



Sustainability: mapping the media & public conversations

From accusations of greenwashing to the
role of misinformation, we explore the
comms landscape around sustainability

Understanding the conversational landscape is essential to the right messaging

With each successive year, sustainability becomes a greater focus for legislators, the media and audiences themselves. Since the pandemic, however, the views around the topic have become more intensely polarized and politicized, even as the cost-of-living crisis emerges to confuse the picture further.

It all means that brands and institutions alike are being held to a higher standard in their messaging and actions. So it's more important than ever for professionals in the PR & Comms space to understand how the topic is being discussed, the potential pitfalls around issues such as greenwashing, and an in-depth understanding of the audiences who ultimately receive this messaging.

In exploring this topic, and surfacing the kinds of insights useful to crafting tactical responses and longer-term communications strategies, we'll explore:

















1. Trends in the sustainability conversation
2. The reputation of brands & industries
3. Greenwashing & misinformation
4. The audiences of sustainability
5. How sustainability is spoken about

Approach

Data Collection Period:

Jan 1st 2023 – Feb 19th 2024

Channels:

 Online News	 X
 Television	 Reddit
 Radio	 YouTube
 Podcasts	 Blogs
 Facebook	 Forums
 Instagram	 Amazon Reviews
 TikTok	 Tumblr
 Pinterest	 Google Search

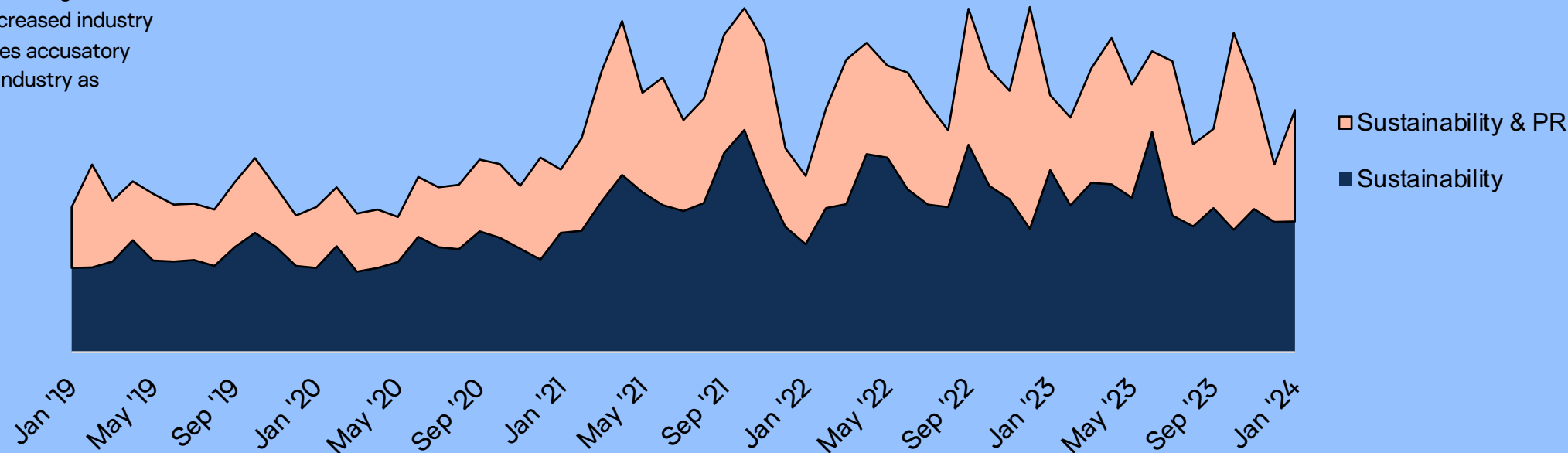
Markets/Languages:

Global data collection
Analysis in English-language

Of mounting importance to the world – and to PR & comms pros

By mapping social mentions, we can get a sense of how discourse around the topic has grown more of less continuously until 2021 – at which point it has sustained at an elevated level.

Against this backdrop, we also see a gradual upswing of mentions of the term alongside PR or Comms. Part of this reflects increased industry participation, but it also captures accusatory language levelled towards the industry as ‘greenwashers’.



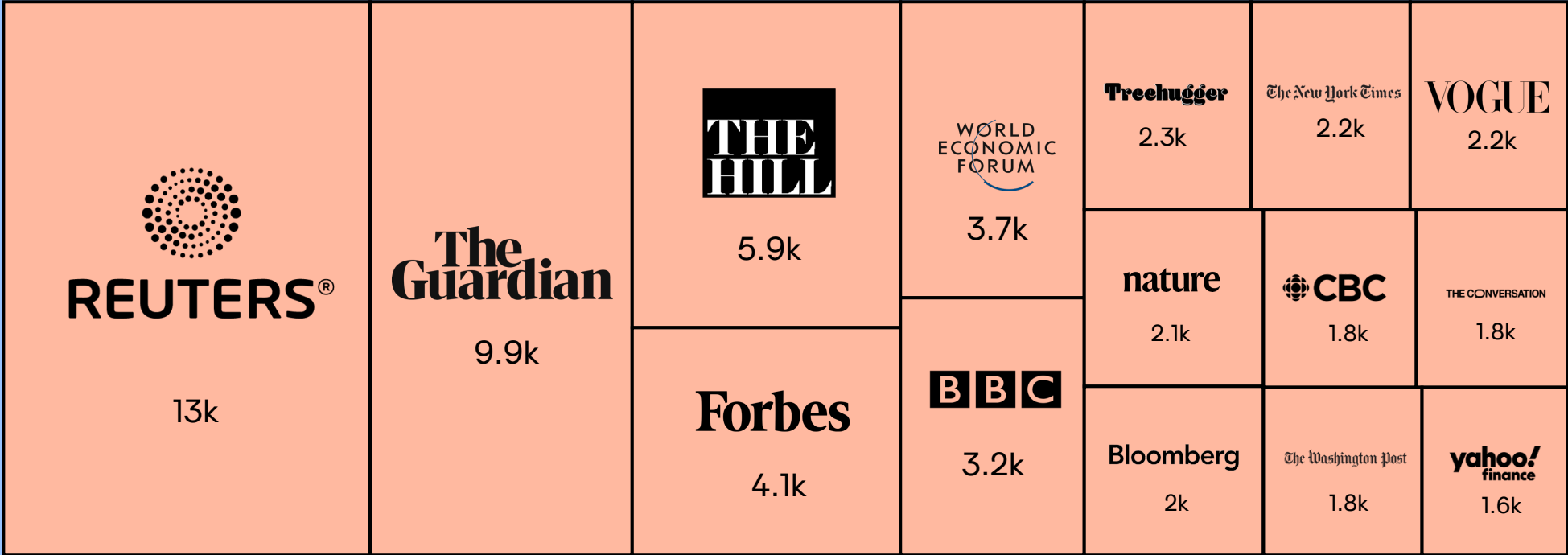
X mentions of sustainability and its association with PR between Jan 2019 and Jan 2024. Source: Pulsar TRENDS

Reuters and The Guardian account for a huge proportion of total media conversation

There's a left-of-centre slant to many of publications within the sustainability conversation, suggesting that the burgeoning backlash against the concept is yet to be reflected in column inches.

We see how sustainability is as much defined as a lifestyle choice as it is a driver of the news cycle, hence, the popularity of Vogue, which emphasises sustainability practices

to an extent that edges out scientific and economic publications like Nature and Bloomberg.



The most shared media by credibility in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

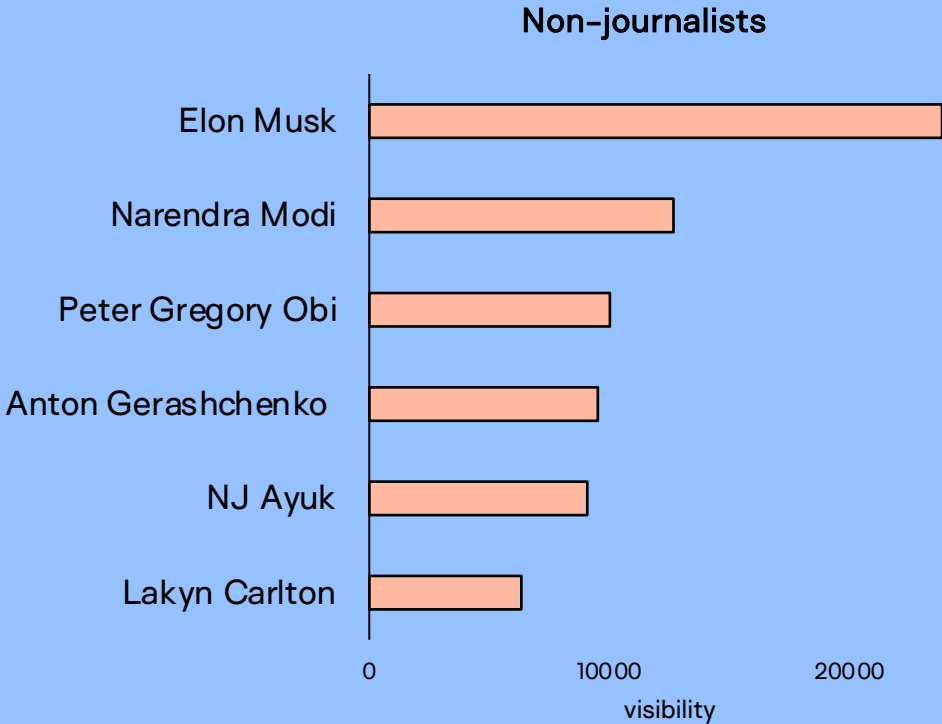
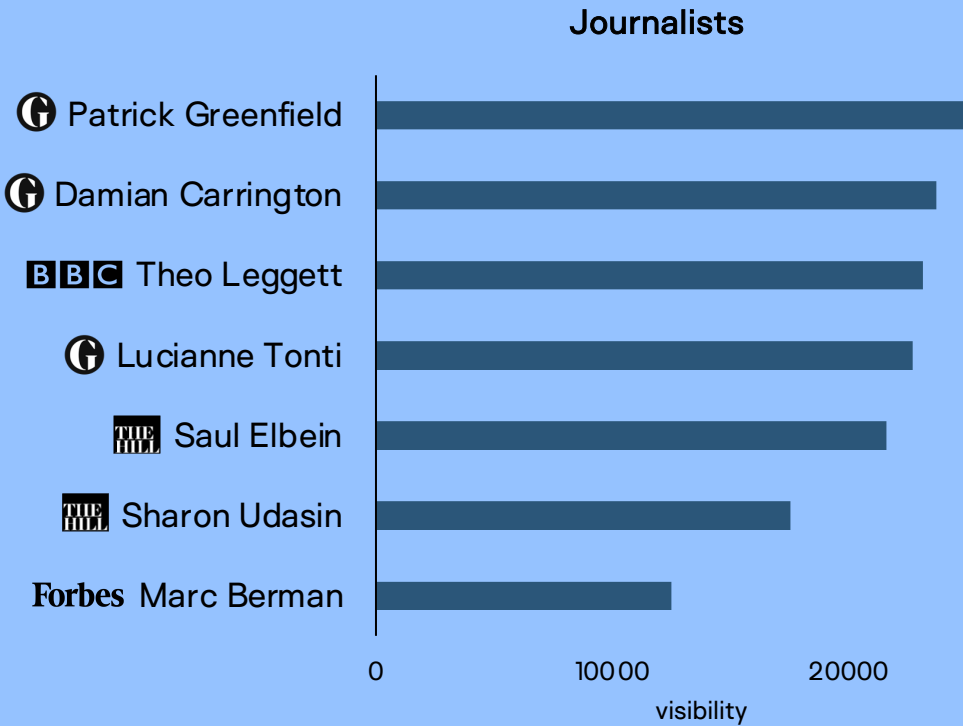
British journalists have disproportionate impact on global conversation

