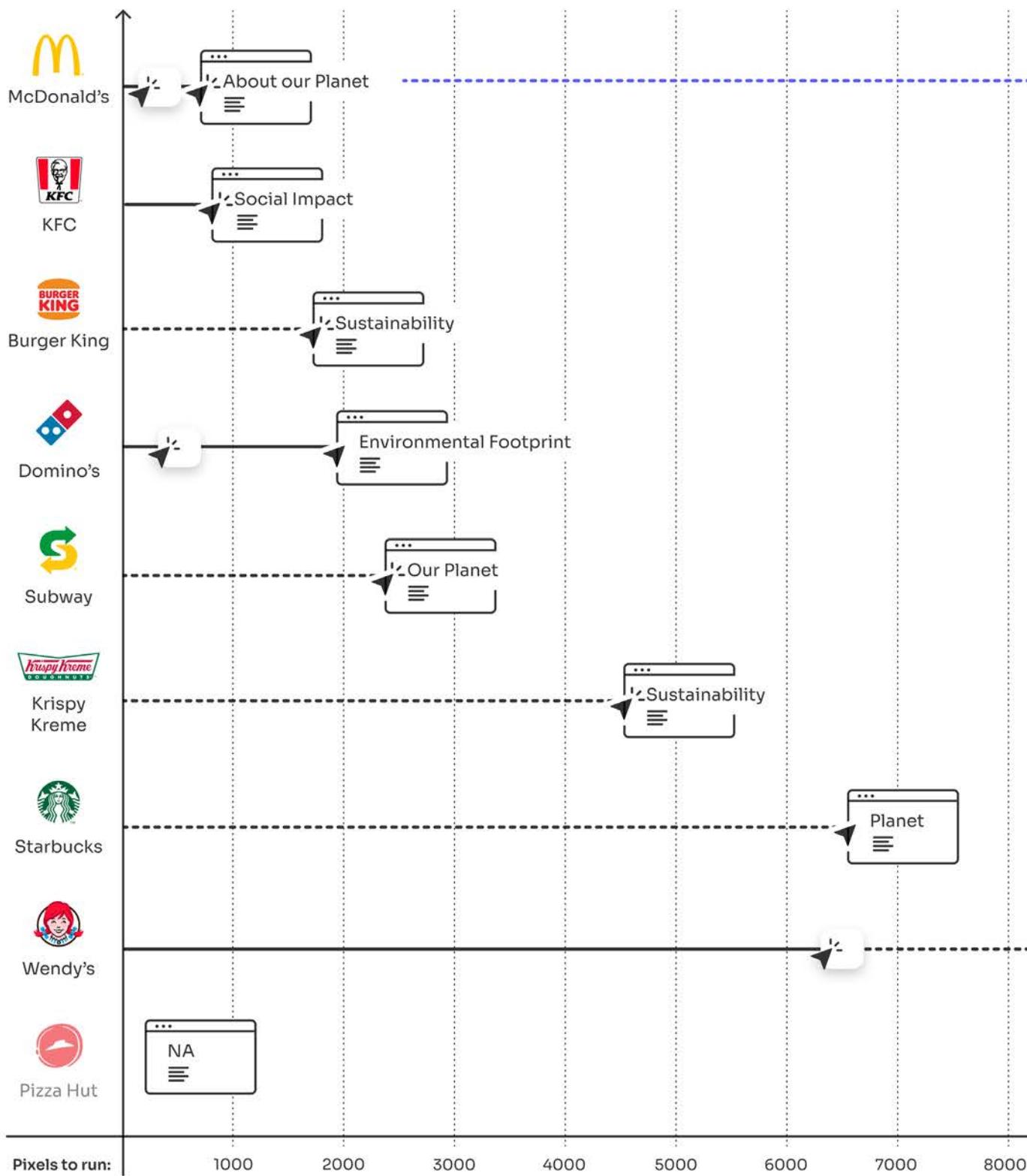
To conduct the research, it was chosen to analyze the domains [.com](#) of fast food companies in order to have not-geographically-based results.

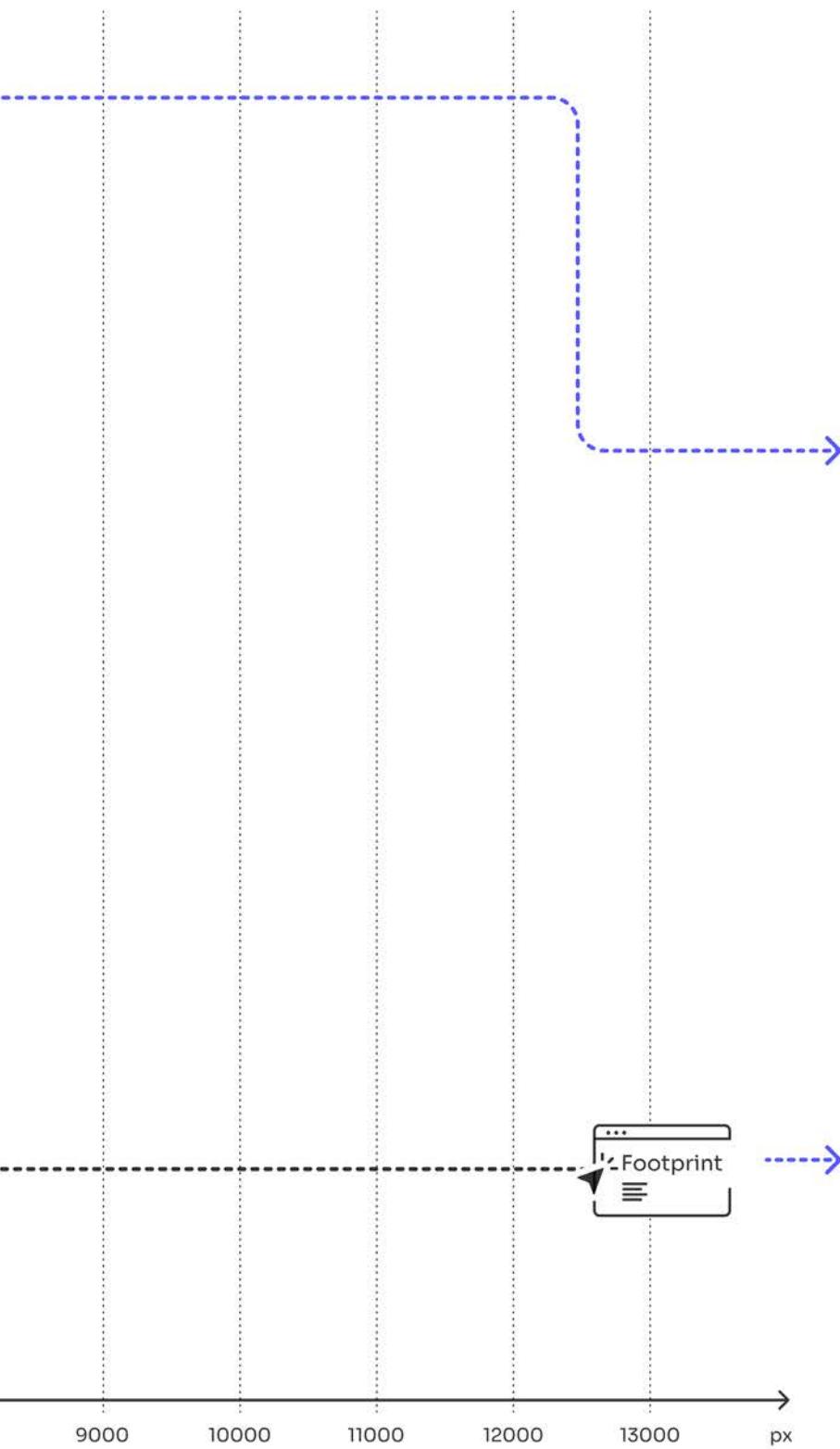
What was defined as the 'sustainability section' is namely the page that are speaking about or is strongly related to [environmental issues](#).



→ Graph 01

Ease of access to the section about sustainability





Q 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.

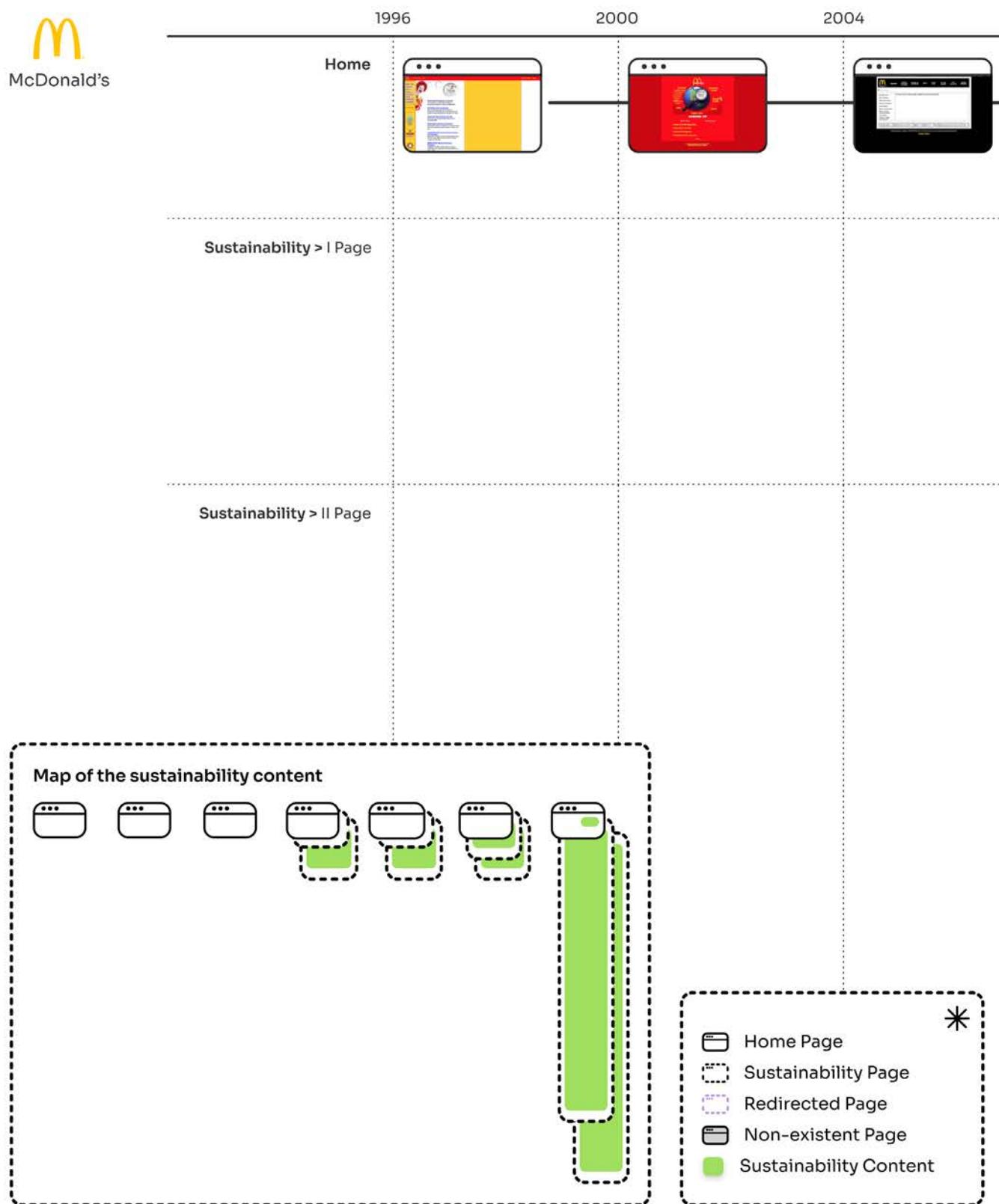
Q Finding 02

The most hidden section

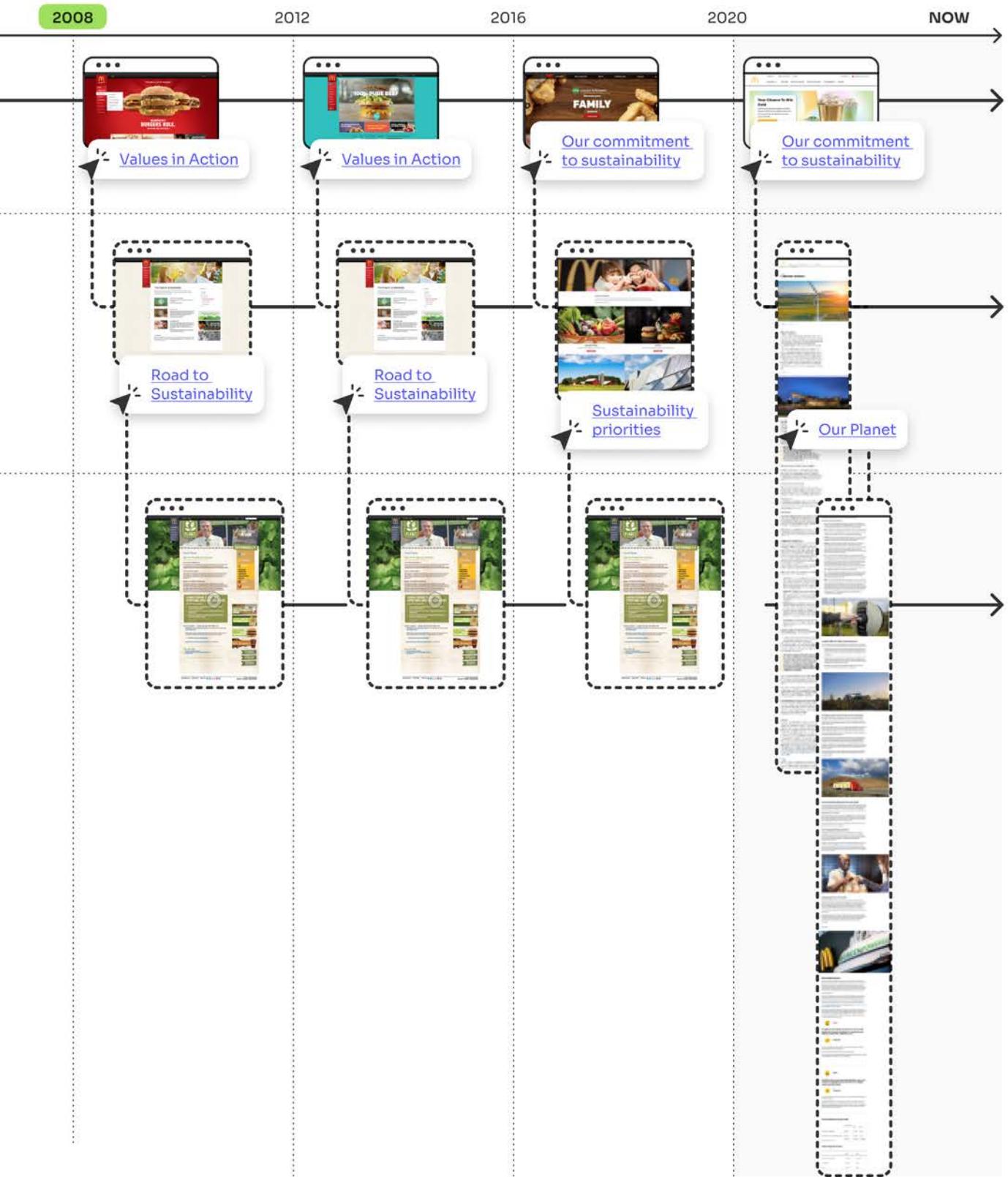
Wendy's sustainability section is the [hardest to reach](#): it requires one click and a long mouse distance. The company thus tries to attract users towards its [other focus areas](#) first.