In a global conversation, we see UK-based journalists assume an outsized influence. Their top two pieces spotlight major flaws in current climate efforts, resonating strongly with brands and consumers.

Elsewhere, journalists like Leggett and Elbein focus on on everyday climate impacts, and issues like fruit shortages and living costs.

Politicians also tend to dominate a topic tied to standards of living and largescale initiatives.

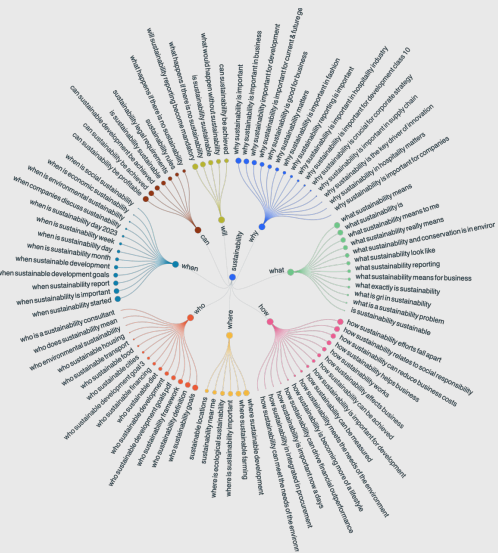
Elon Musk, however, emerges as top voice both for his EV expertise, and his lambasting 'ineffective' methods of defining sustainability. Eco-stylist Lakyn Carlton, meanwhile, suggests an alternative route to influence, tying personal expression to the broader sustainability context.



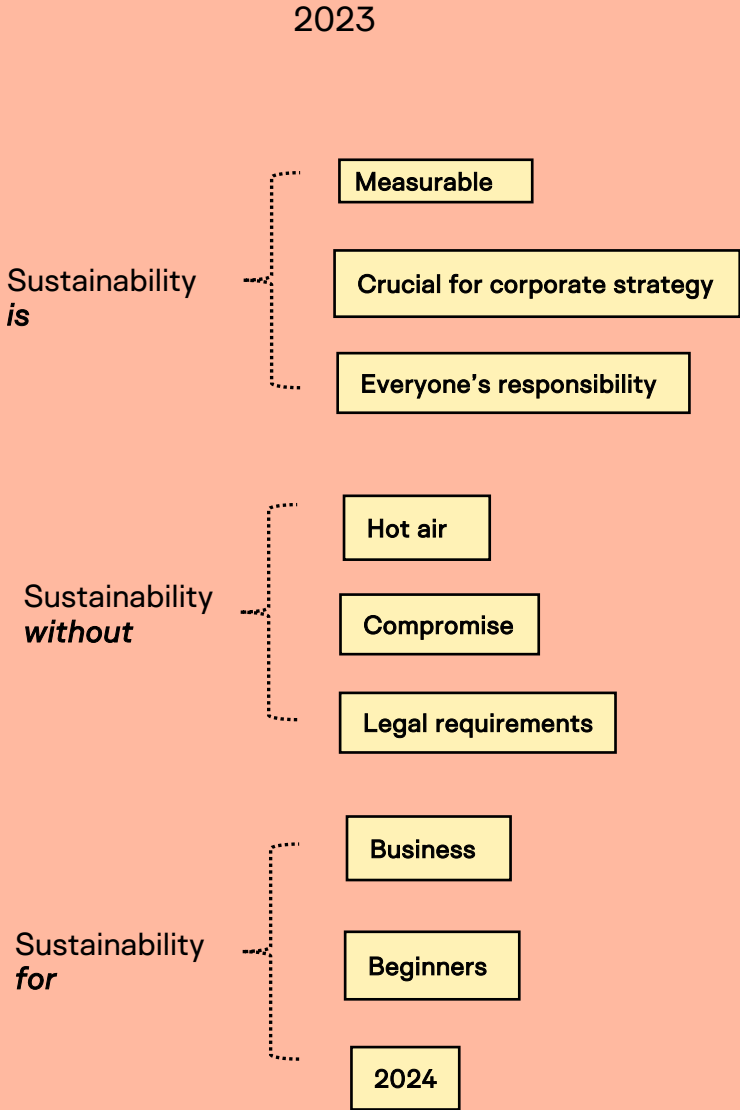
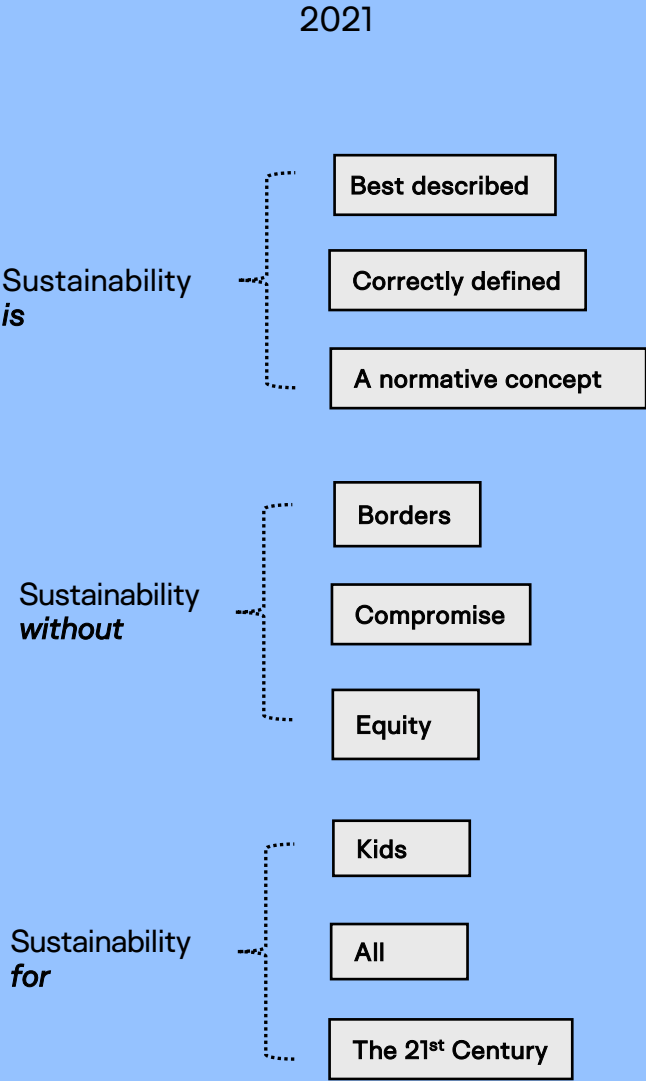
The most engaged influencers in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024.
Source: Pulsar TRAC

Search data reflects drive for action over words

Comparing 2021 to 2023, the focus shifts from broad definitions to practical, adaptable actions at the individual level, best exemplified by the search strings that include phrases like ‘sustainability without compromise’ or ‘sustainability is everyone's responsibility’.



The most-searched queries on Google related to sustainability in 2021 vs 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC

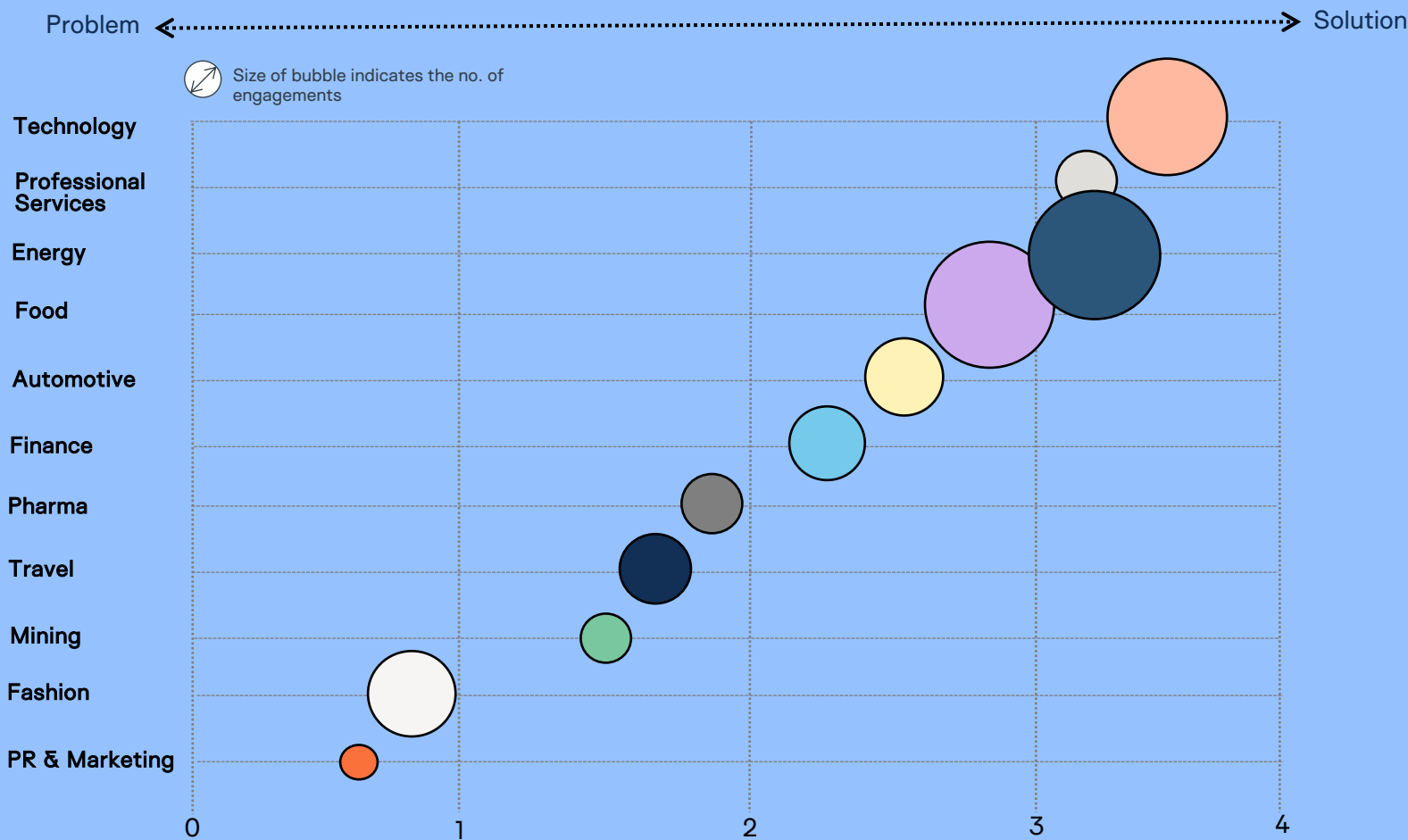


PR & marketing viewed as more problematic than mining & fashion

Mapping industry sectors through a problem/solution lens gives us in-depth views of how each industry is viewed by global audiences.

This visualization reflects a positivity around technology, which is predictable, but also around energy, which is perhaps less so. Optimism around sustainable and novel energy sources is at present outstripping negativity and blame around more transitional sources of energy.

Less positive is the conversation around PR & Marketing. Part of this is due to increasing suspicions of greenwashing. Individuals attack both specific examples of PR firms representing certain clients, and also use phrases like 'PR' or 'marketing' as catch-all condemnations. For all that, this is also the smallest sector featured – can advertisers and marketers assume greater prominence and impact by acting as pressure groups on brands?



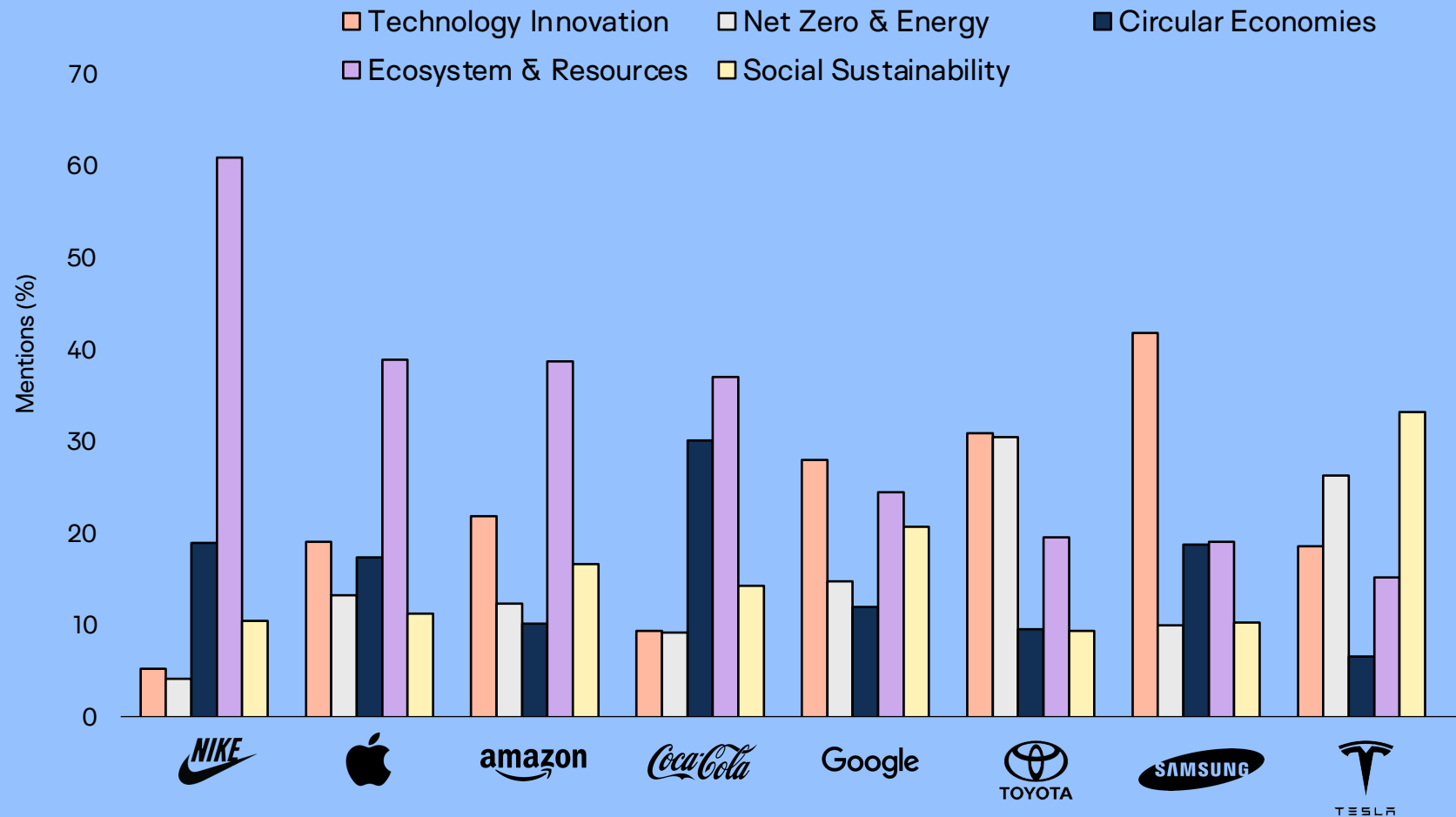
Sector breakdown by problem vs solution SOV in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Brands project associations with with either tech innovation or ecosystems & resorurces

Clearly, the sustainability conversation differs from brand to brand, not only with regards to their product lines but also the concepts and initiatives they're linked to.

Ecosystem & Resources are unsurprisingly popular topics in reference to retail brands such as Nike, Apple and Amazon, given the intersection between sustainability initiatives and workers' rights, particularly in the global south.

Car manufacturers Tesla and Toyota also stand out, experiencing a surge in Net Zero and Emissions associations. While the former receives a mixed press reception as manufacturing practices (and the company CEO) attract increasing scrutiny, the latter faces accusations of greenwashing for its perceived lack of electrification efforts.



Analysis of the top brands mentioned in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

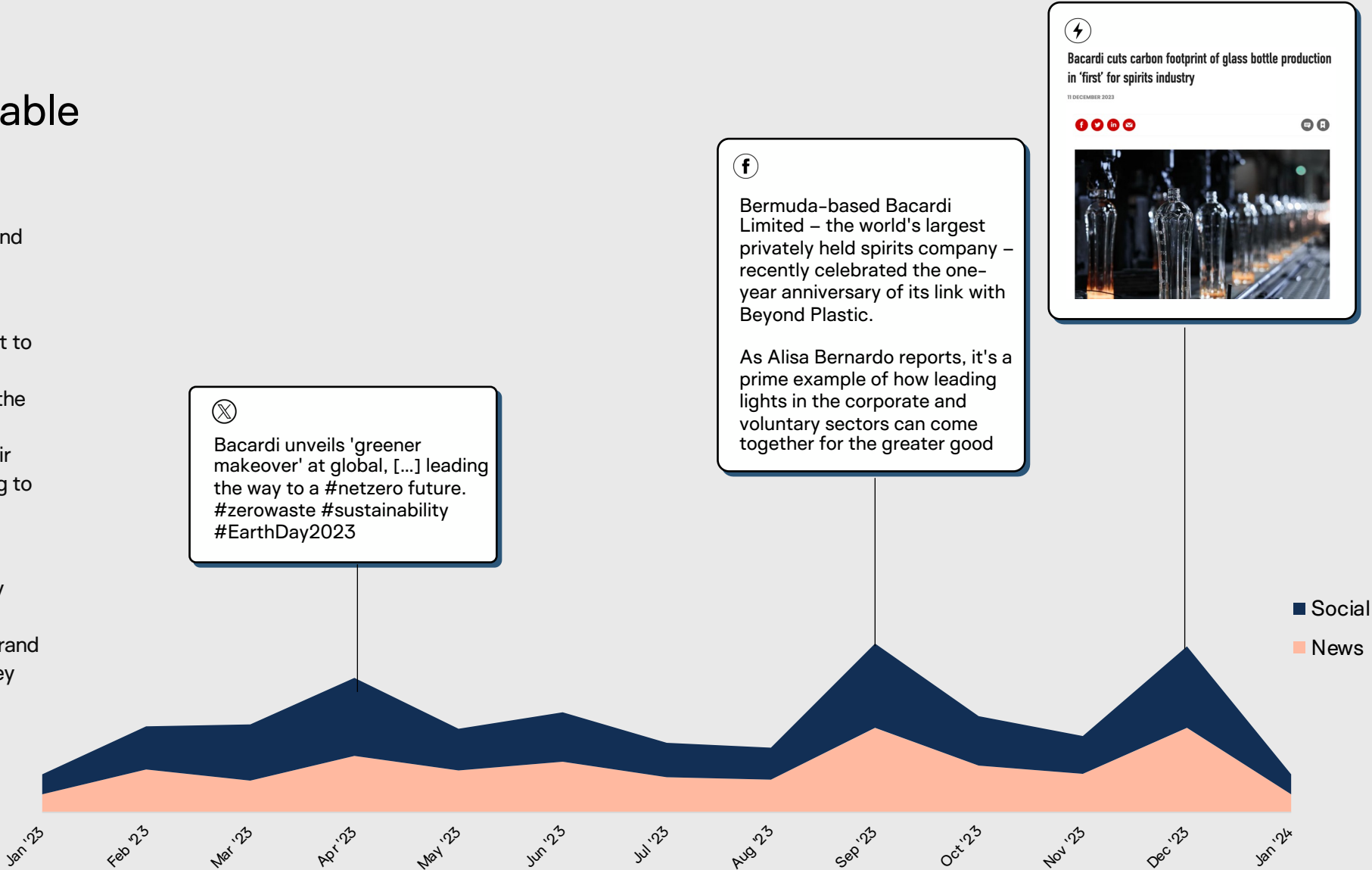
Brand case study

How Bacardi magnified attention on its sustainable initiatives

Bacardi were a brand well known before public and media attention swung decisively behind sustainability as an idea.