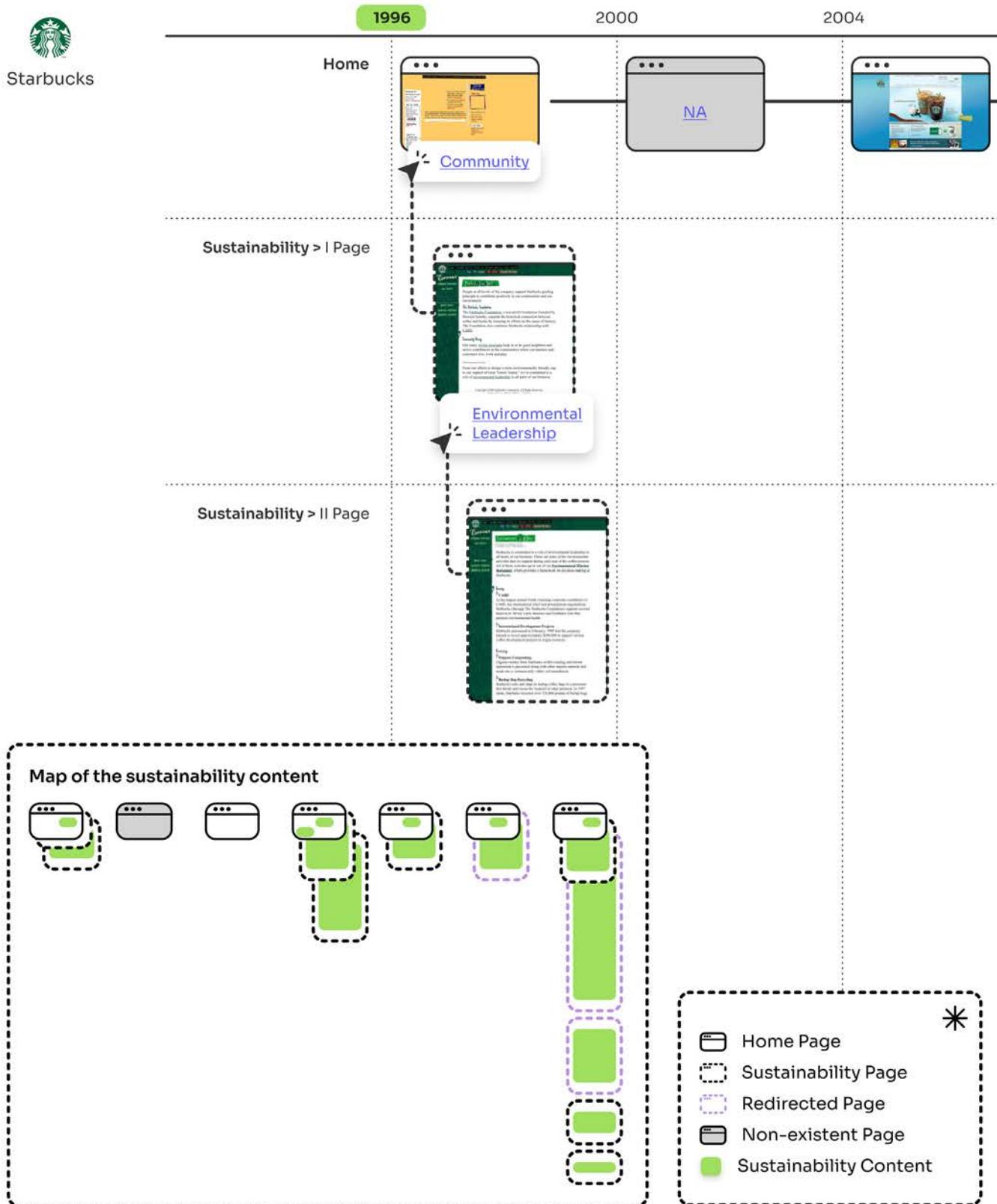
→ Graph 02

The evolution of sustainability sections

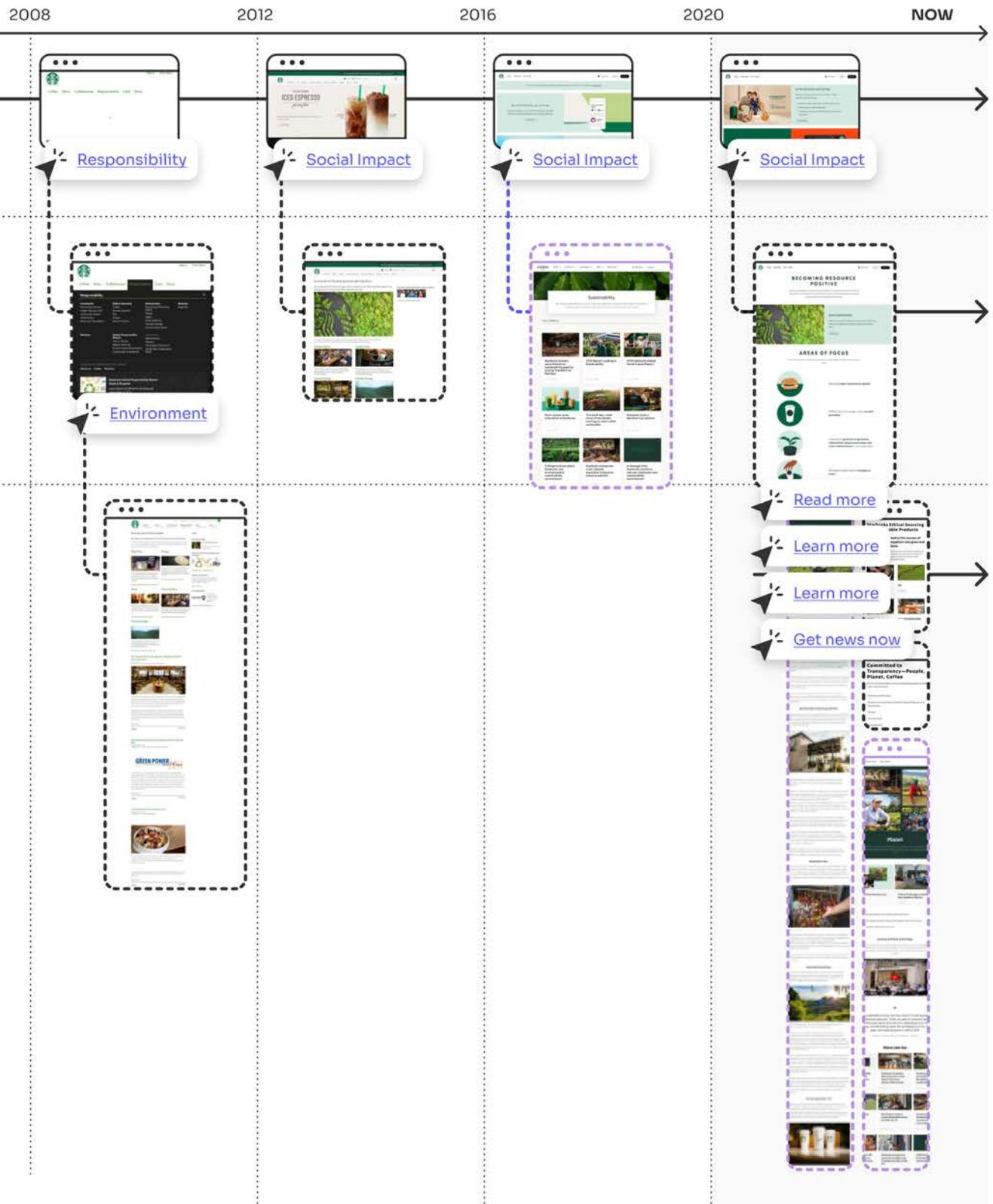


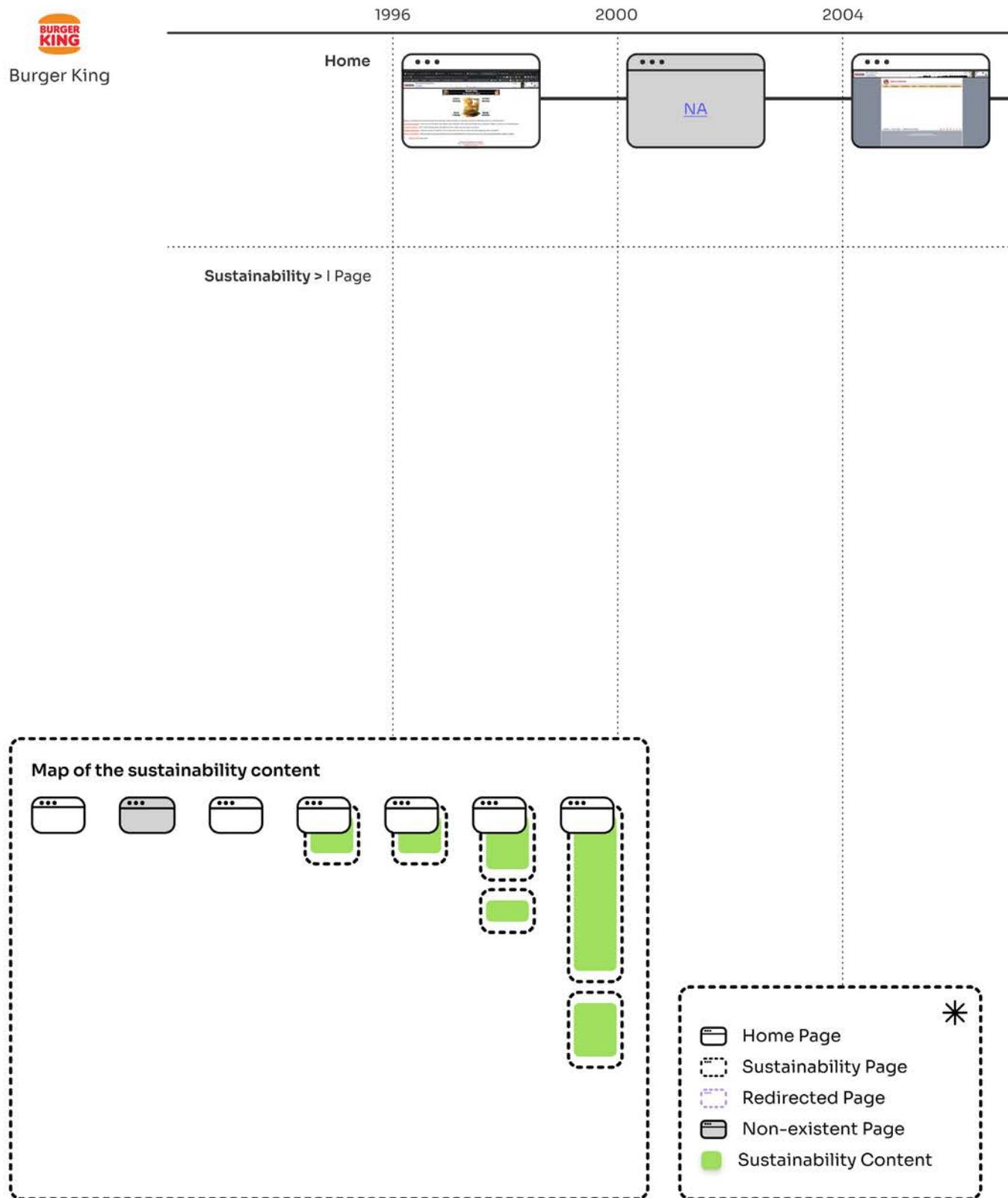
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



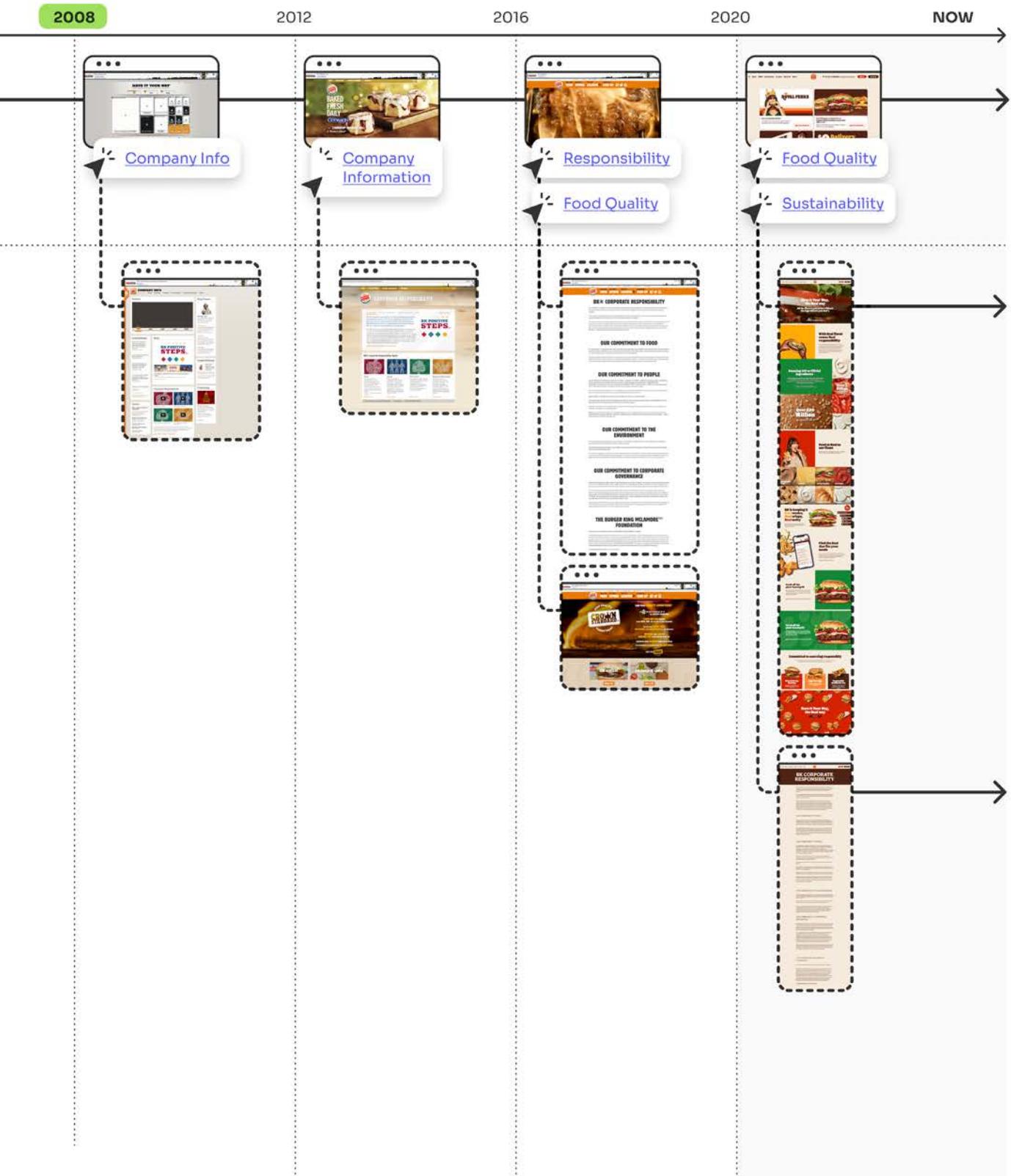


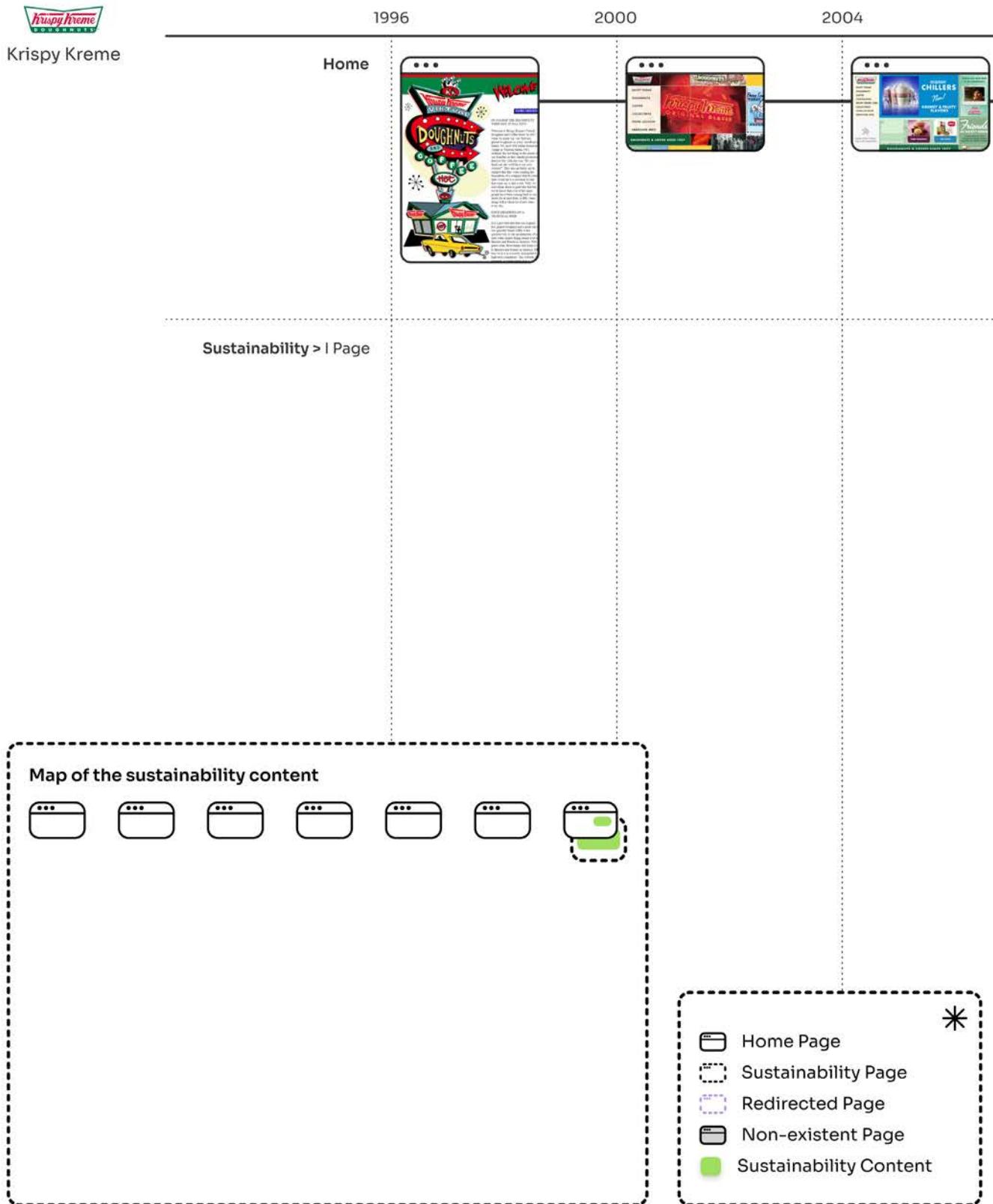
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