Since then, however, an unwavering commitment to sustainable practices has not only garnered significant media attention but has also shaped the discourse in their favor. Consumers increasingly admire their dedication, especially evident in their recent transition from traditional glass packaging to innovative hydrogen-fueled bottles, a move that epitomizes their environmental consciousness.

As more and more brands embrace sustainability within their supply chains or manufacturing, amplifying these elements of your strategy via brand partnerships and media releases – so long as they are authentic – appears a winning stratagem.



Social v News mentions of Bacardi in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Jan 31, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Brand case study

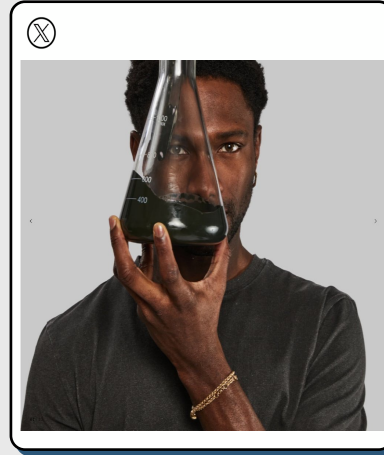
Vollebak: how a nascent brand became identified with sustainable values

Vollebak produce the sort of 'clothes from the future' you might find in a William Gibson novel. And their position as a leader in luxury sustainable fashion has solidified among consumers seeking longevity and discreet opulence. How come?

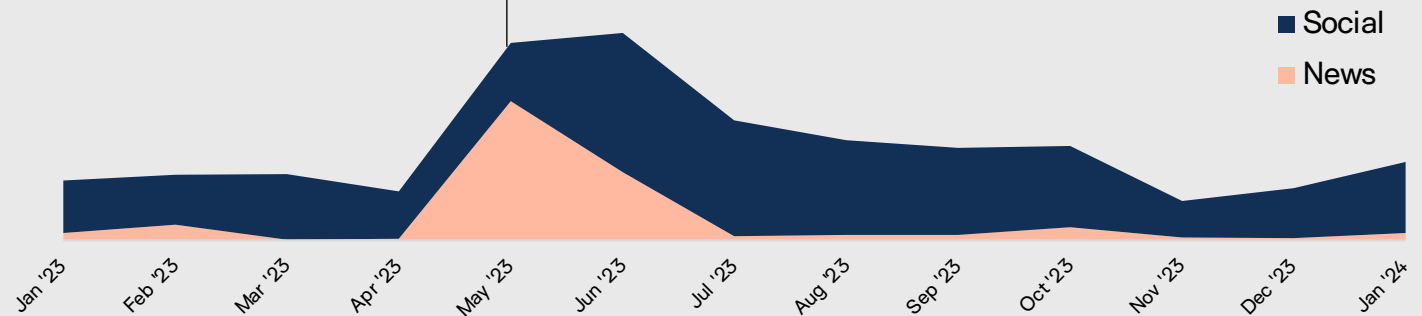
Their collaboration with architecture brand Big to construct an off-grid house in Nova Scotia was a PR win for the brand given how it typified their core value of "design for the next century, not the next season".

Amplifying one of their distinctive products at right time also proved good strategy. Media coverage of a t-shirt crafted from an unexpected material – wood – helped produce sustained social and audience interest in the brand.

Vollebak's integration of sci-fi elements alongside sustainable materials and high-end pricing underscores how aligning your core brand values with sustainability in a logical, organic way can not only further environmental credentials, but also massively grow brand awareness.



“
Always good to see more brands like @vollebak using sustainable natural fibres. But its not the first ever T shirt made from wood. [...]



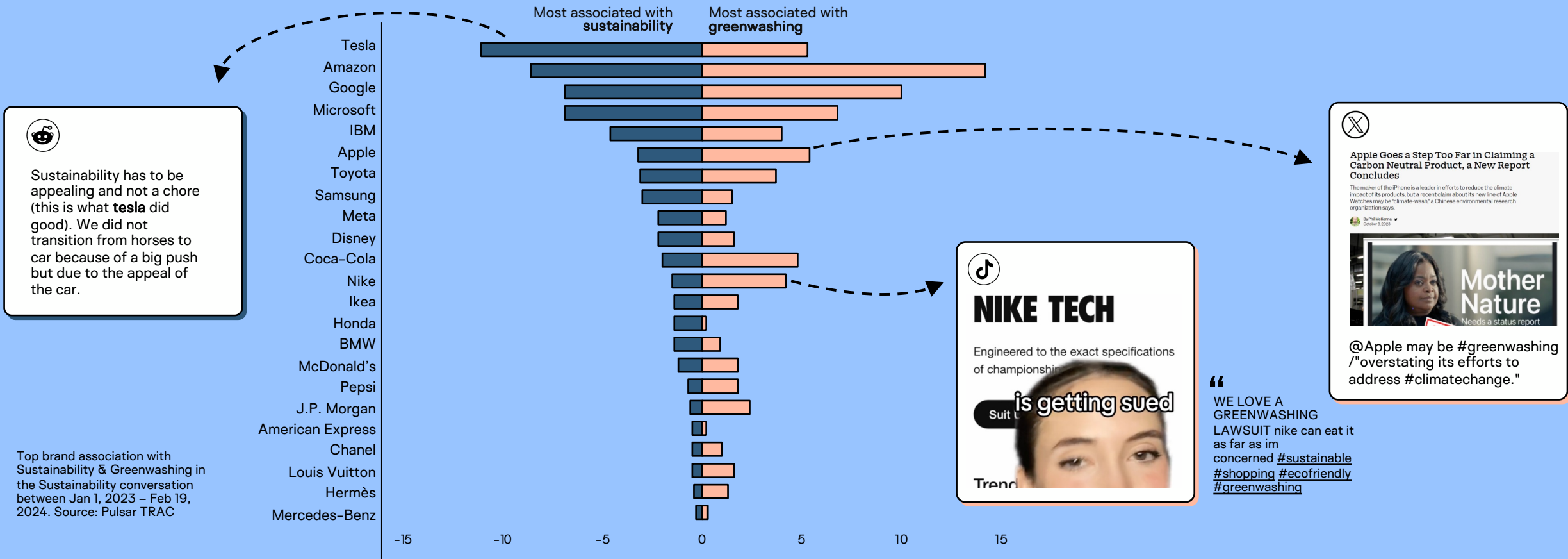
Social vs News mentions of Vollebak in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1 – Dec 15, 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC

The brands most tied to sustainability ...and greenwashing

As many comms & PR professionals will attest, brands appear far more likely to hit headlines and be discussed by audiences for the sustainability practices that *aren't* met, or else fall short of community standards.

Tesla is the notable exception. For all the controversy that attaches to its CEO's stewardship of X, it is viewed overwhelmingly positively by a dedicated audience as a proponent of a kind of win-win sustainability, in which luxury, eco-consciousness, transgression and sense of community can all reside within one company.

The correlation between the brands most mentioned in the greenwashing conversations, and those featuring prominently in the overall sustainability conversations, affirms that many of these conversations are negative. As we will explore, however, these are not always rooted firmly in fact, but also in anti-ESG narratives propelled by misinformation spreaders.



Top brand association with Sustainability & Greenwashing in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

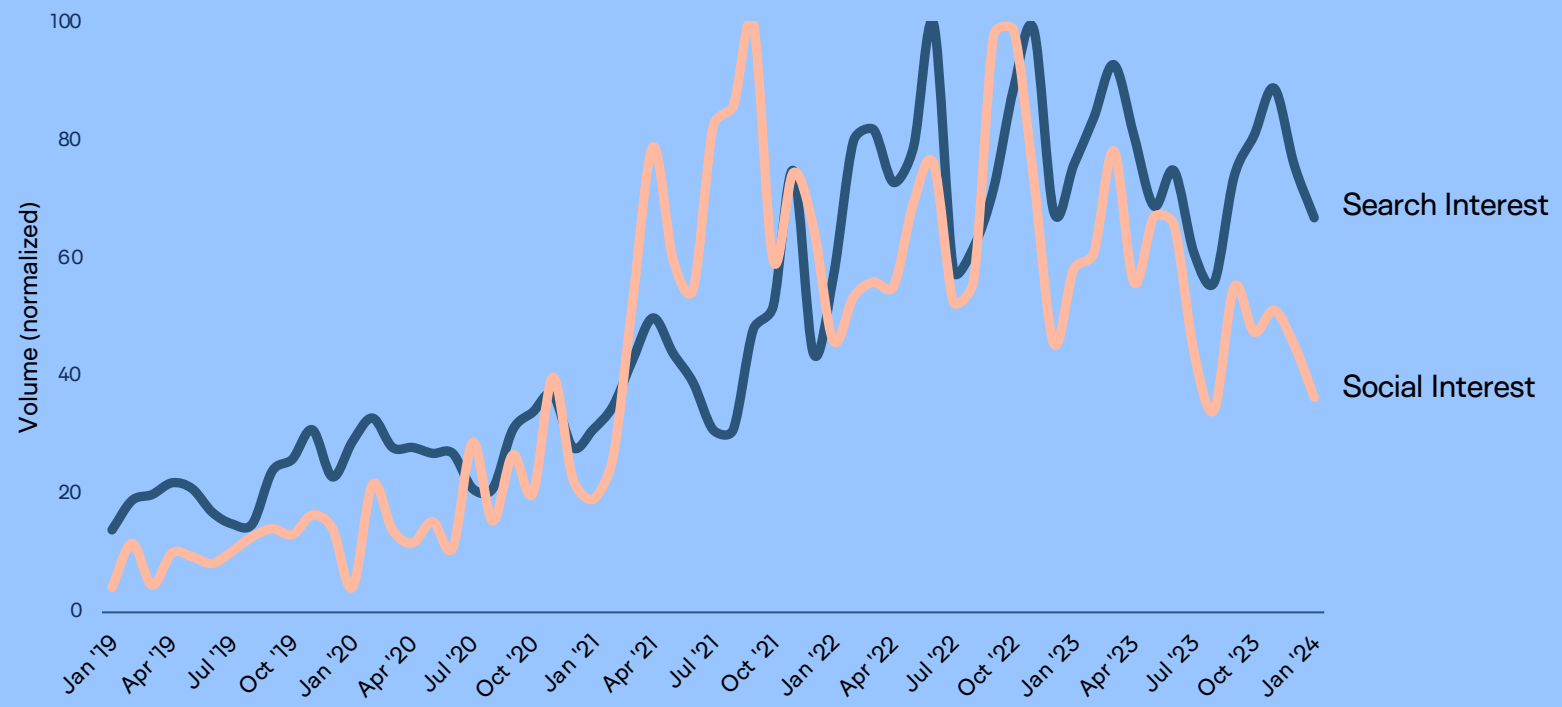
Greenwashing soars as a topic over time, as audiences turn sceptical

Greenwashing is tightly intertwined with how brands manage their image and reputation in the sustainability landscape. As discussions evolve, so do nuanced perceptions, including concepts like ‘green hushing’ and greenwashing

Until 2022, we see a continual rise in both social conversation *about* and search interest *in* greenwashing,

So what was behind the subsequent plateau? One there might be that audiences reached a saturation point, with a high percentage of environmentally-minded individual already aware of the phrase.

The other points towards the cost-of-living crisis. Price-gouging and growing inequality has become a more urgent cause to take up for many who might once have posted about greenwashing.



Greenwashing X mentions and search volume in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2019 – Jan 31, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

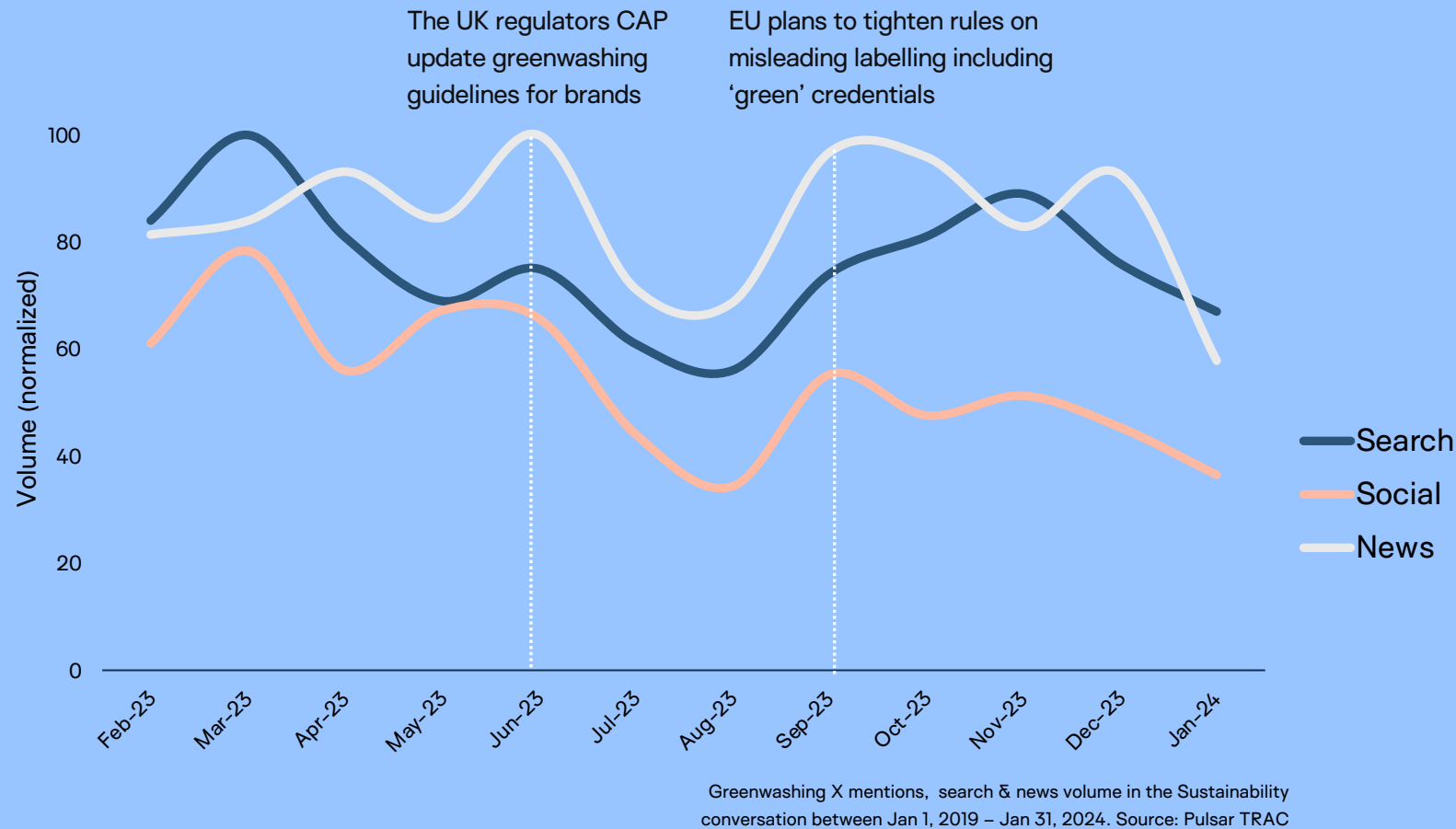
Audiences talk less about ‘greenwashing’, even as the media writes more about it than ever

2023 reveals a widening gap between audience engagement in greenwashing, and how often the topic is mentioned within the media.

One potential reason for this is that the media is moving at a slower pace than audiences, and that now ‘greenwashing’ has been brought into the lexicon of corporations and intuitions, the activists driving conversation are employing different means of expression. Extinction Rebellion, for instance, do not appear to have employed the phrase on social channels since 2021.

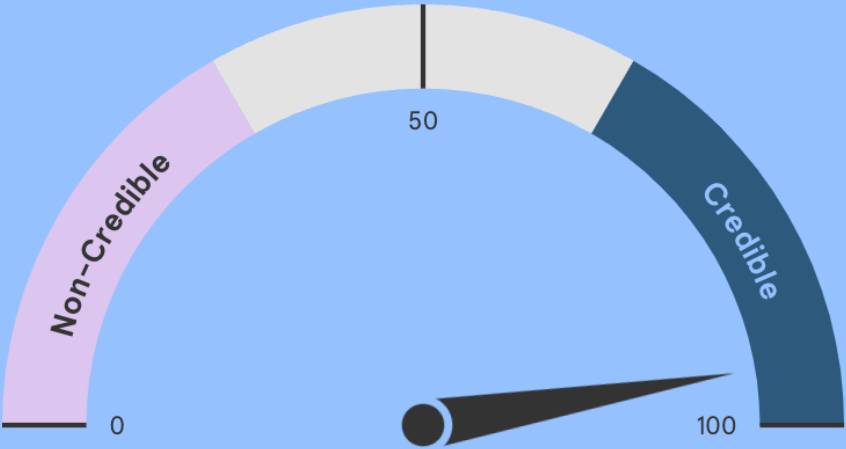
There is another aspect to this, which is that certain types of greenwashing content are simply more viral than others. Major brands being called out for violating commitments, for instance, are far more likely to generate largescale engagement than more recent news items, which reflect a consensus that greenwashing exerts a negative impact.

Additionally, a higher percentage of greenwashing posts in 2023–24 have been focused on changes in legislation, which is engaged with smaller, tighter-knit communities outside of mainstream discourse.

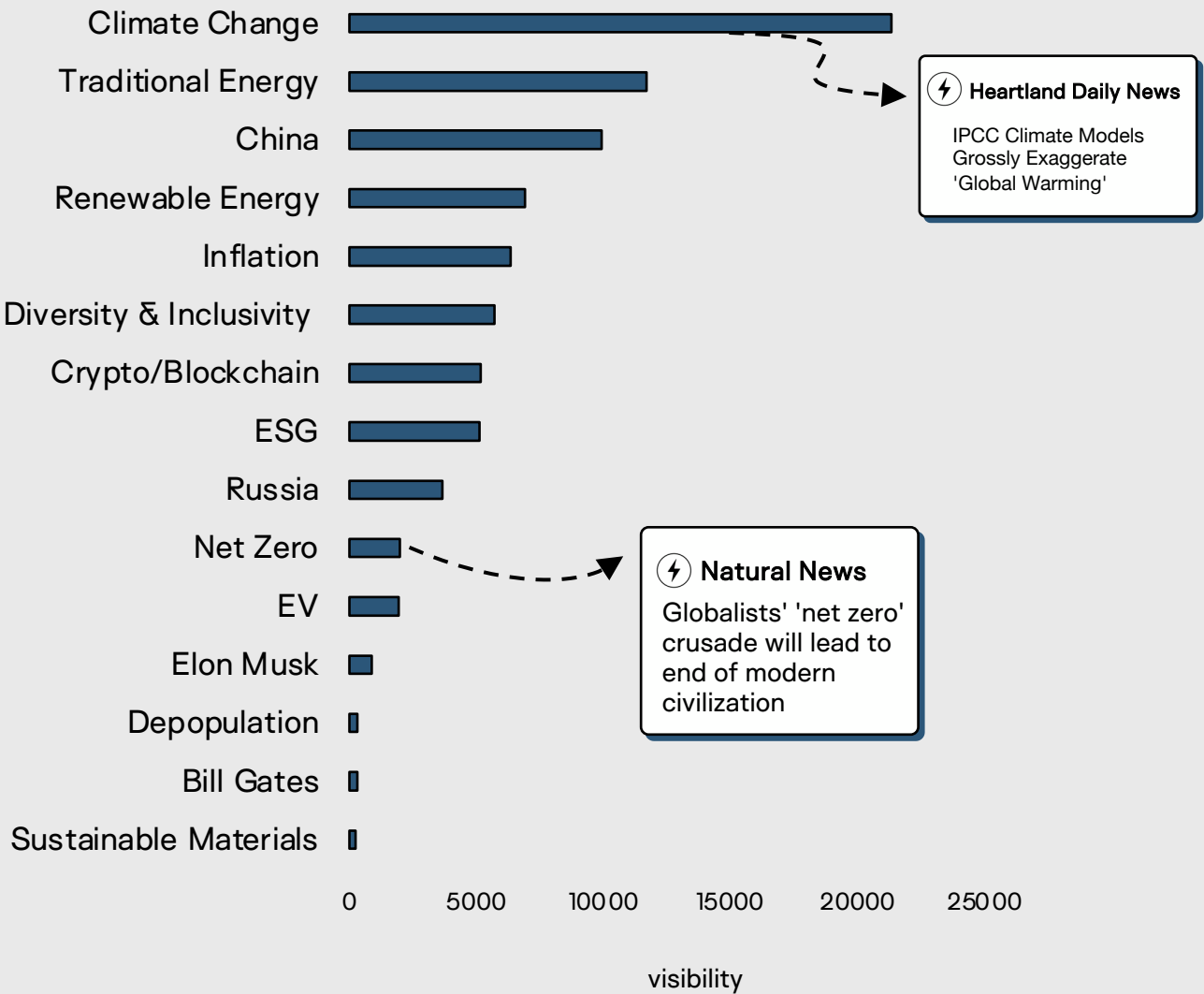


Climate Change & China provide flashpoints for misinformation

Pulsar’s integration with NewsGuard, who provide reliability ratings for news sites, allows us to understand how often concepts or brands are mentioned on sites that fall short of journalistic standards. And at first glance, sustainability appears to be a conversation relatively untroubled by misinformation. However, some context is required here. More than a few percentage points of misinformation constitutes a serious challenge, given that it incorporates *all* available news sources. And this is more keenly felt still in particular subtopics, such as Climate Change, where the degree of misinformation risk reaches fully 5%.