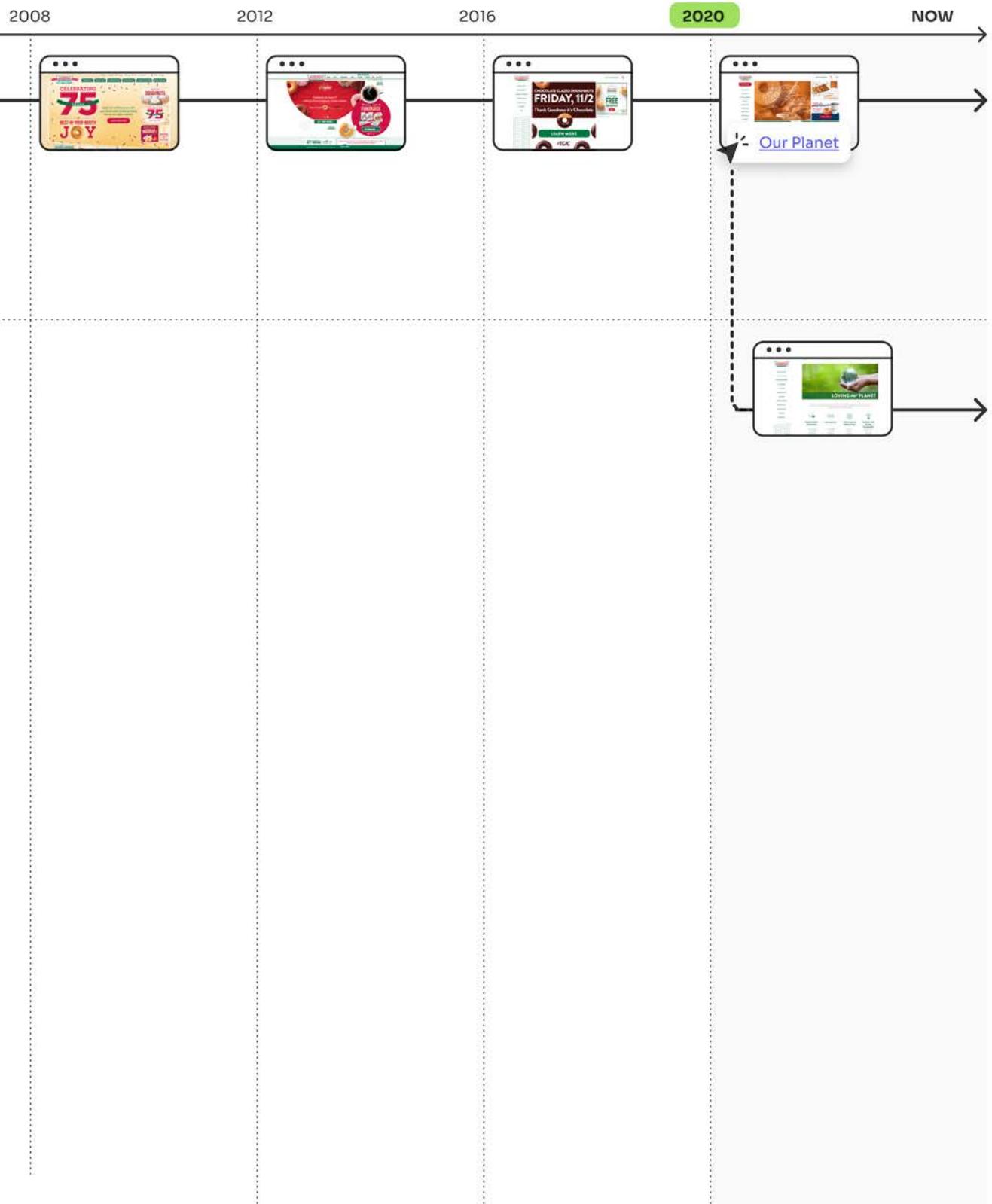


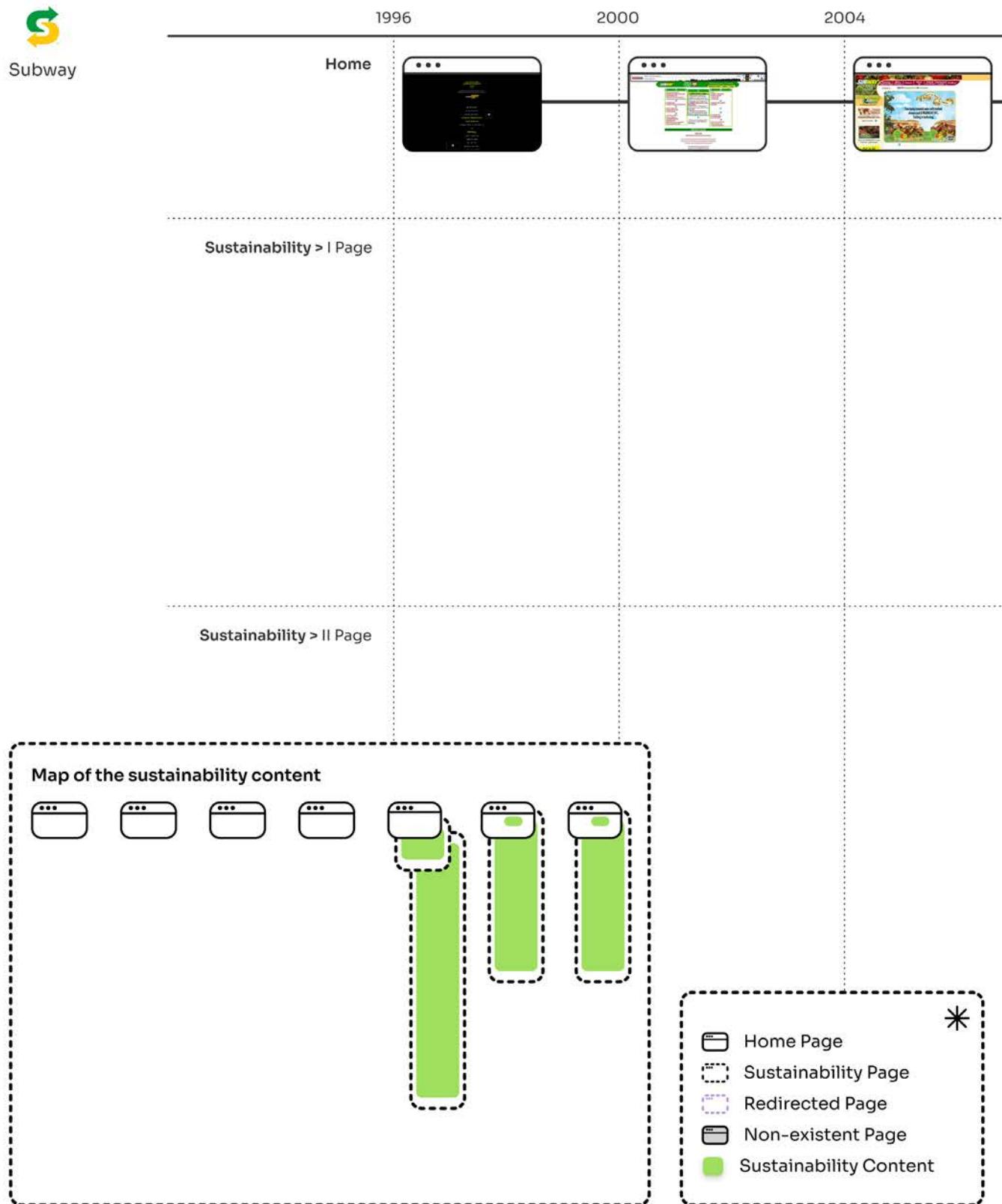
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



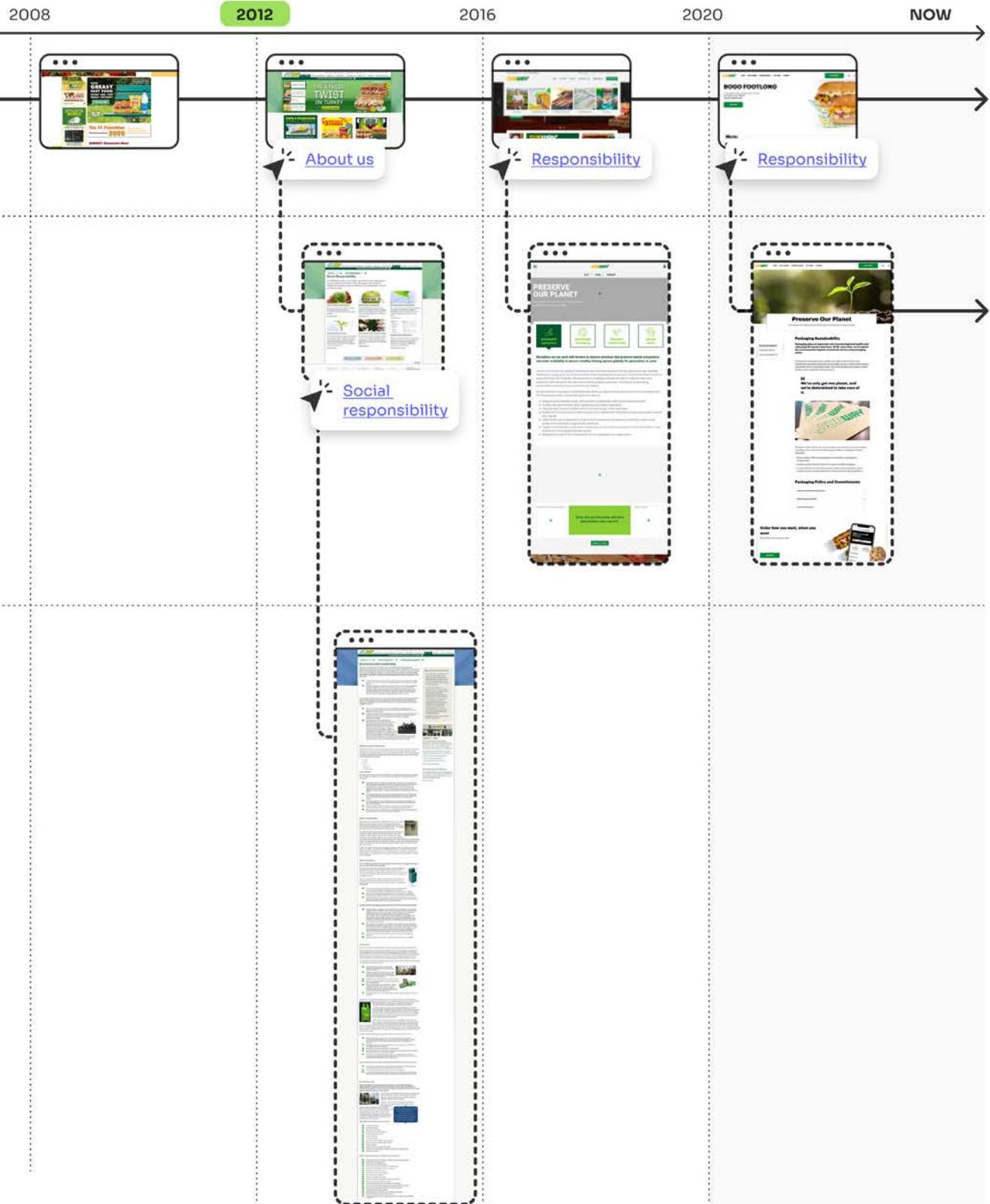


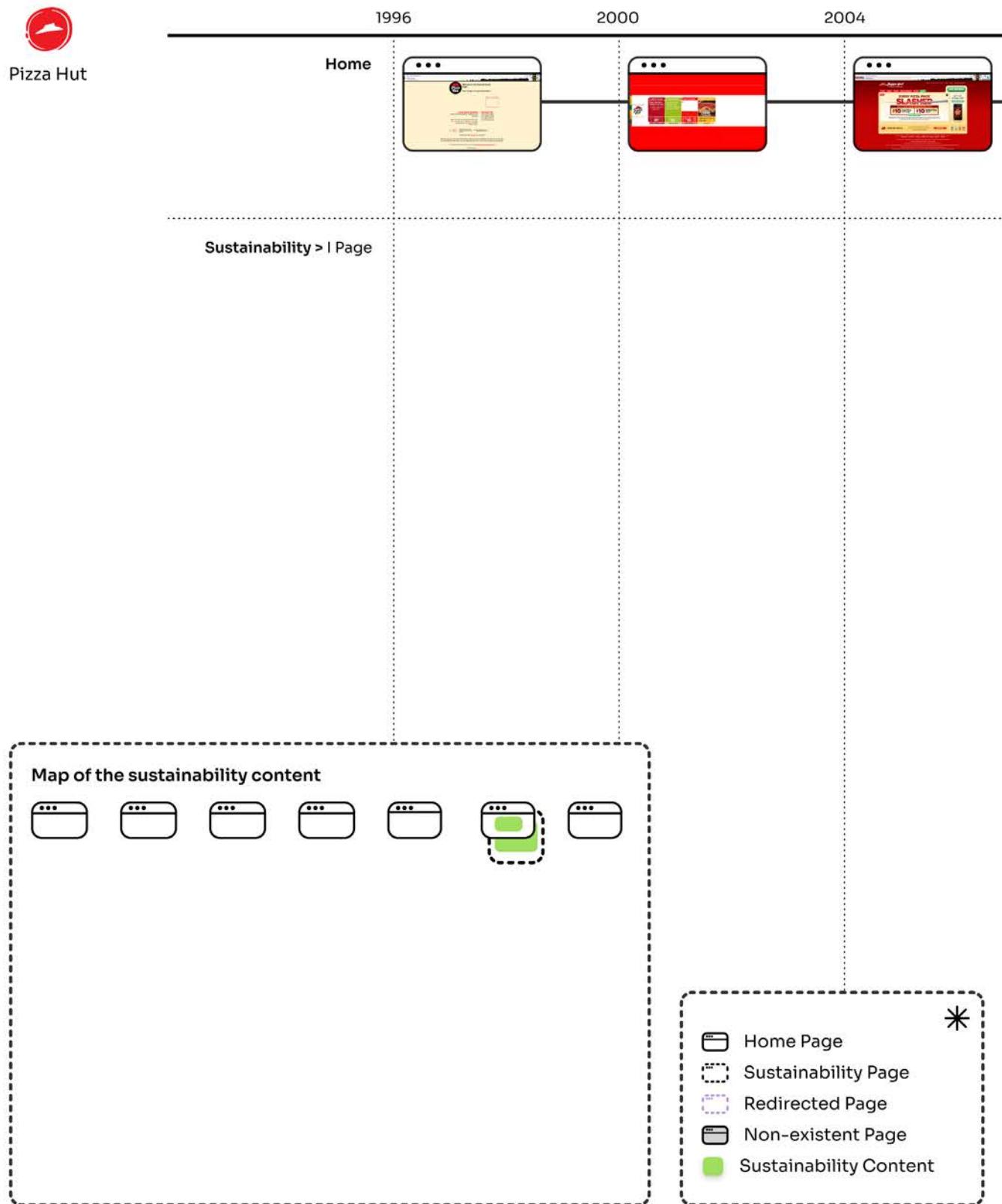
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