Misinformation association with sustainability in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

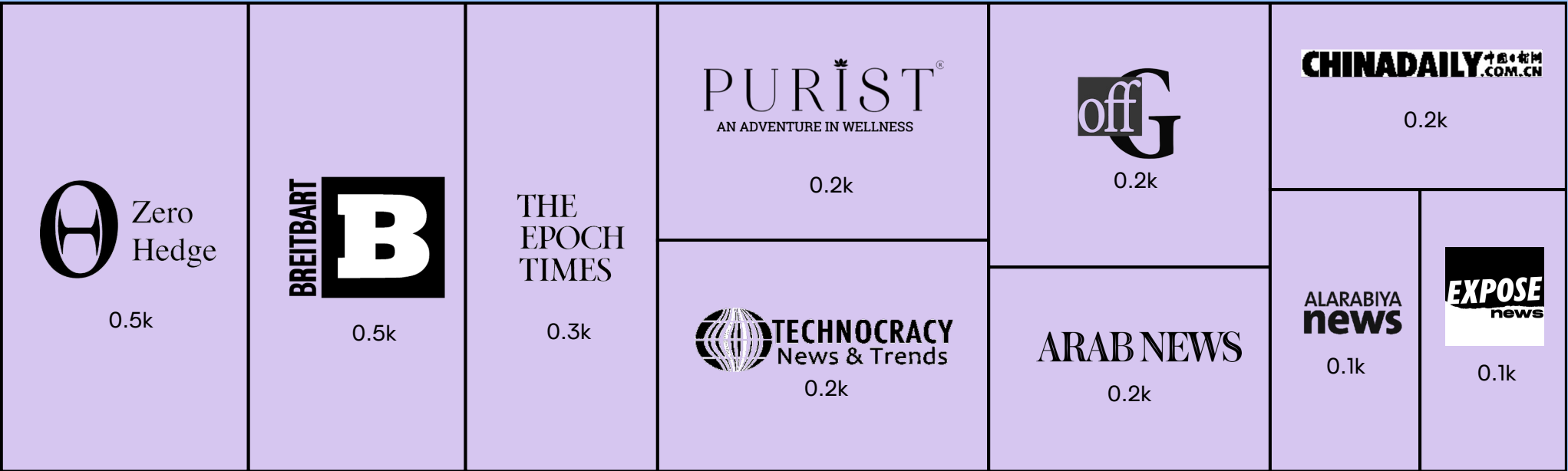


Conservative, financial and wellness publications expose conversation to misinformation

There are a number of publications labelled ‘untrustworthy’ by NewsGuard, which have contributed to the global conversation. Within this selection, we see three distinct trends emerge.

The first is the proliferation of news channels with opaque ownership structures and deeply politicised messaging, including Breitbart and The Epoch Times.

In addition, there are also a host of finance-focused publications, such as Zero Hedge, which communicate a great volume of projections around sustainability debt crises. Finally, there are also an increasing number of countercultural, ‘wellness’-based publications, which can regularly feature unsubstantiated health advice.



The most shared media by credibility in the Sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 18, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

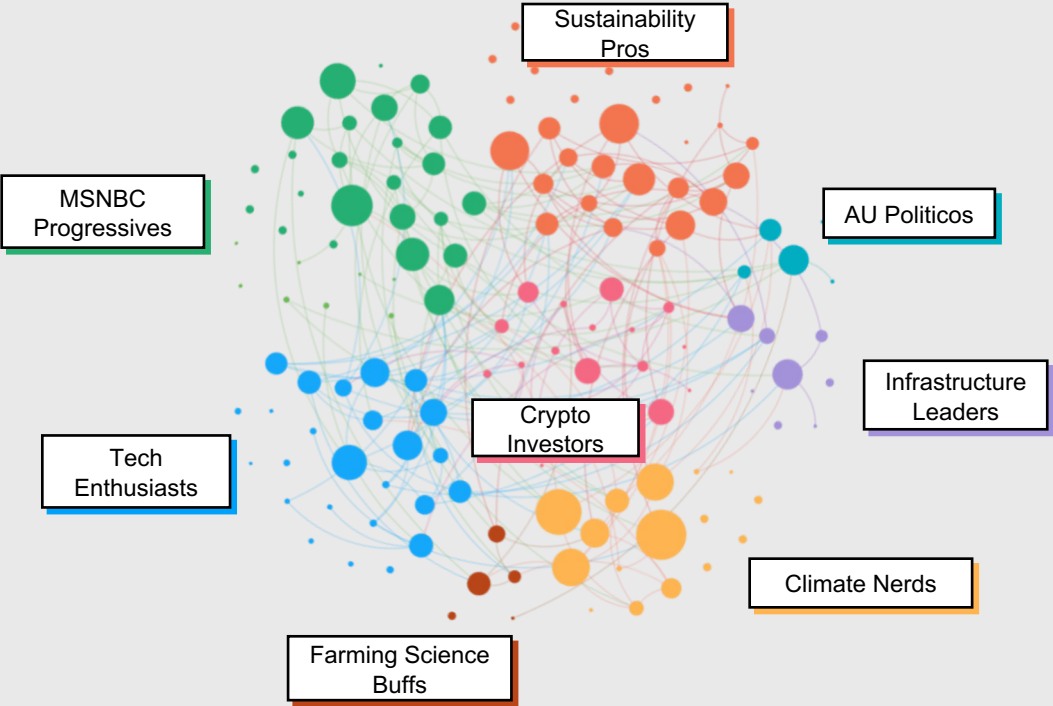
Environmentalists, progressives and professionals: The global communities engaging in the sustainability conversation

This analysis segments the audiences according to shared online affinities & behaviors, allowing us to move beyond simple demographic data. What does it tell us?

For one thing, we can see that the conversation has become more decentralized since 2021, with sustainability-specific institutions ceding space to communities draw across tech, infrastructure, politics and even farming.

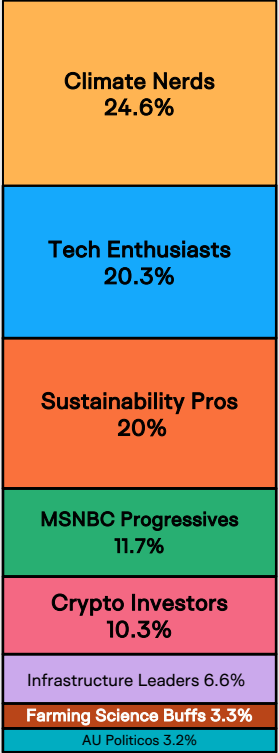
What’s more, when political-minded communities discuss sustainability, they are not just as likely to talk about living sustainable lifestyles, rather than debate points of policy.

In both instances, we see sustainability being embraced as something practical and liveable, rather than abstract and political.



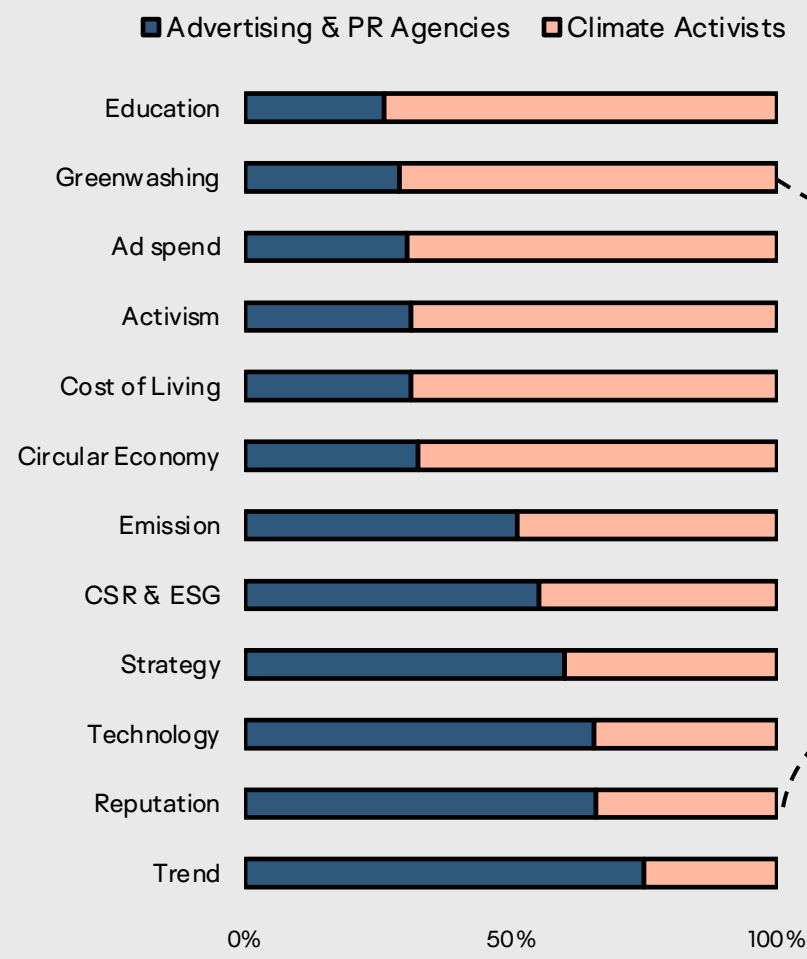
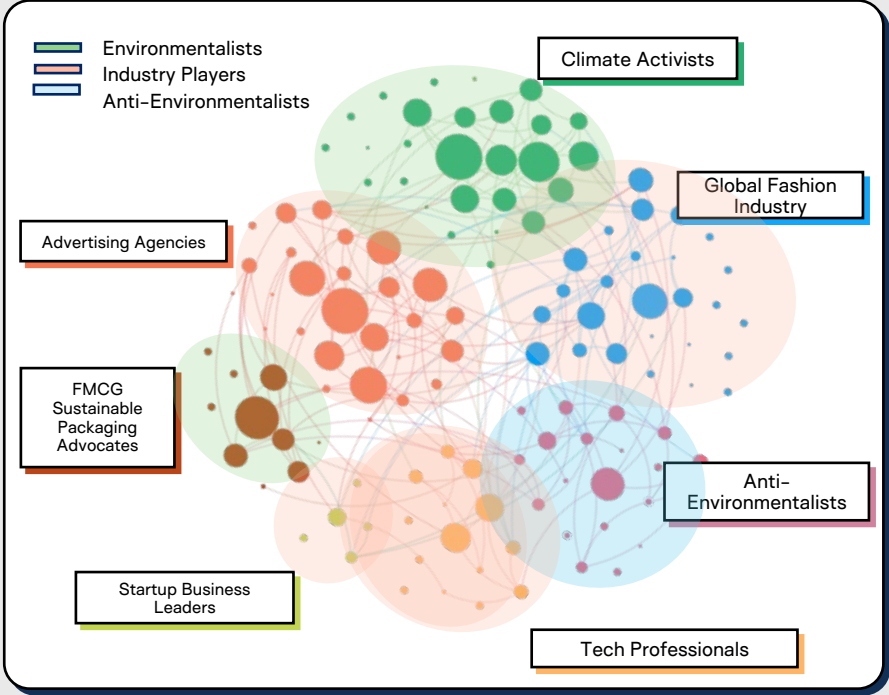
The overall audiences talking sustainability on X between Jan 1 – Dec 15, 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Audience Share of Voice in the Sustainability Conversation