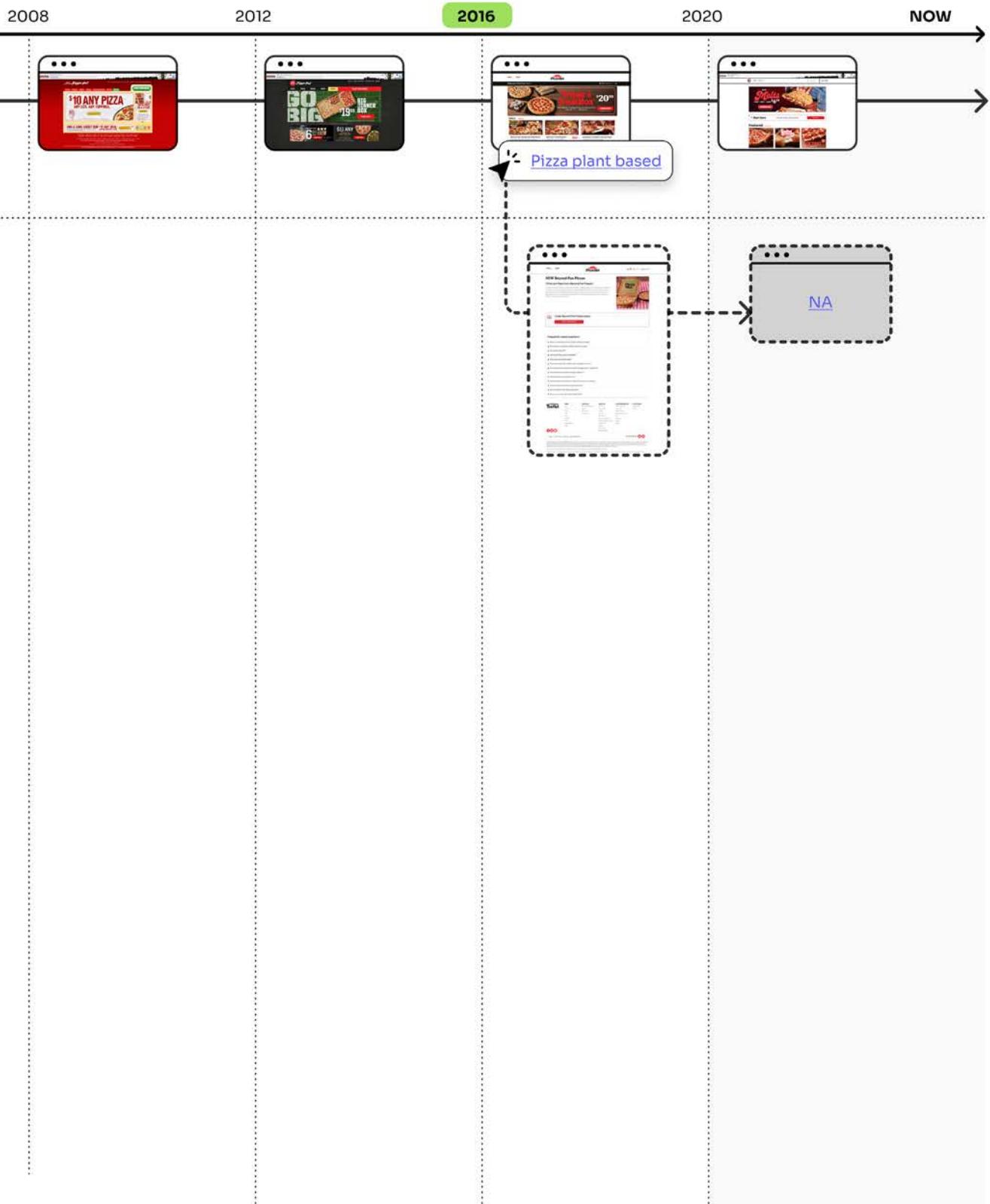


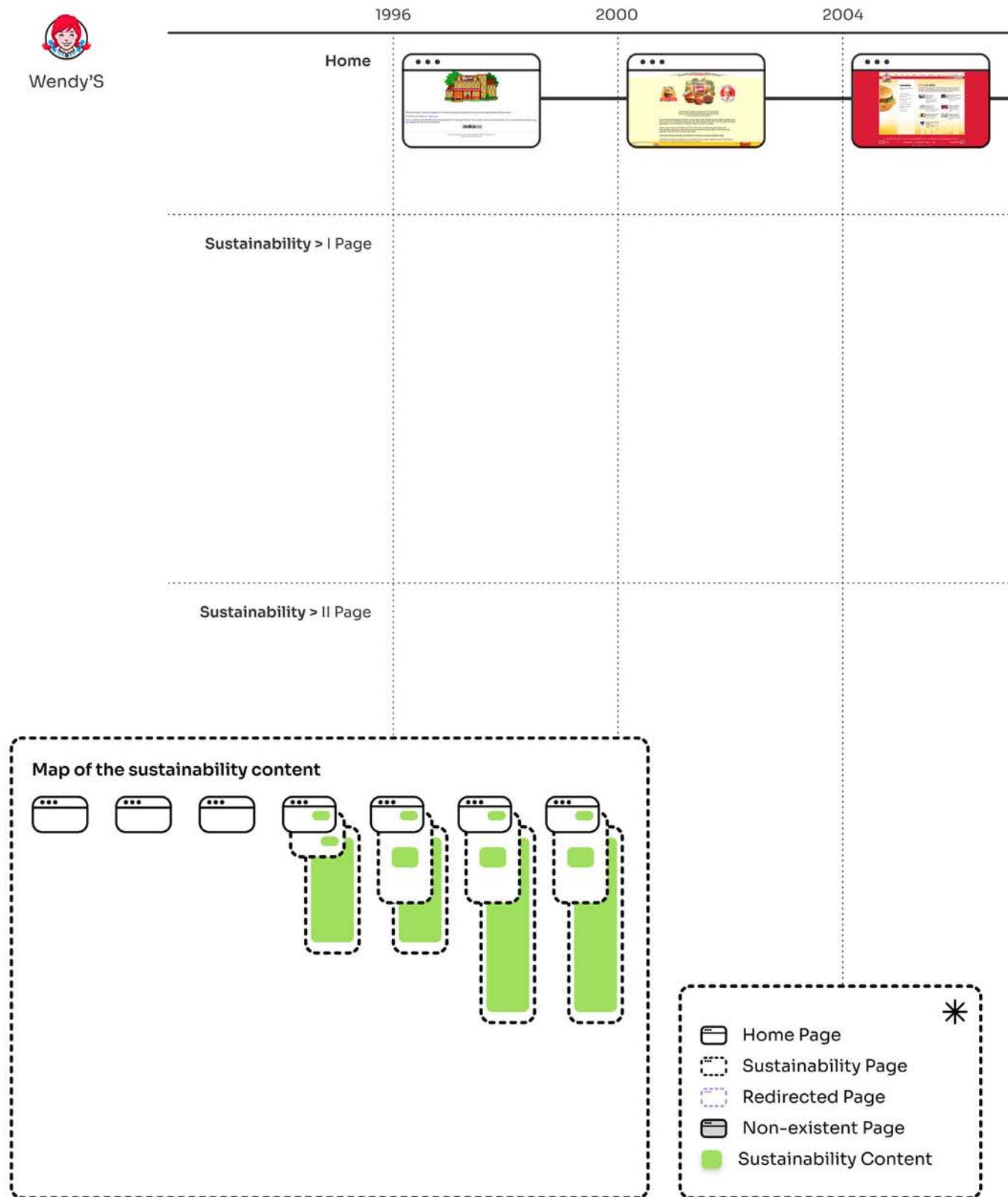
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



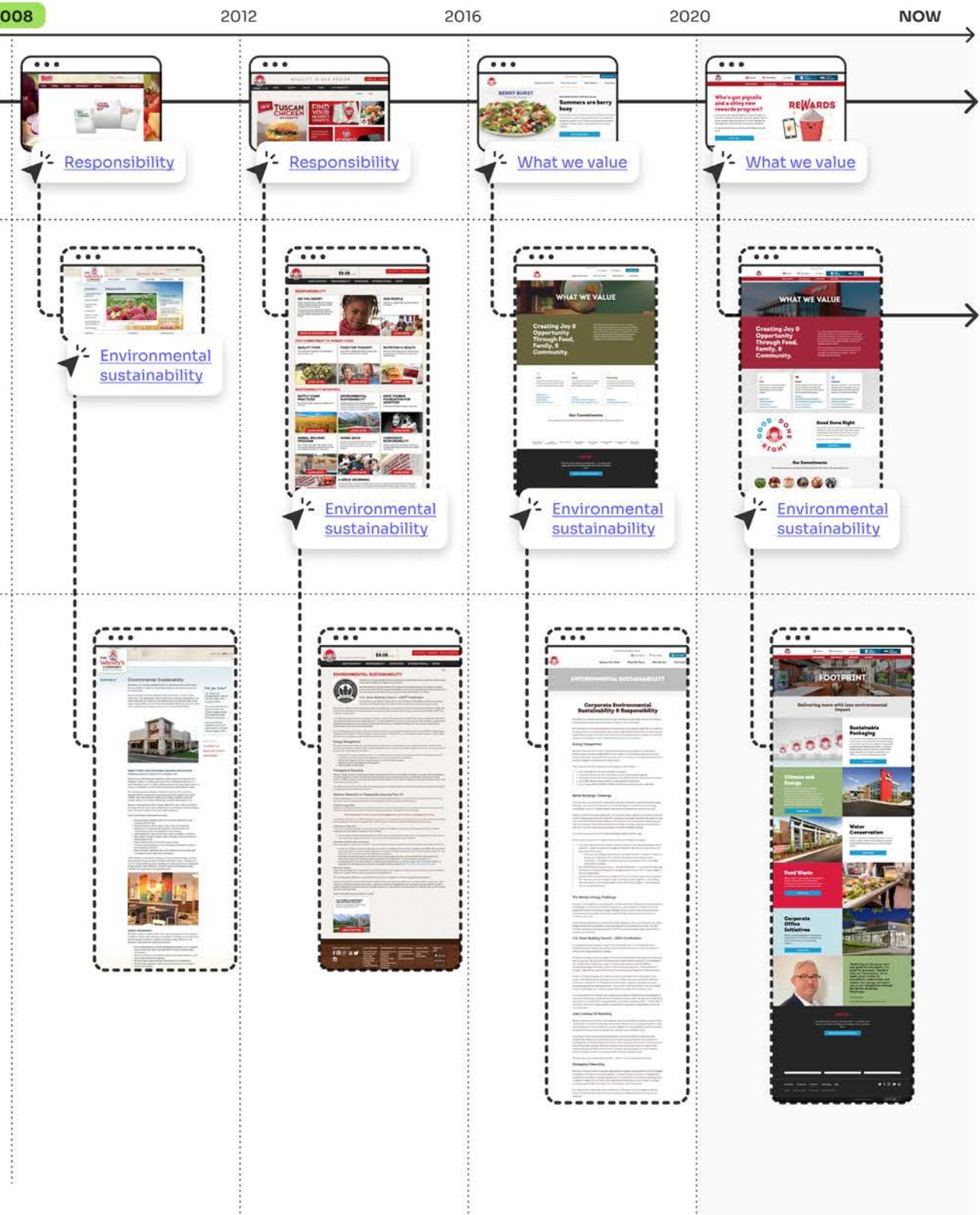


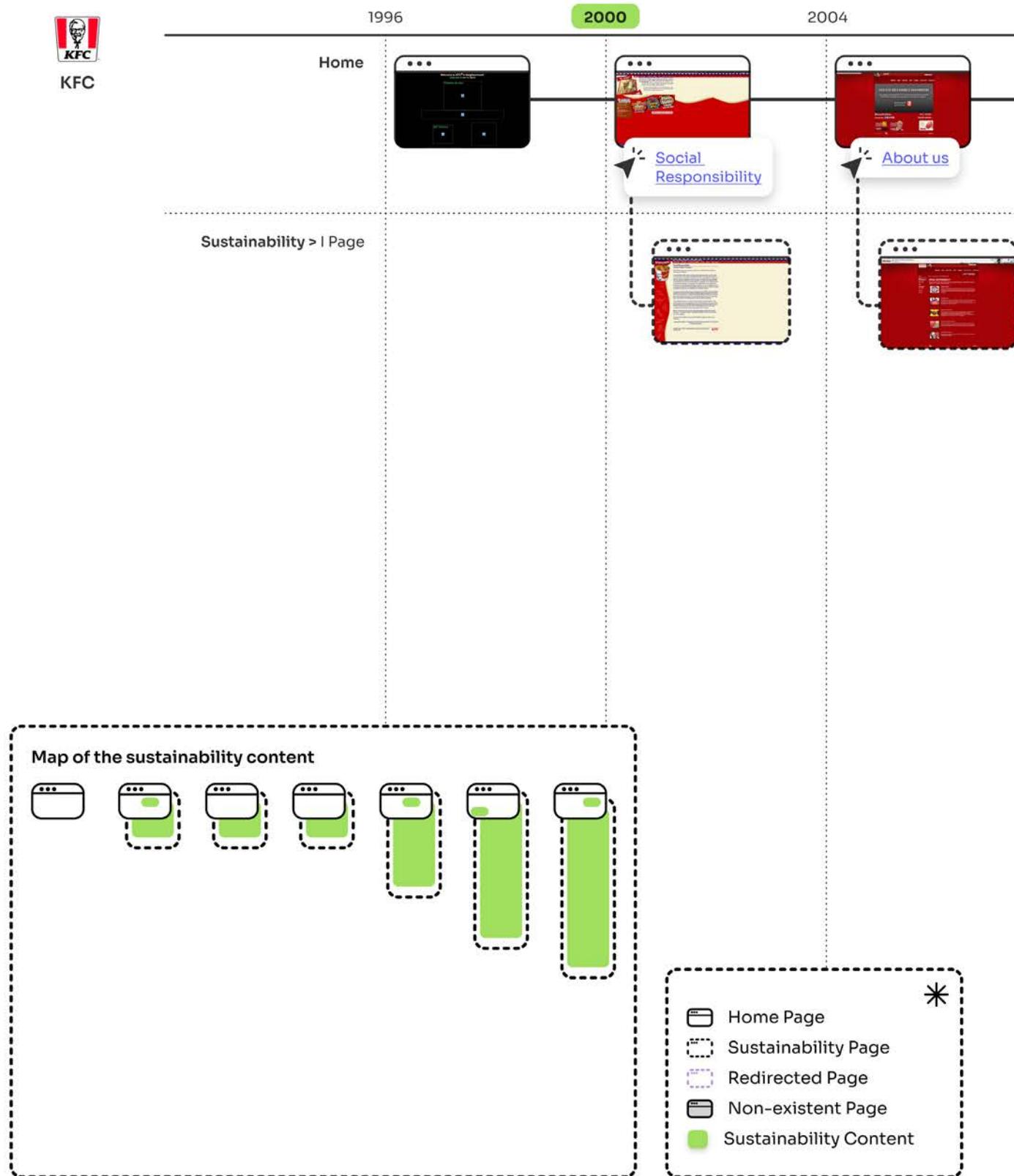
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



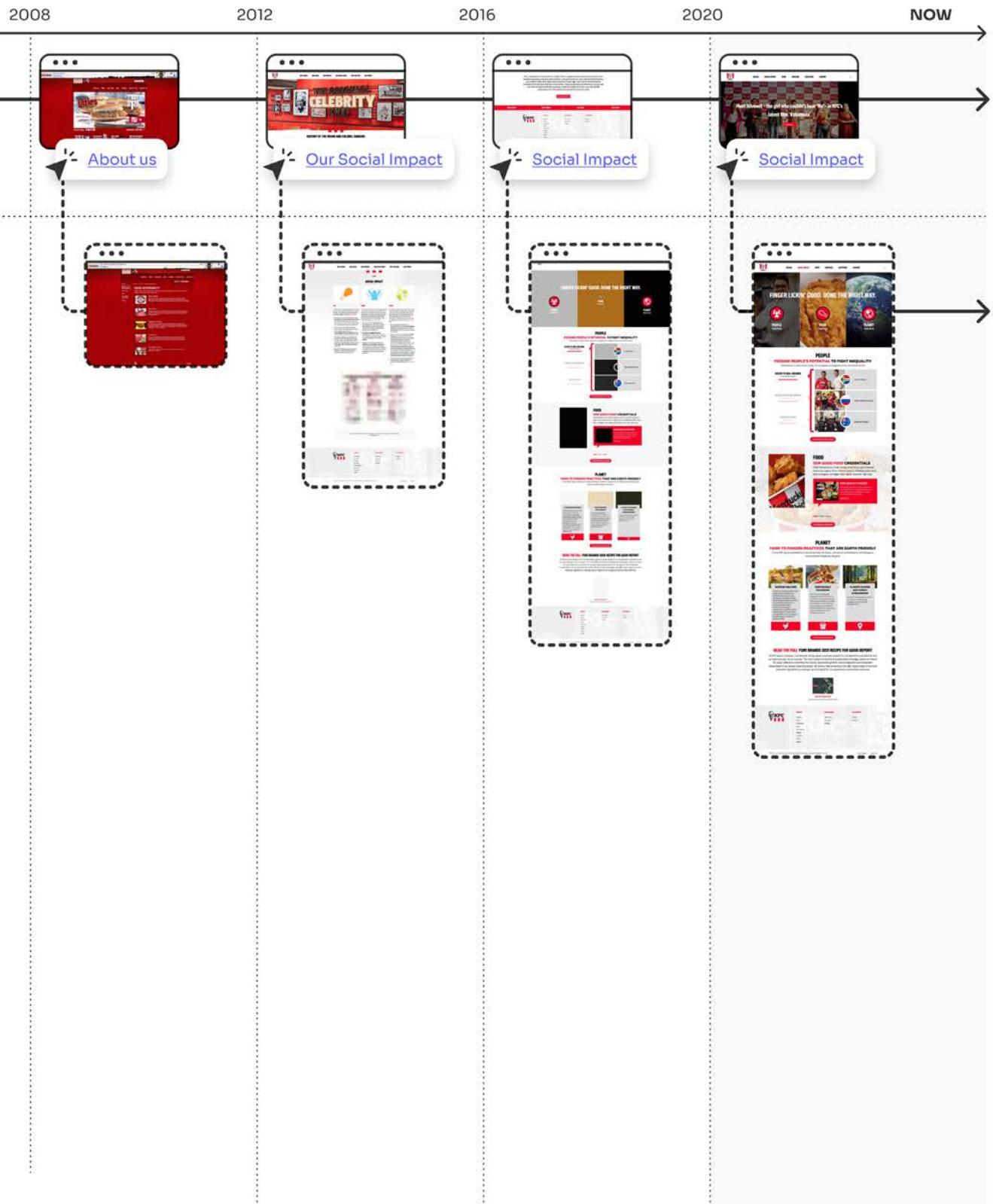


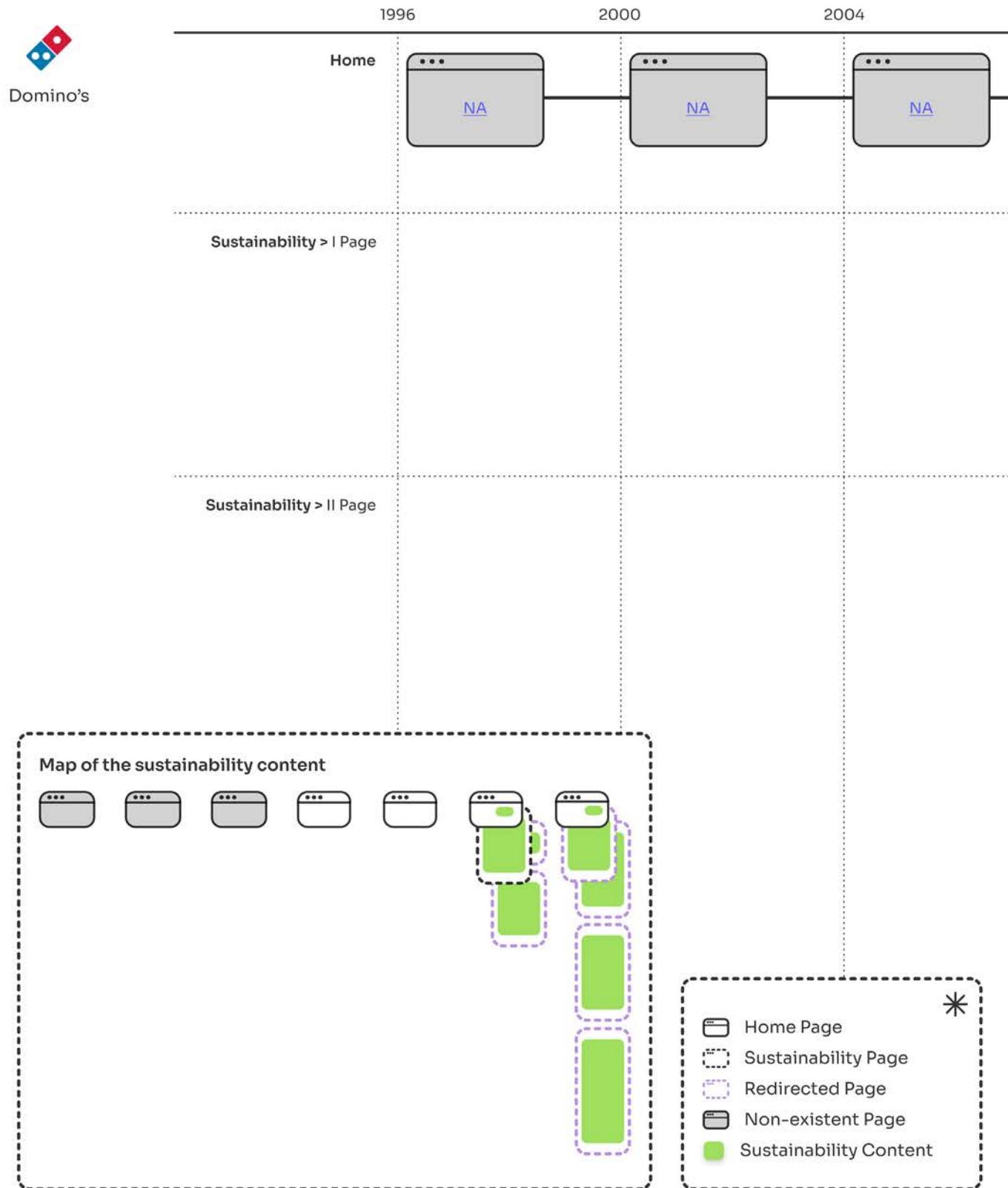
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?



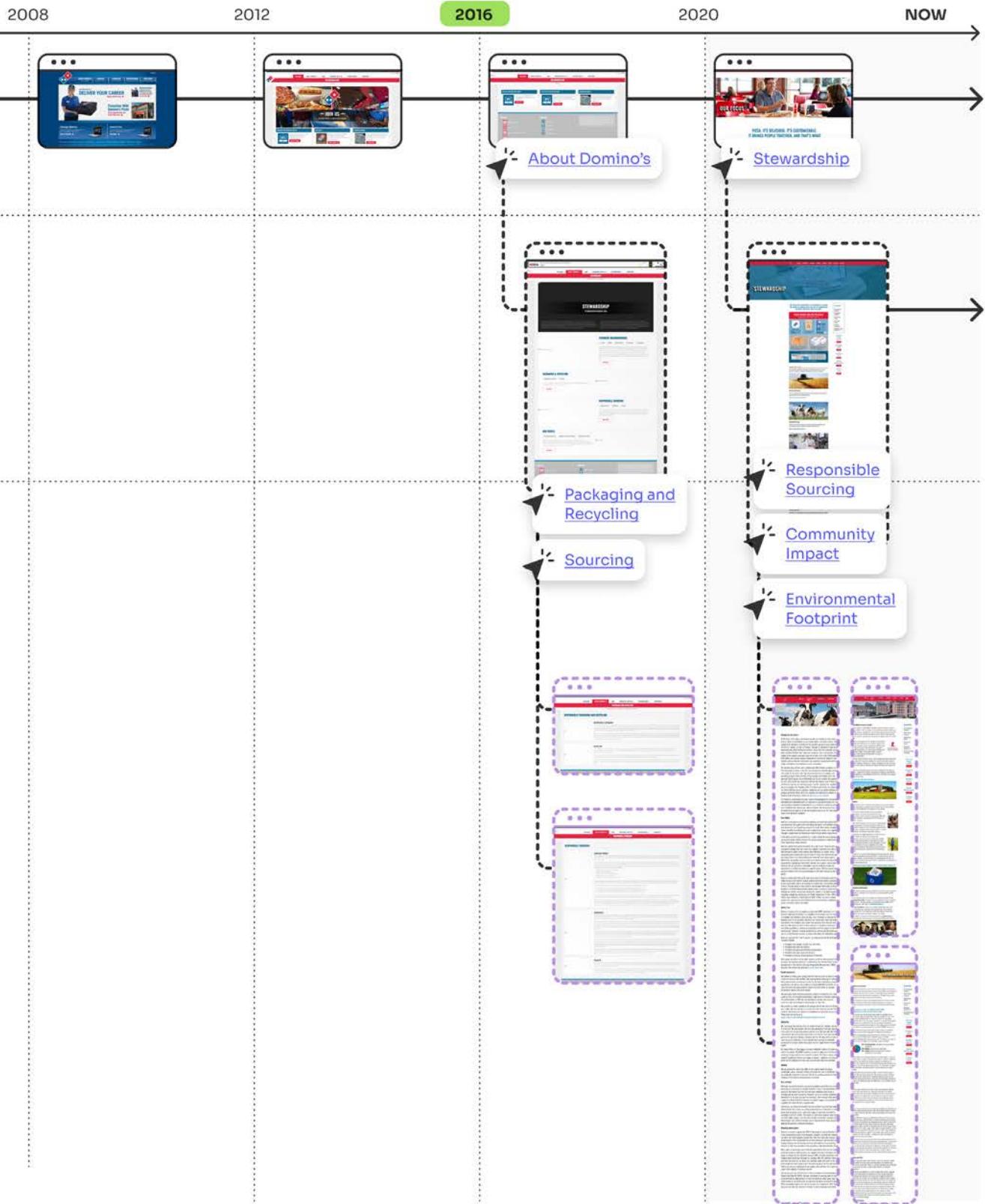


Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?





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

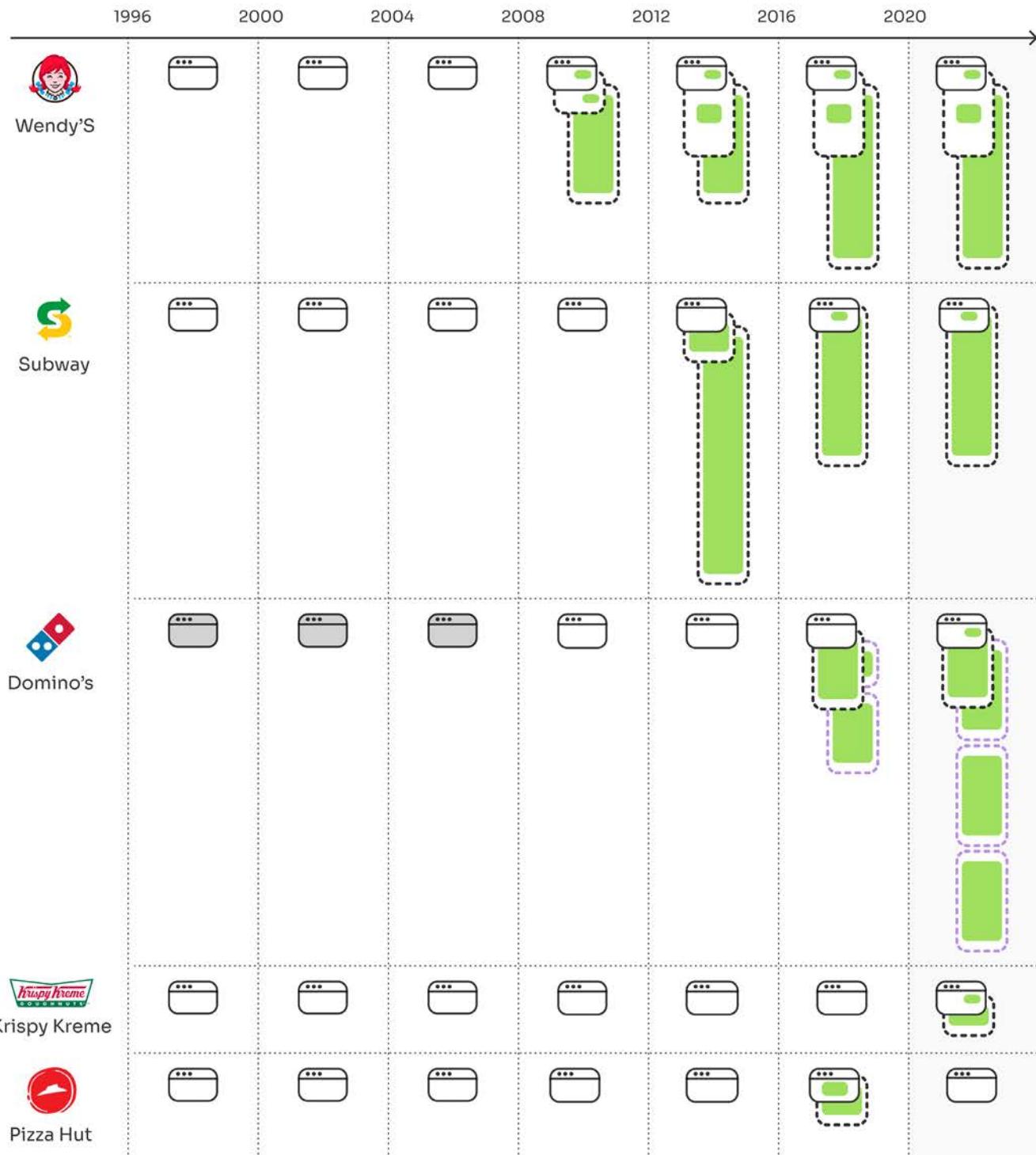


→ Graph 03

Comparison: the evolution of sustainability sections



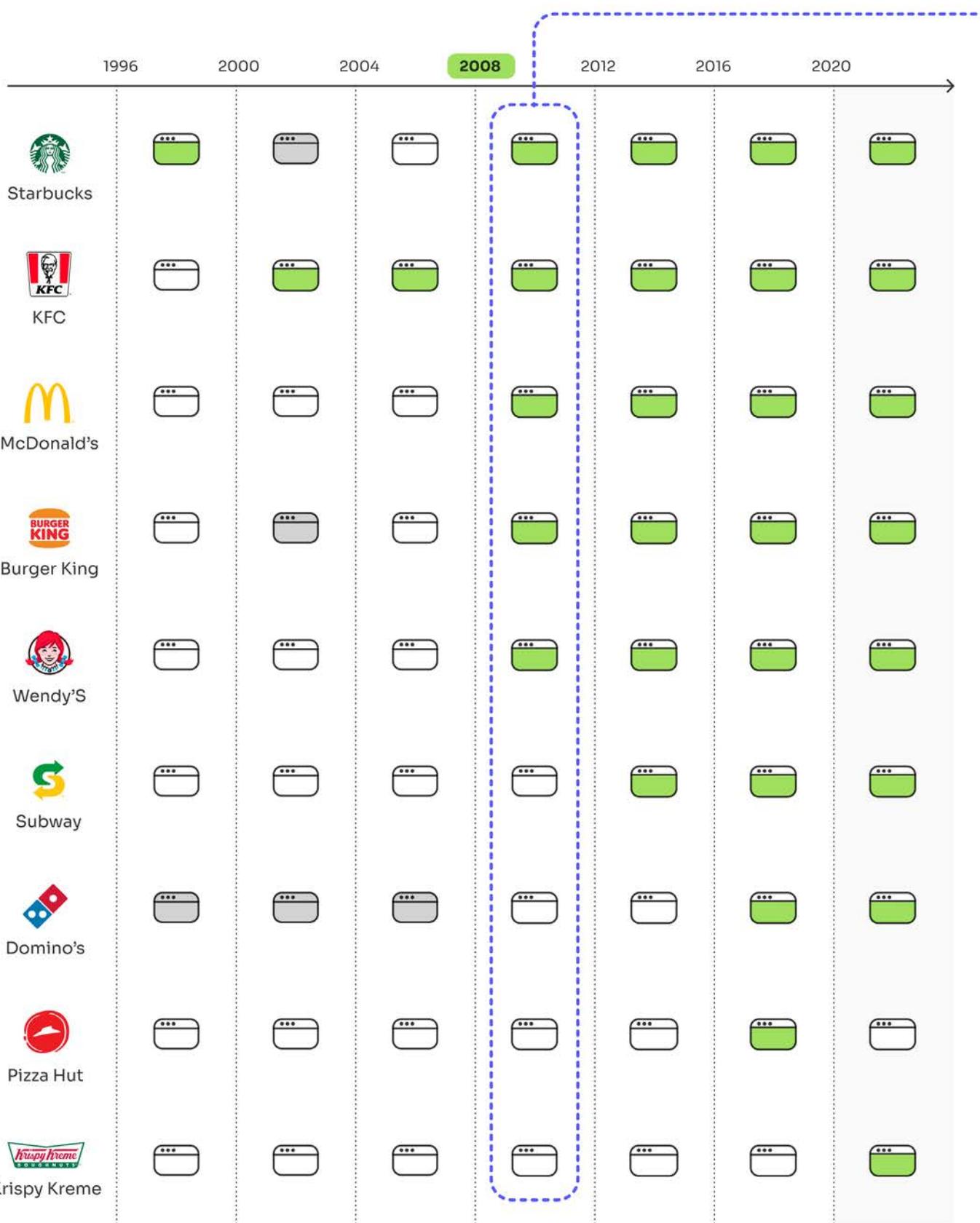
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?

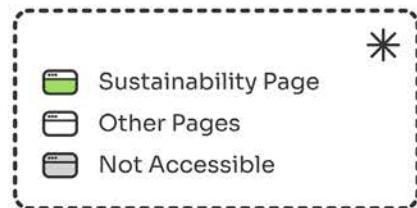


█ Home Page
█ Non-existent Page
█ Sustainability Page
█ Redirected Page

█ Non-existent Page
█ Redirected Page
█ Sustainability Content







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

ENVIRONMENT AND LEADERSHIP

10 Fixes for the Planet

Scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs are focusing on ways to help the environment. Some of our favorite ideas.

More waste, less recycling? Plastic and paper are the most common trash items in landfills, says Mark Litterst, director of Environmental Initiatives at the Bechtel Group, Inc., the world's largest engineering, construction and project management company. "We've been told that we need to make more products recyclable, using materials that are easier to collect and process," he says. "It's also important, as consumers, to reduce waste and recycle more often."

Litterst suggests that companies make products with stronger packaging and longer-lasting materials, making waste recyclable—and an environmental benefit—once it gets into the green bin, trash can or recycling bin.

LED light bulbs These won't burn out, so you may never have to buy a better one.

SOY FUEL WE'VE ALREADY talked about compact fluorescent lightbulbs. A new generation of even better bulbs may be on the way: LED

By ANNE UNDERWOOD

LED JACKETS EVER FEELLED the heat of political and social issues? Now you can channel your consternation. It's what's keeping the founders of the Earth's ecological organization, Greenpeace, warm in water and tons. **NEWSWEEK** recently visited their headquarters in Brussels to see how they're using the jackets to help pull off their

1. More waste, less recycling?
Plastic and paper are the most common trash items in landfills, says Mark Litterst, director of Environmental Initiatives at the Bechtel Group, Inc., the world's largest engineering, construction and project management company.

Mark Litterst **MARK LITTERST** wants "landfills are like black holes that swallow up trash and never come out," says the director of Environmental Initiatives at Bechtel, Inc., the world's largest engineering, construction and project management company. "We've been told that we need to make more products recyclable, using materials that are easier to collect and process," he says. "It's also important, as consumers, to reduce waste and recycle more often."