Who's talking about PR & sustainability?

Understanding audiences is at the heart of what we do. And when we run an audience analysis on the communities mentioning PR, Comms or even marketing alongside sustainability, it becomes apparent that industry players and various stripes of environmentalist are the ones driving discussion. And while the former talk more about technology, trends and strategy, the latter are far more likely to highlight greenwashing, and the different mechanisms ('education', 'ad spend') by which it's disseminated.



ⓧ
@FossilFreeFoot @realmadrid Car brands spend billions on sports sponsorship to greenwash their PR while lobbying to delay climate policy. @badvertising11 @NewWeatherInst report Toyota & BMW sold 12m+ fossil fuel powered vehicles in 2021. BMW is #RealMadrid's sustainability partner

ⓧ
How Sustainability Marketing can elevate Financial Service Institutions brand reputation and revenue

Analyzing audiences talking about sustainability in association with marketing between Jan 1 – Dec 15, 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Where different audiences get their information from

Different communities don't just talk differently – they read different news and share different information online. Within the Climate Activists sphere, the sustainability conversation is largely shaped by over 70% of credible news sources, with notable players like Reuters and The Guardian taking the lead. Conversely, Crypto Investors exhibit a proclivity for non-credible sources. A closer examination of top source domains reveals the significant influence wielded by user-generated content platforms, particularly amongst the latter community.



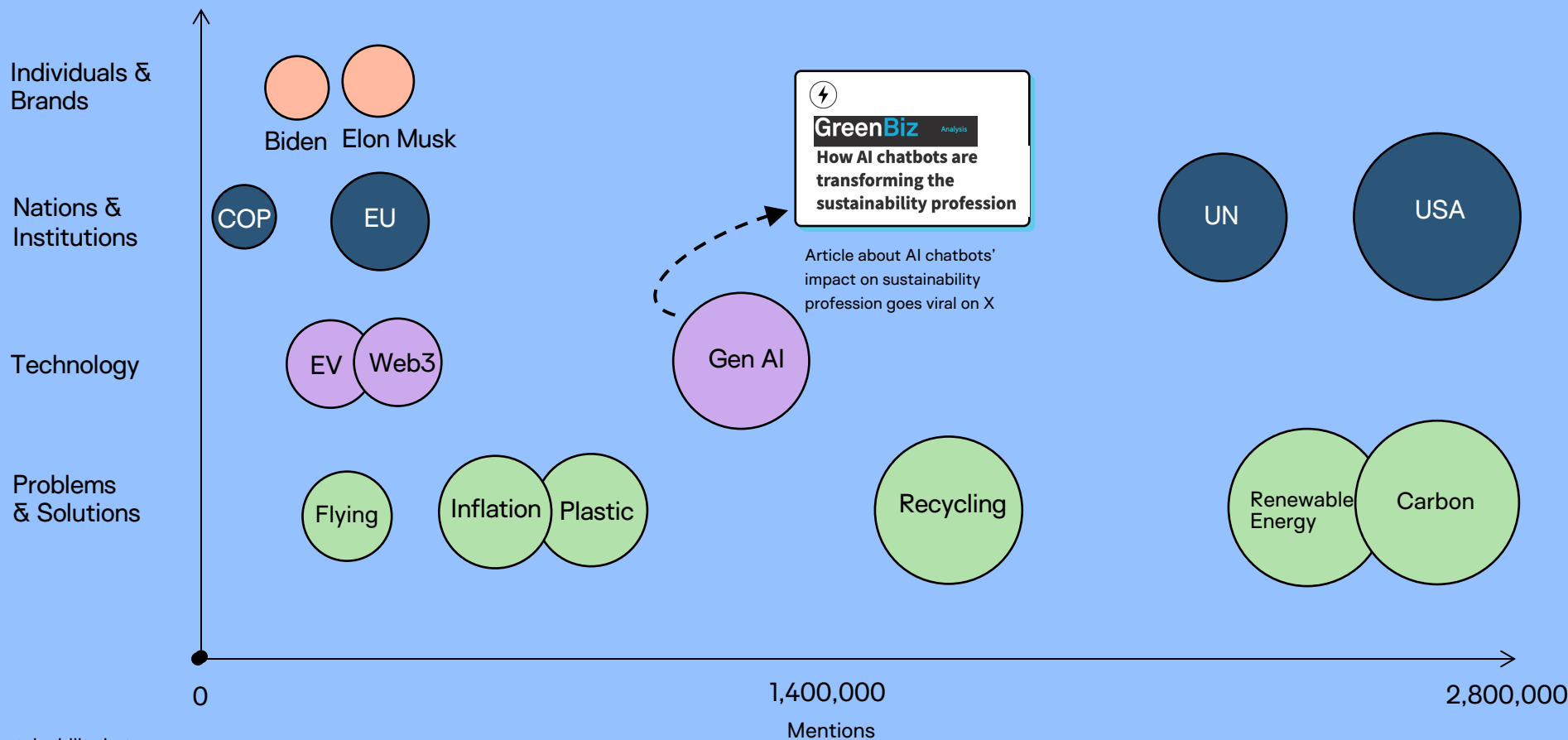
What we talk about when we talk about sustainability

So, what topics attract the most interest?

Mapping notable subtopics according to how often they're mentioned alongside sustainability reveals the attention directed towards actors like the US or Elon Musk (who has superseded Greta Thunberg since 2021).

But even the most famous individuals pale when compared to the the international bodies who attract and stimulate conversation. And for all COP's recent prominence, we actually see it mentioned considerably less than both the EU and the UN.

Many of the solutions cited, such as Generative AI or Electric Vehicles, are notably modern. But it appears that the institutions entrusted to enact these changes are often the same to whom the public have turned in the past, when they're not private companies or even the public itself.



Different topics by volume in the Sustainability between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

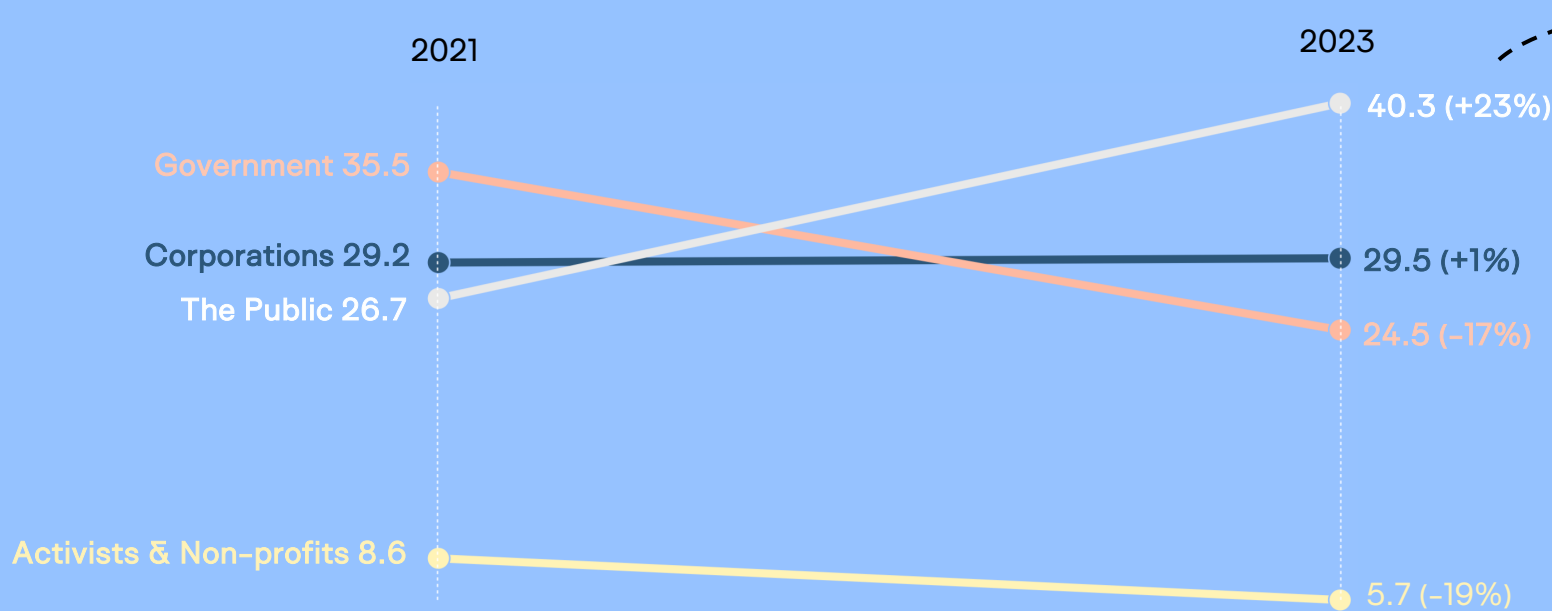
Who has agency?