Companies are getting there, Litterst says. "They're making products with stronger packaging and longer-lasting materials, making waste recyclable—and an environmental benefit—once it gets into the green bin, trash can or recycling bin," he says. "It's also important, as consumers, to reduce waste and recycle more often."

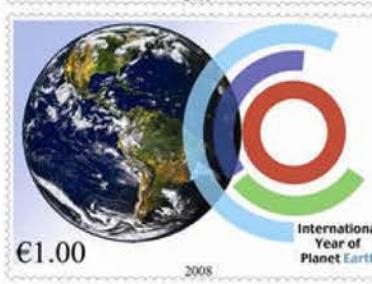
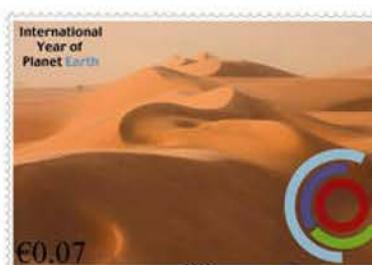
LED light bulbs These won't burn out, so you may never have to buy a better one.

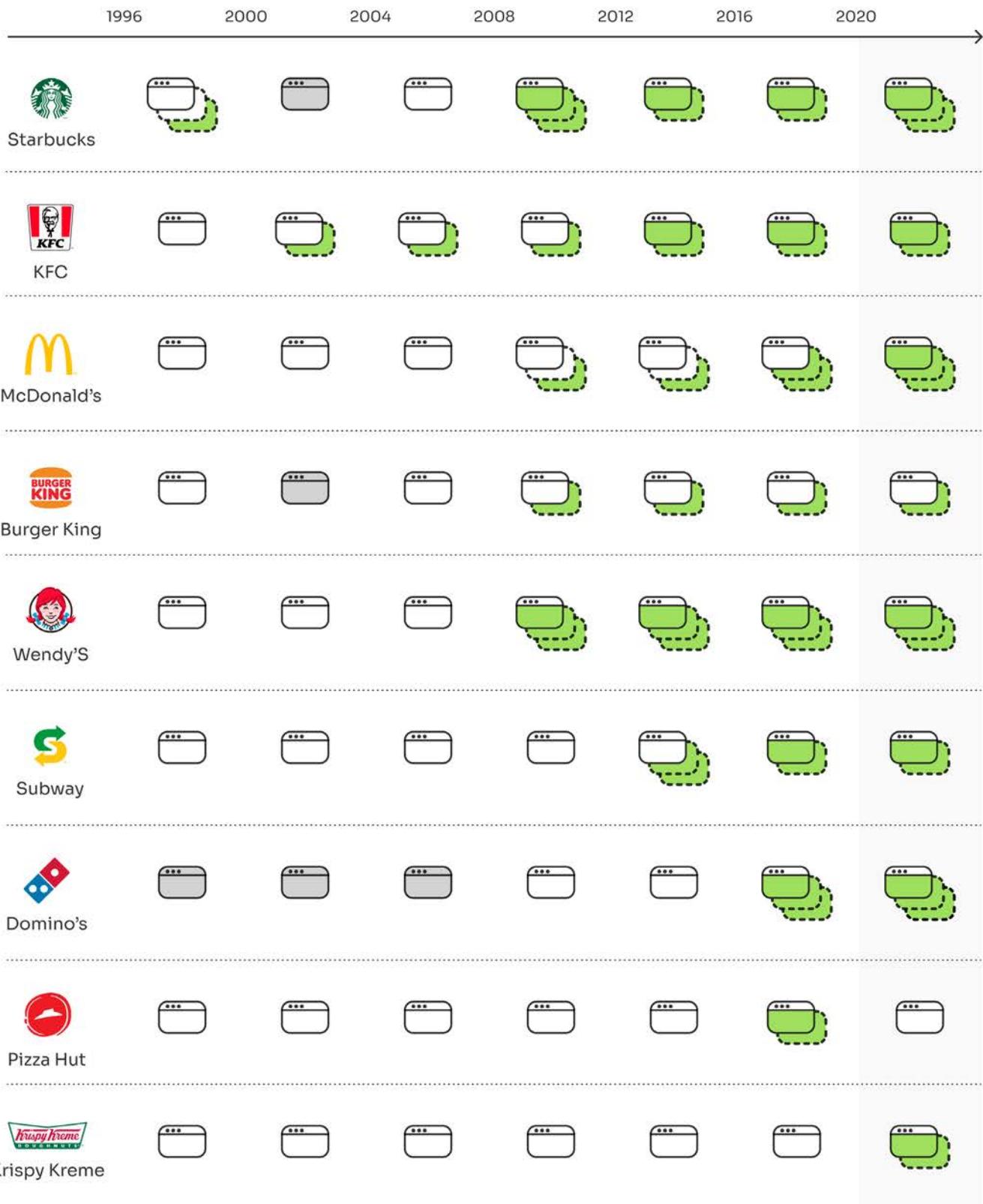
SOY FUEL WE'VE ALREADY talked about compact fluorescent lightbulbs. A new generation of even better bulbs may be on the way: LED

MATTRESS **Lombard** will lug it to your curb, ditching

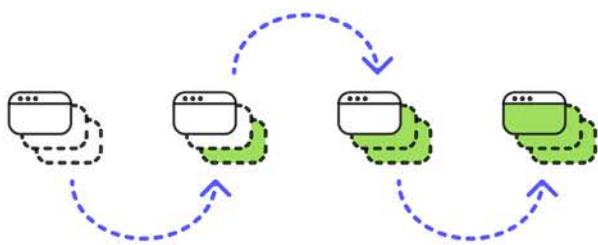
52 NEWSWEEK | APRIL 14, 2008

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY DUNCAN FOR NEWSWEEK





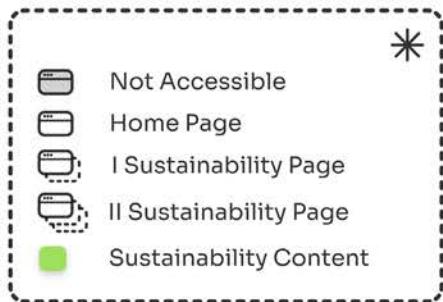
Q1 → How do fast food chains portray environmental issues on their websites and how has it evolved overtime?

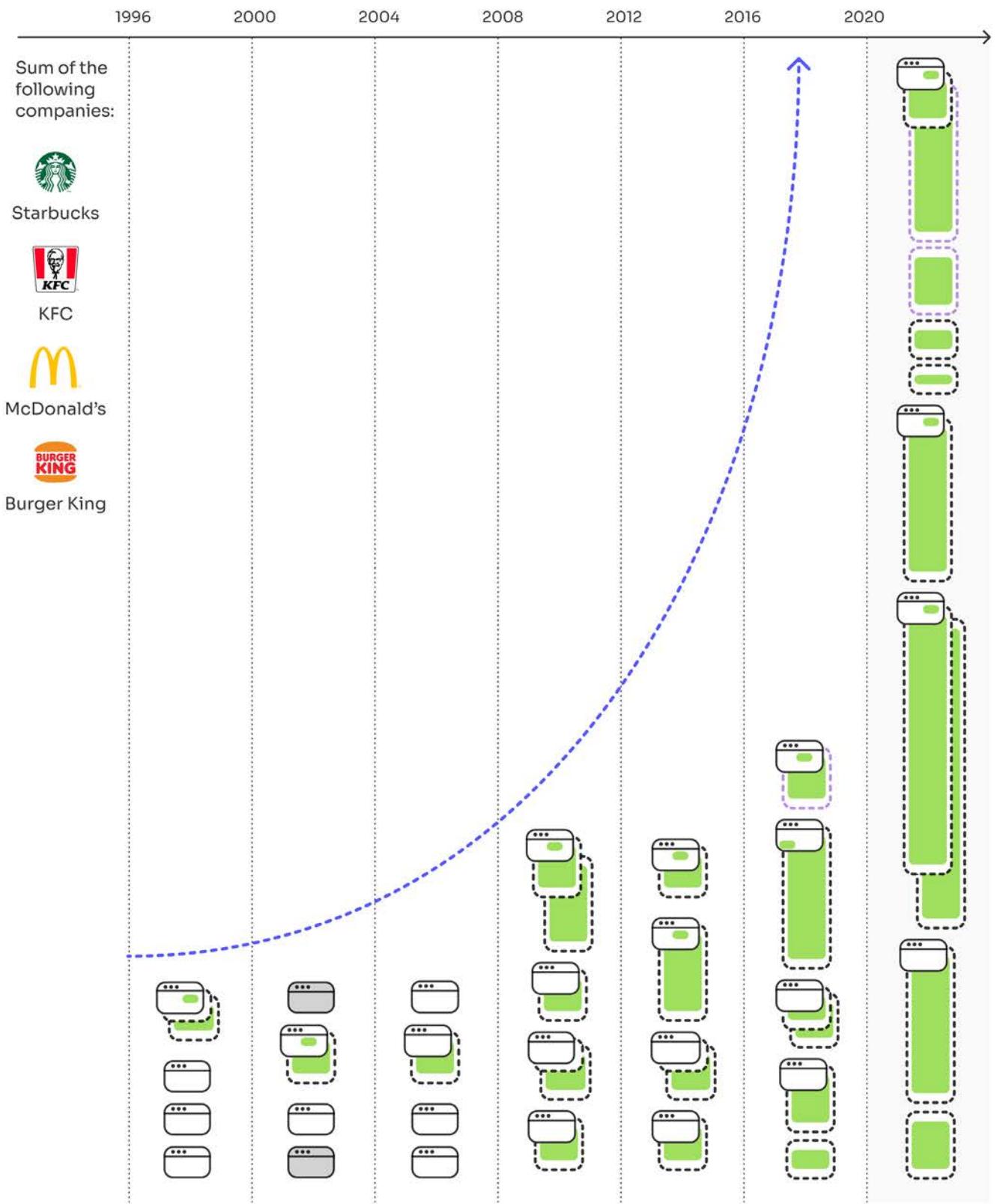


Q Finding 04

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.

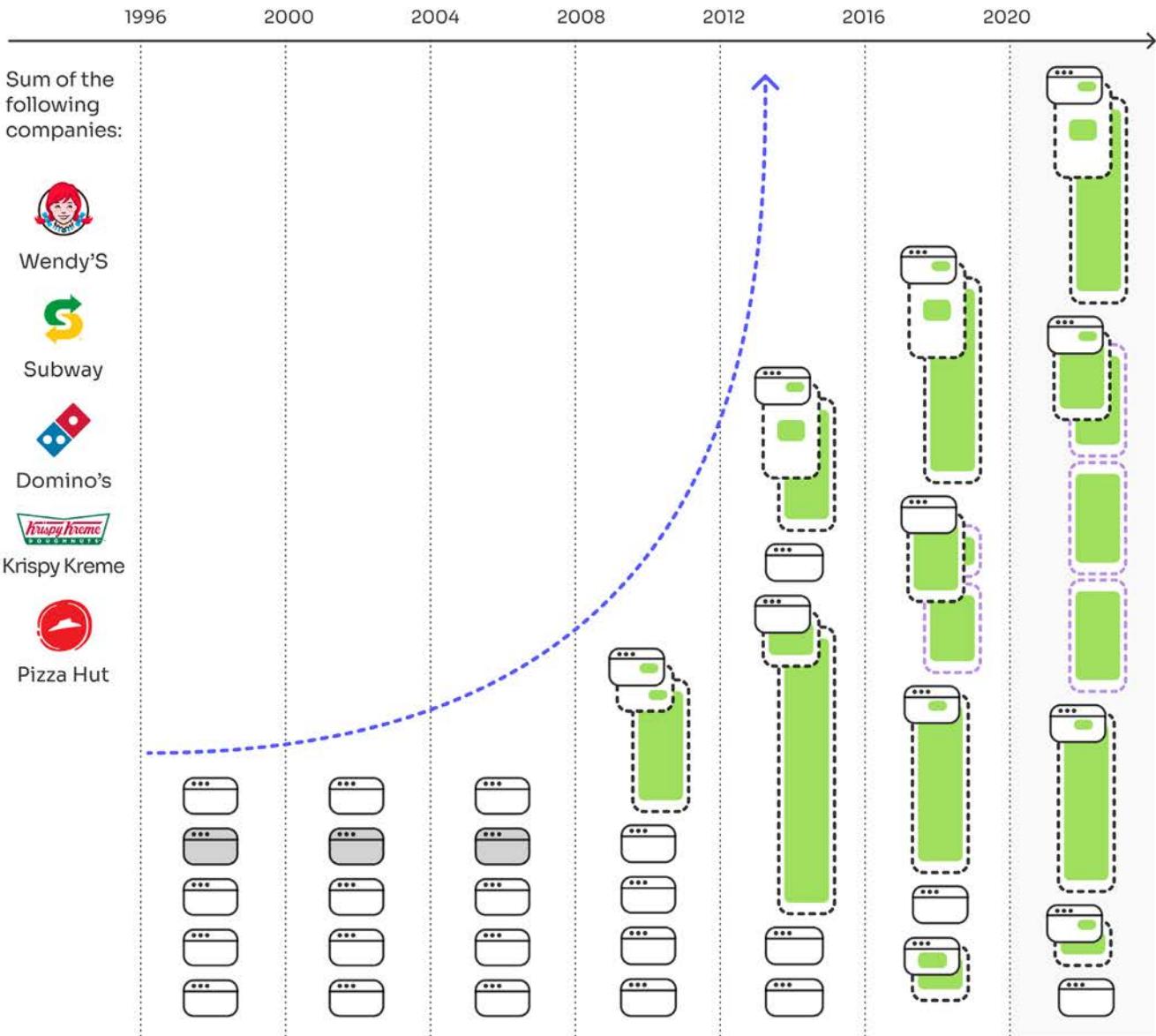
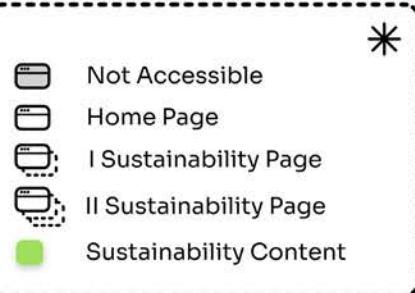




Finding 05

Amount of green content has increased exponentially

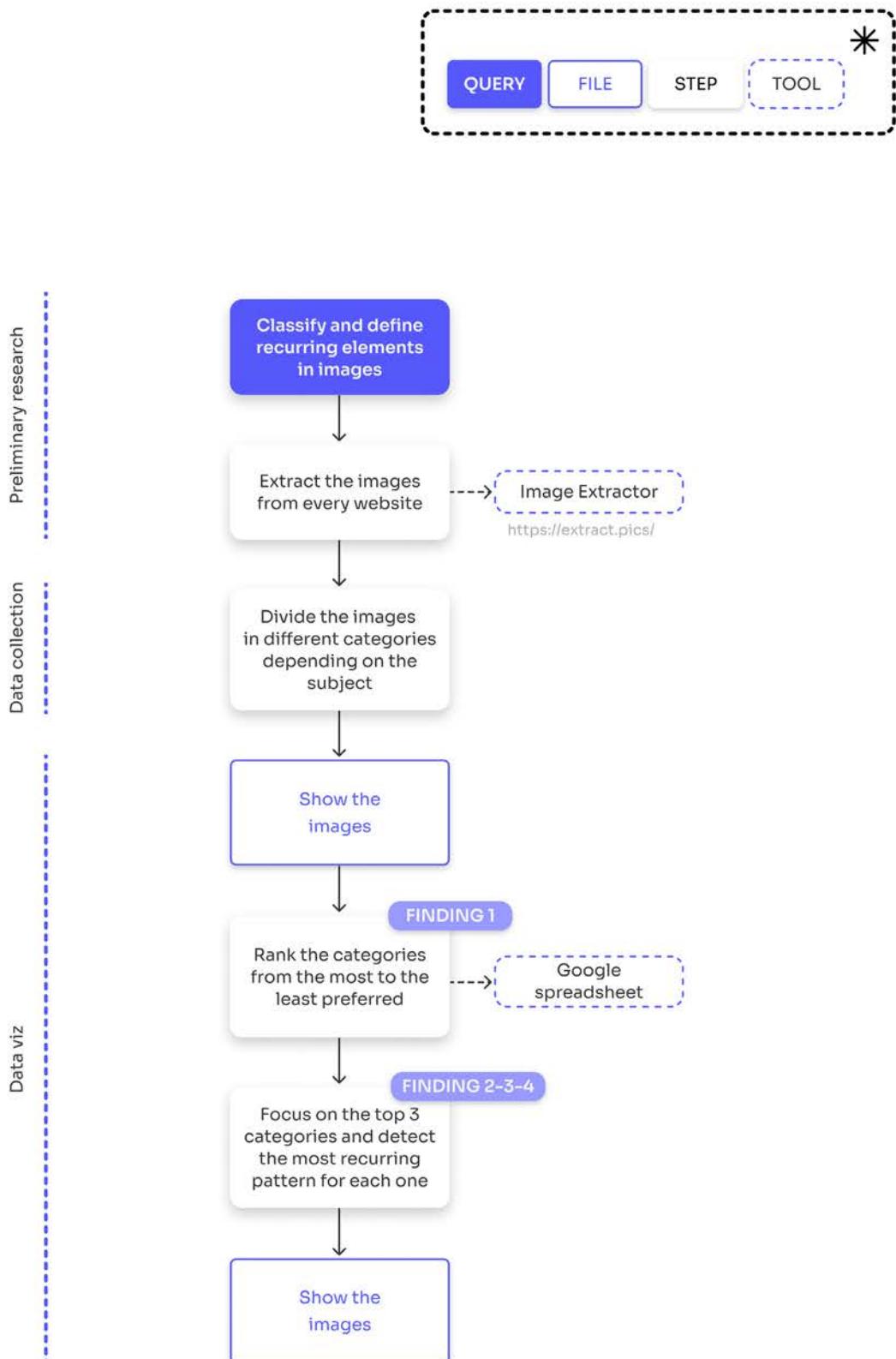
There is a clear difference in the amount of sustainability-related content between the years: overall, it has increased exponentially. It demonstrates a clear shift in brand values, which are increasingly moving towards a sustainable narrative.