The perceived actors in sustainability

Both the media and the general public project a sense as to who the main 'actors' within the sustainability conversation are.

This is important, because it means that certain groups attract far more column inches and social posts than others – and so are far more likely to be identified as the problem, solution or (as is the actual case) some combination of the two.

One thing our data clear points towards is a collapse of trust around the traditional stewards of norms. Whose responsibility it ultimately is to 'make things happen' in the world appears to be in the process of shifting to the populace at large, away from both governments and non-profits.



The most-mentioned actors in the Sustainability conversation in 2021 vs 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC



Of course, we should work to hold big corporations and governments accountable, but we shouldn't stop there. There are many things that each one of us – as individuals – can do that will make an impact (especially when millions or billions of people do them). Our actions go beyond their direct impact. They provide an example for others and they provide hope. Even – in the worst case – they do no good, at least we will have the pride of knowing that we tried.

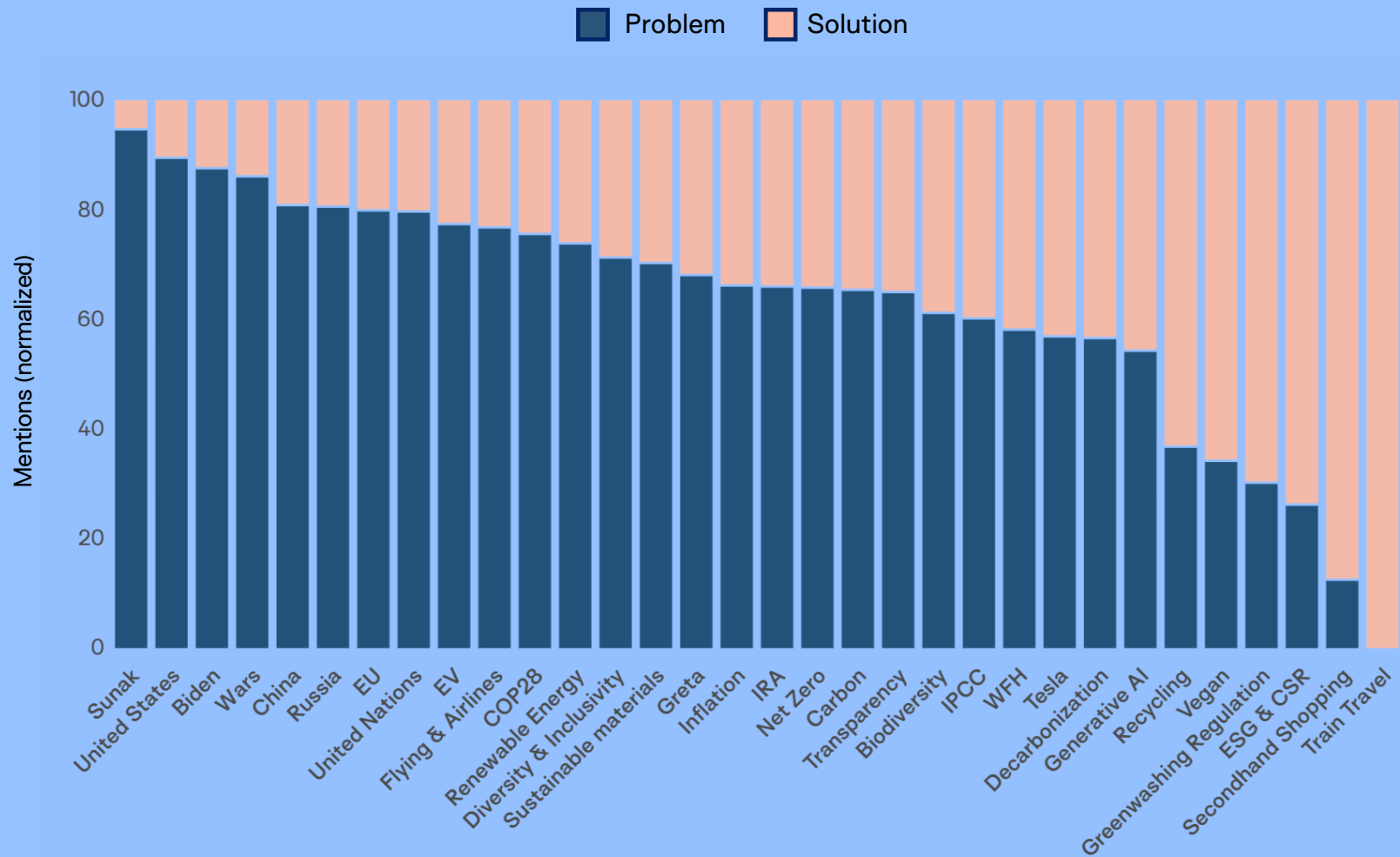
Problem or Solution?

Key topic breakdown

We can overlay this problem and solution lens across many of the topics contained in the sustainability conversation. What does it tell us?

For one thing, it suggests that blame and recrimination might, on the macro-level, account for a relatively small part of the conversation, but that on the level of individuals and institutions, from UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to the UN, it abounds.

Unsurprisingly, concepts, such as veganism or train travel are more likely to be cast as solutions. Where exceptions to this occur, it's often a result of previous overexposure and subsequent backlash, as in the case of Electric Vehicles.

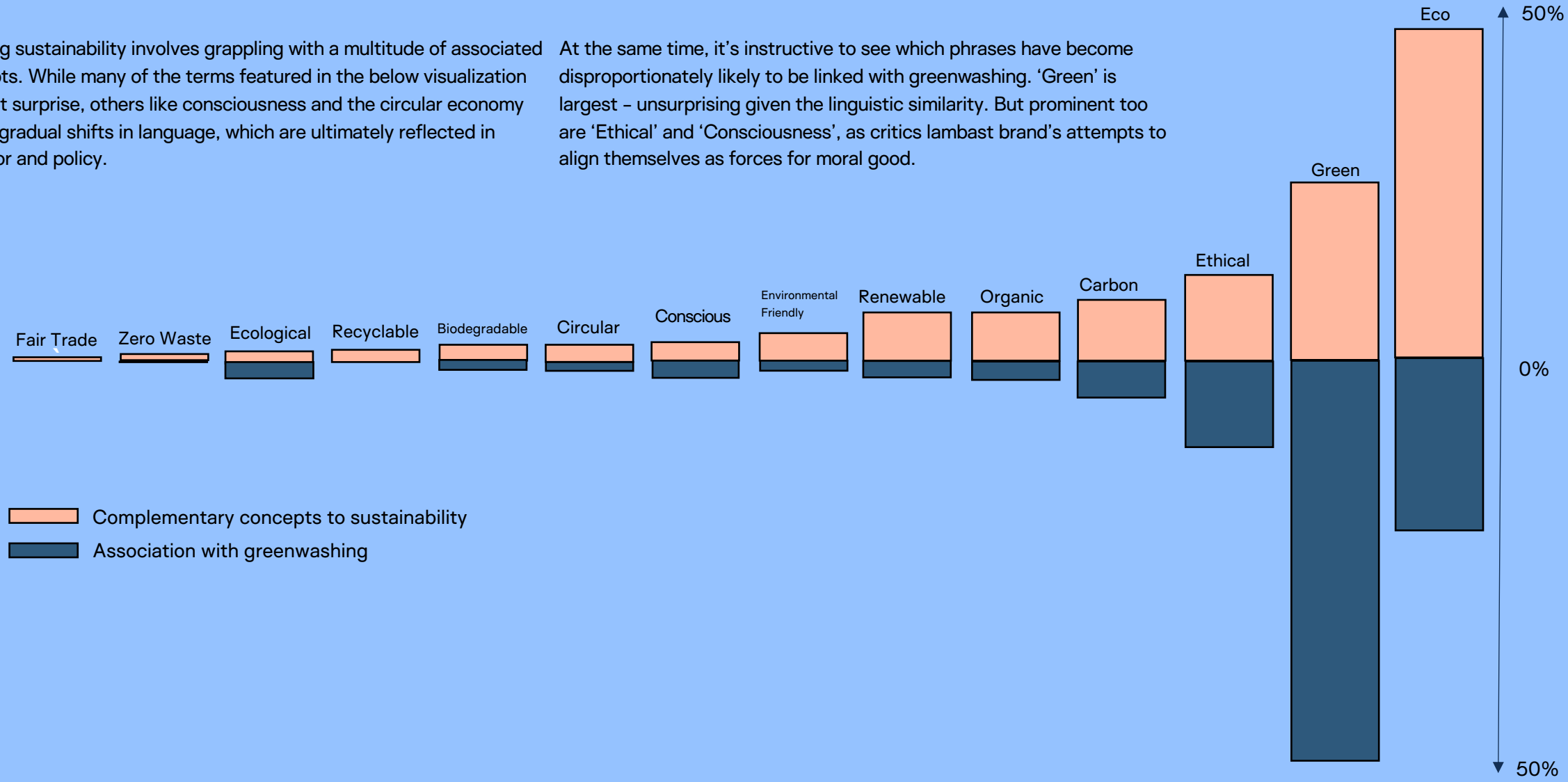


Topic analysis through a problem/solution lens in the sustainability conversation between Jan 1, 2023 – Feb 19, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

The terminology of sustainability & greenwashing

Defining sustainability involves grappling with a multitude of associated concepts. While many of the terms featured in the below visualization may not surprise, others like consciousness and the circular economy hint at gradual shifts in language, which are ultimately reflected in behavior and policy.

At the same time, it's instructive to see which phrases have become disproportionately likely to be linked with greenwashing. 'Green' is largest – unsurprising given the linguistic similarity. But prominent too are 'Ethical' and 'Consciousness', as critics lambast brand's attempts to align themselves as forces for moral good.





[Read more](#)

Isentia is a leading integrated media intelligence in APAC, blending market-leading monitoring experience with analytics to help the world's biggest brands uncover the whole picture—and act on it.

[LinkedIn](#) [X](#)



[Read more](#)

Pulsar is the world's leading audience intelligence platform—harnessing rich data sets, AI and human minds – so our clients can access nuanced and actionable insights that get straight to what matters most to their customers, their businesses and to society.

[LinkedIn](#) [X](#)