→ QUESTION 02

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

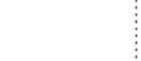
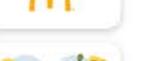
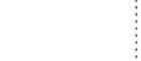
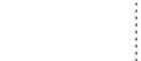
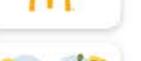
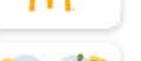
Images also greatly contribute to the green storytelling. In this step, all the pictures found in the sustainability sections were analysed and then mapped, according to the subject and the type of environment portrayed, in order to discover [recurring patterns and/or unique strategies](#).



→ 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.

	People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
McDonald's	             	                     	                 	                  	             	             	

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

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

40 —

	People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
Krispy Kreme	        	  	  				      

	People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
KFC	    	 	   				

	People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
Pizza hut							

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

People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						 Wendy's

People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						

People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						 Starbucks

People	Nature	Food	Animal	Architecture	Packaging	Other
						 Subway

→ Graph 02

Main visual categories chosen to portray environmental issues

Nature	Food	People	Architecture	Other	Animal	Packaging
 Domino's	 Burger King	 Mc Donalds	 Wendy's	 Krispy Kreme		
 Starbucks	 KFC					
 Subway						

Q 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.

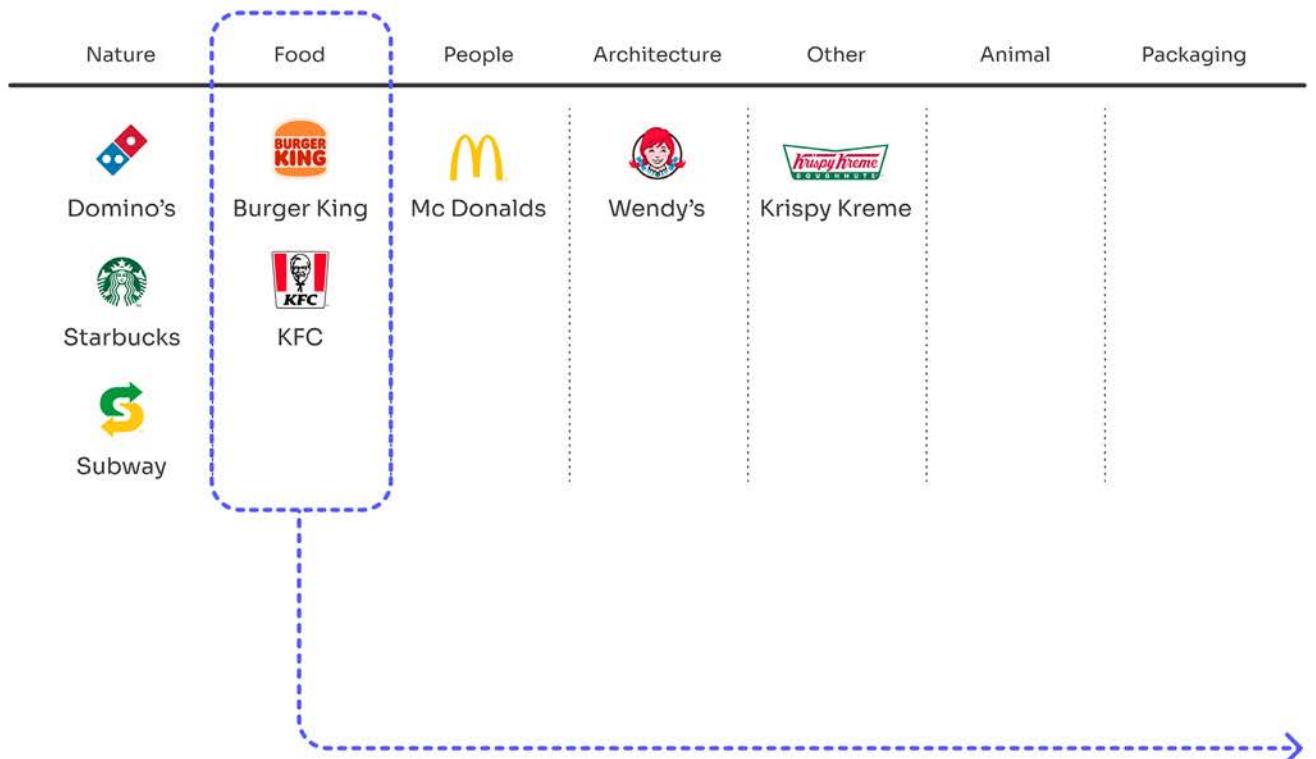
Q Finding 02

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	Renewable energy	Other
					
					
					
					
					



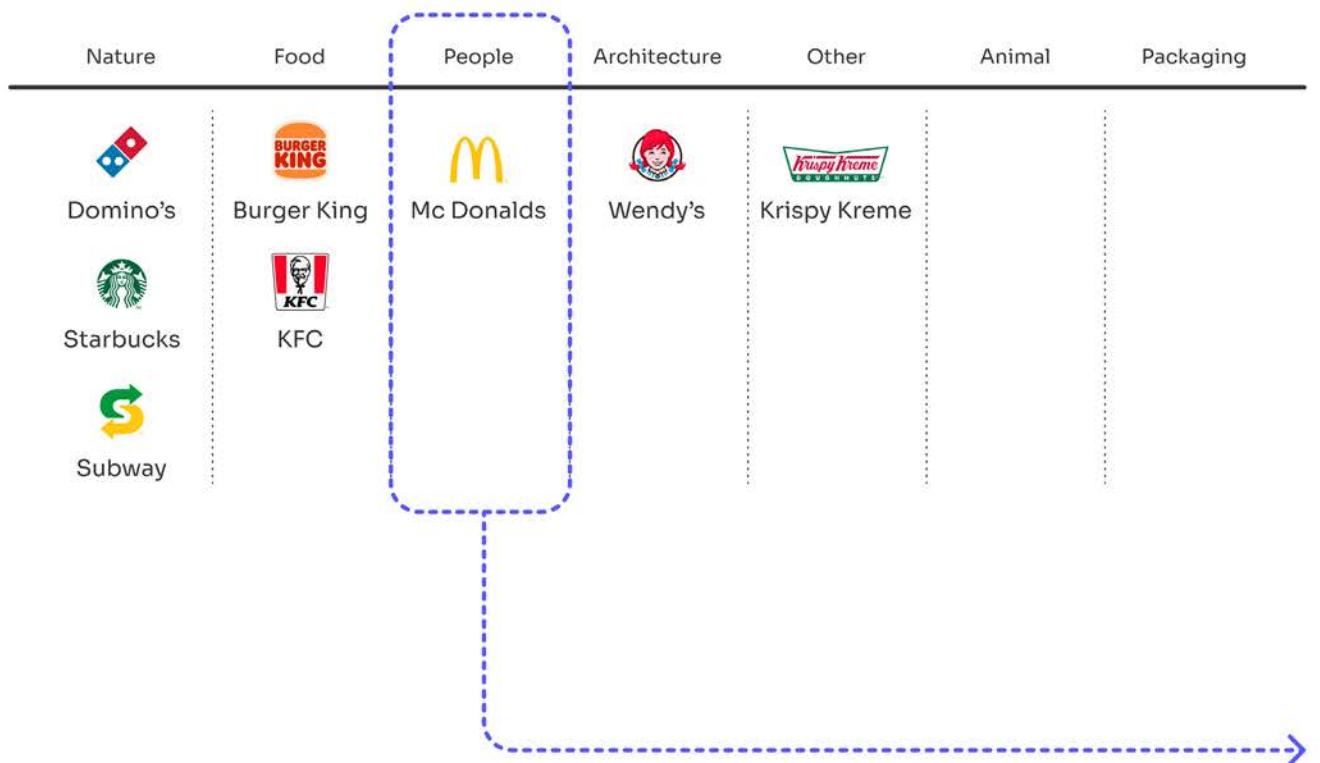
🔍 Finding 03

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



Q 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.

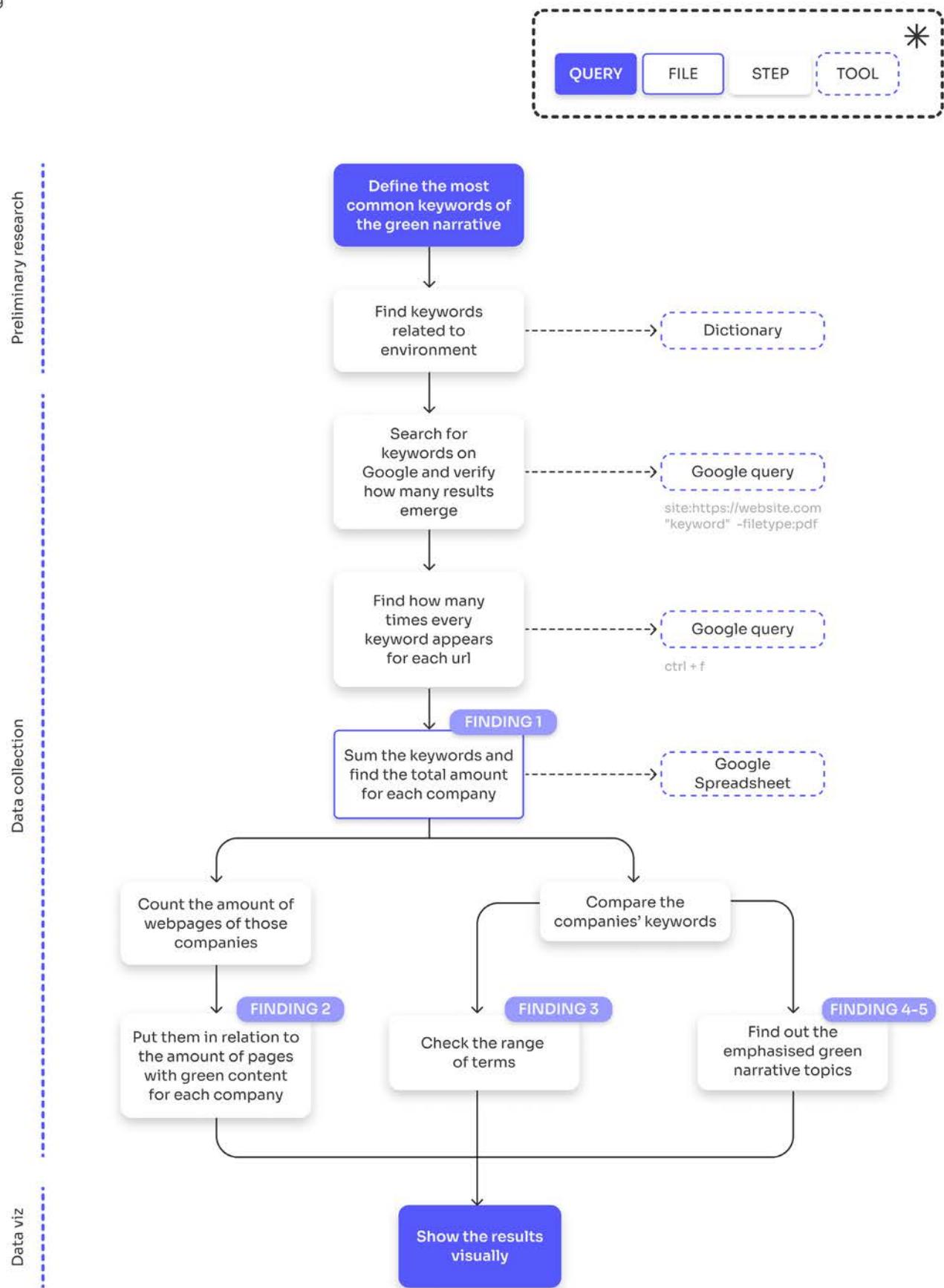
The final output is a list of [40 environment-related keywords](#) that are strongly connected to the fast food market and are frequently used in today's green narrative.

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





→ Graph 01

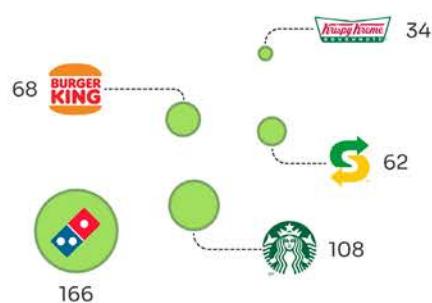
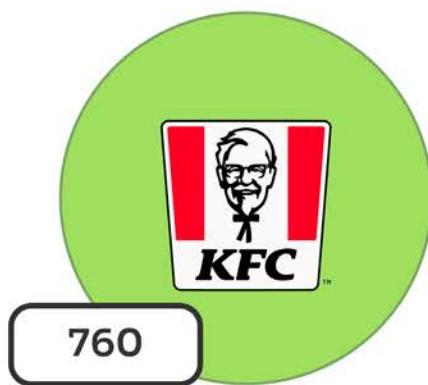
Amount of keywords about sustainability for each company's websites



 Finding 01

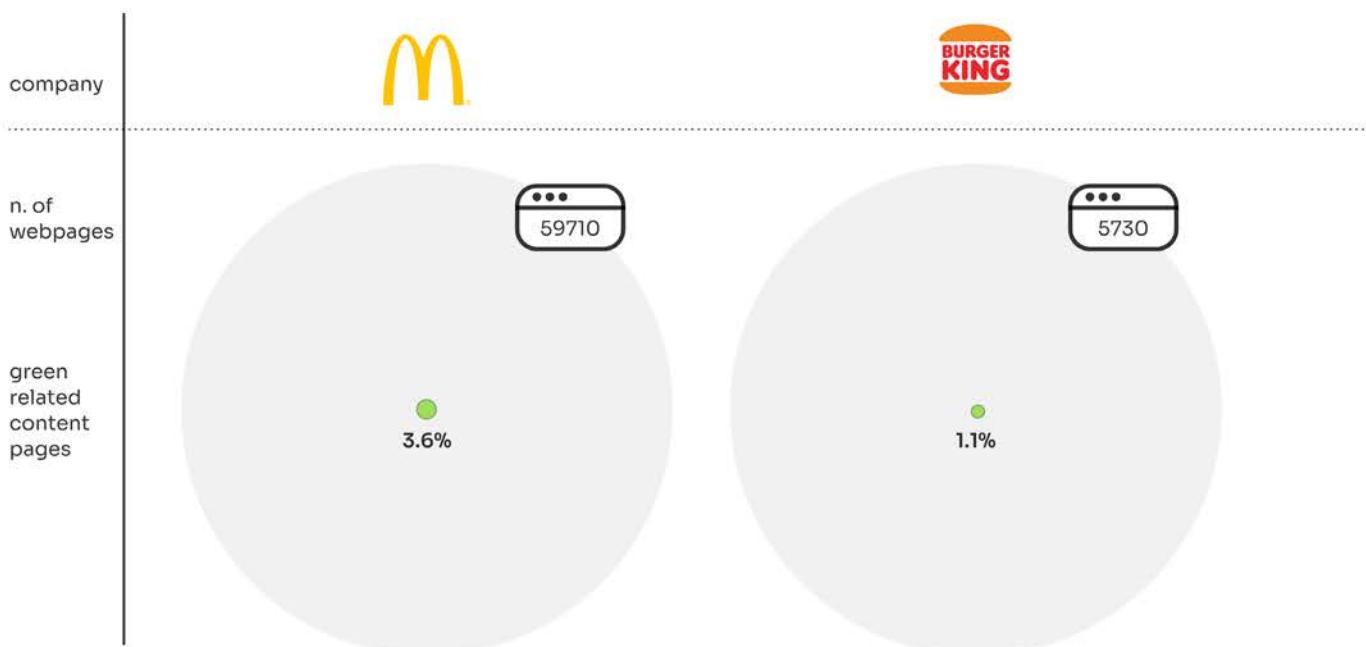
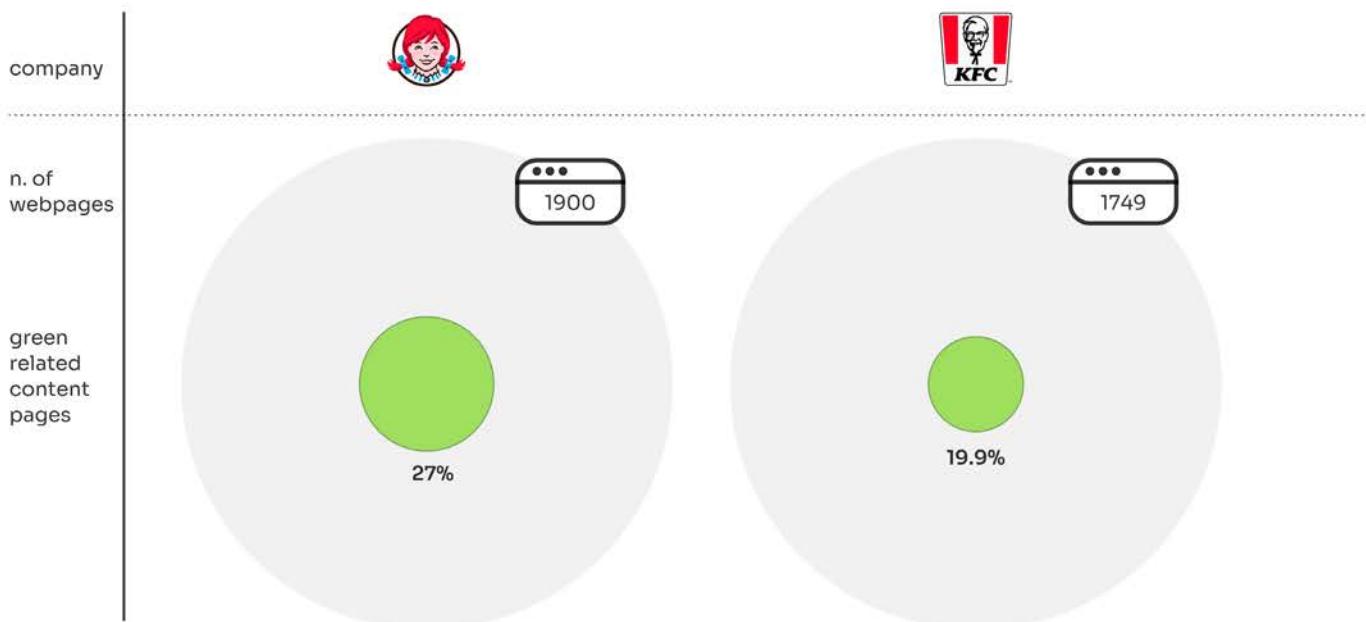
Biggest amount of keywords

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



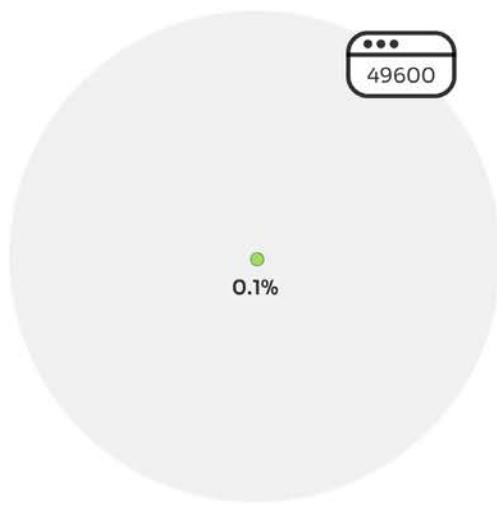
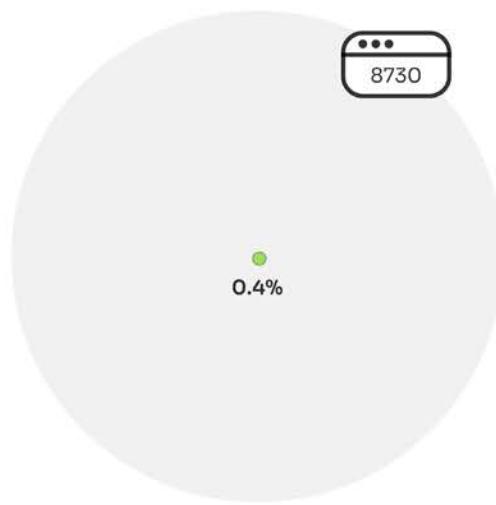
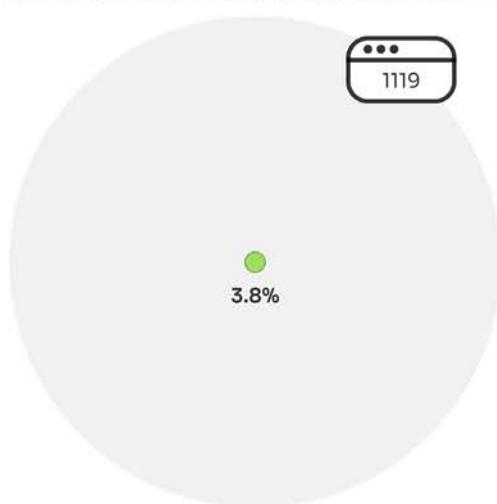
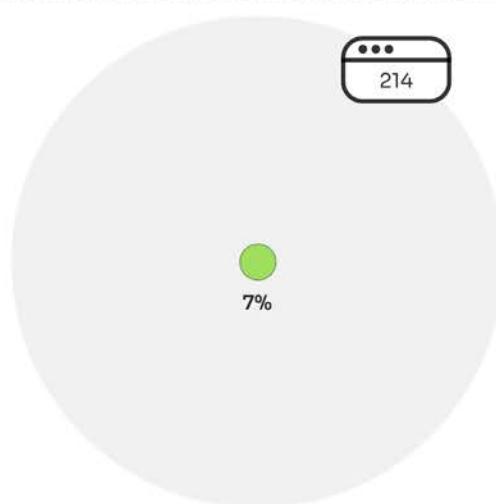
Finding 02

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%).

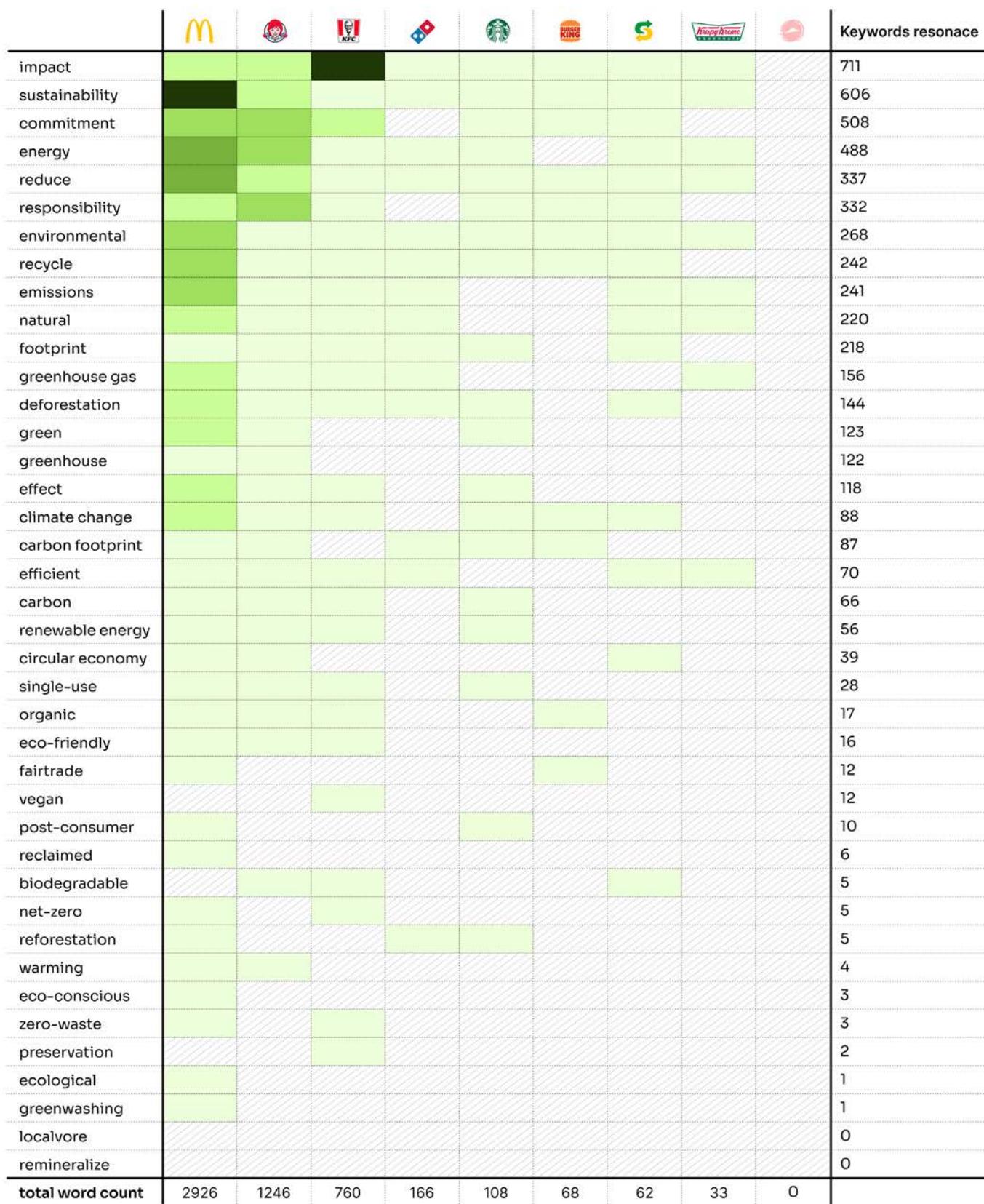
This data indicates a lower dispersion of content in favor of [richer sustainability](#) sections.

Q3 → Which keywords resonate the most on fast food websites regarding companies' commitment to environment?

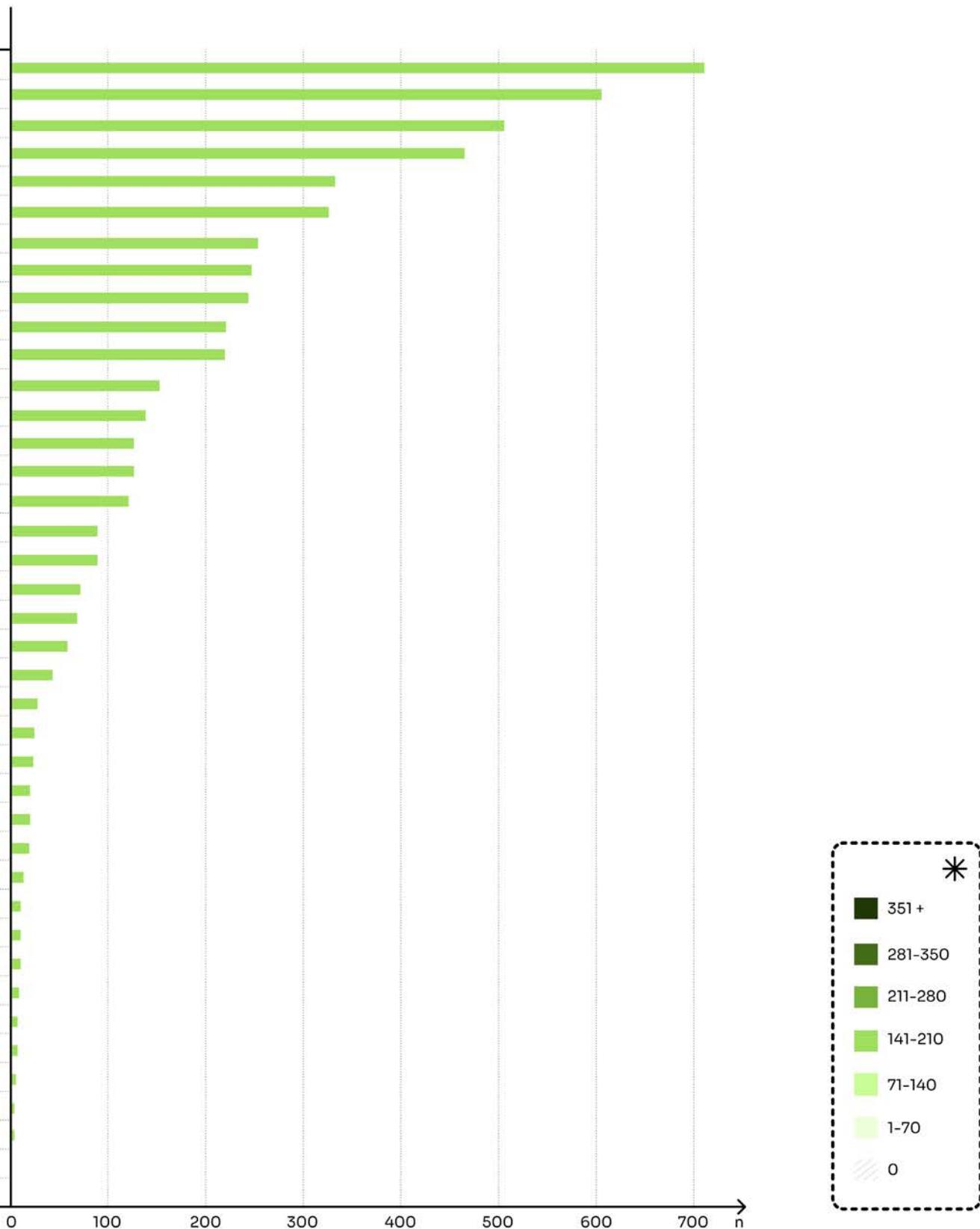


→ Graph 03

Recurring keywords to spread environmental commitment



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

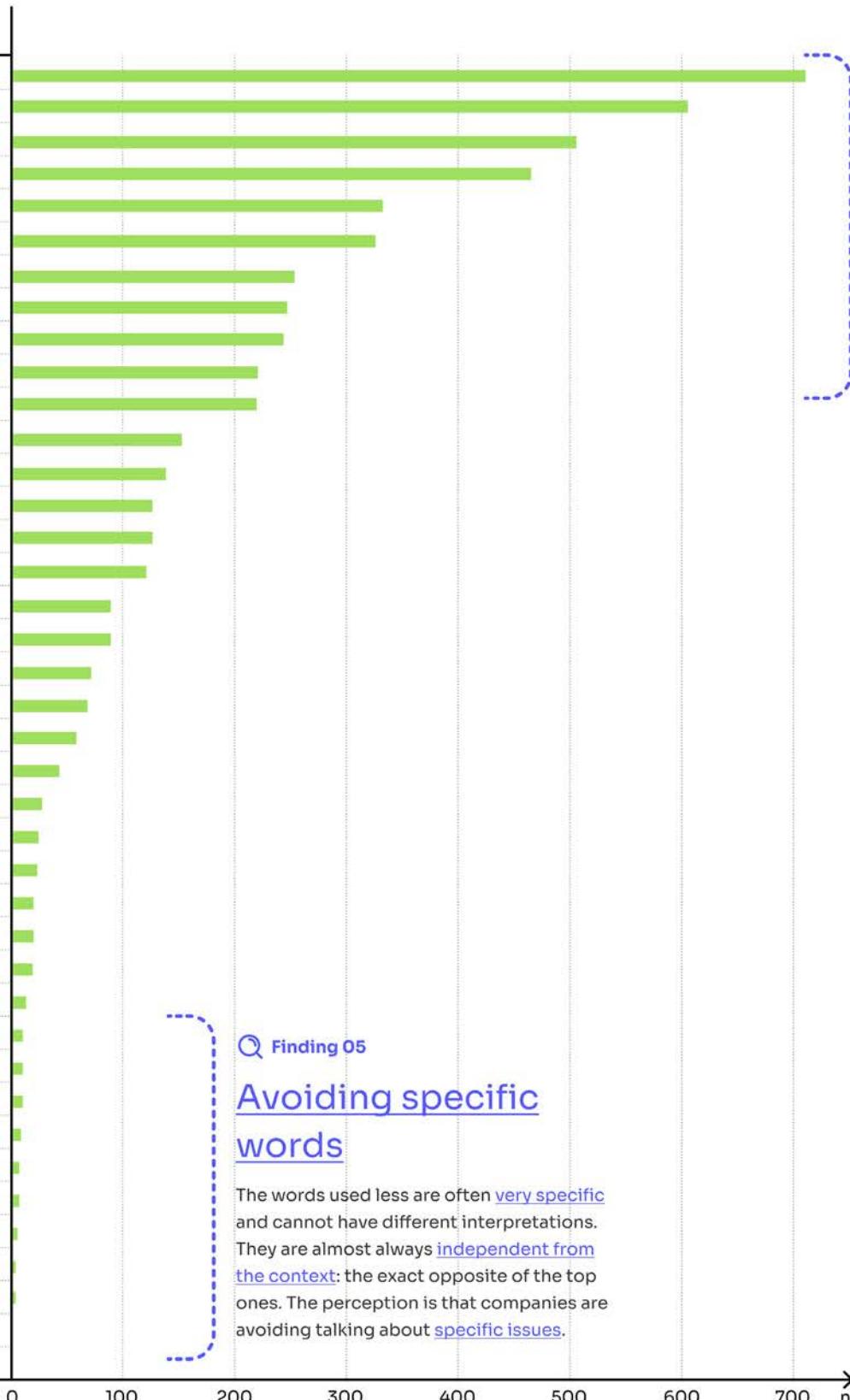


🔍 Finding 03

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!