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## **Companies' Approach Towards Communicating Sustainable Practices**

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Master's in Business Administration

Supervisor:

PhD, Doutora Florinda Maria Carreira Neto Matos, Assistant Professor

Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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BUSINESS  
SCHOOL

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Departamento de Marketing, Operações e Gestão Geral

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## Resumo

A presente dissertação centra-se na comunicação da sustentabilidade pelas empresas em Portugal, investigando se as mensagens divulgadas pelas organizações estão alinhadas com as práticas sustentáveis que efetivamente implementam. O estudo parte do pressuposto de que a sustentabilidade é um tema de importância crescente no contexto empresarial, sendo crucial que as empresas não só adotem práticas sustentáveis, mas também a comuniquem de forma autêntica e coerente.

O principal objetivo da investigação é avaliar a congruência entre a comunicação de práticas sustentáveis e as ações concretas das empresas, com base na perceção dos consumidores portugueses. Para atingir este objetivo, a investigação utilizou como estudo de caso a empresa Unilever, utilizando uma abordagem quantitativa através de um questionário aplicado a uma amostra significativa de consumidores, de forma a analisar a perceção dos consumidores relativamente às marcas da empresa.

Os resultados do inquérito revelam uma disparidade considerável entre a comunicação e as práticas efetivas das empresas. Muitos consumidores entendem as mensagens de sustentabilidade como parte de estratégias de marketing que nem sempre são apoiadas por ações concretas. Este desfasamento tem um impacto negativo na confiança dos consumidores nas marcas, sublinhando a necessidade de maior transparência e autenticidade na comunicação das empresas sobre sustentabilidade.

Conclui-se que, para construir uma reputação sólida e preservar a confiança dos consumidores, as empresas devem garantir que as suas práticas sustentáveis não só são implementadas, mas também comunicadas de uma forma que reflita fielmente essas ações.

**Palavras-chave:** Sustentabilidade Corporativa, Comunicação de Sustentabilidade, Perceção do Consumidor, Transparência Empresarial.

**Classificação JEL:** M14, Q56

## **Abstract**

The present dissertation focuses on the communication of sustainability by companies in Portugal, investigating whether the messages disseminated by organizations are aligned with the sustainable practices they actually implement. The study assumes that sustainability is a topic of growing importance in the business context, and that it is crucial that companies not only adopt sustainable practices, but also communicate them in an authentic and coherent way. The main objective of the research is to assess the congruence between the communication of sustainable practices and the concrete actions of companies, based on the perception of Portuguese consumers. To achieve this objective, the research used the Unilever company as a case study, using a quantitative approach through a questionnaire applied to a significant sample of consumers, to analyse consumer perceptions of the company's brands.

The results of the survey reveal a considerable disparity between communication and companies' actual practices. Many consumers perceive sustainability messages as part of marketing strategies that are not always backed up by concrete actions. This discrepancy has a negative impact on consumer trust in brands, emphasizing the need for greater transparency and authenticity in companies' communication about sustainability.

It is concluded that in order to build a solid reputation and preserve consumer trust, companies must ensure that their sustainable practices are not only implemented, but also communicated in a way that faithfully reflects those actions.

**Keywords:** Corporate Sustainability, Sustainability Communication, Consumer Perception, Corporate Transparency.

**JEL Classifications:** M14, Q56





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## **List of abbreviations**

ESG – Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance

UN – United Nations

WCED – World Commission on environmental and Development

SDG - Sustainable Development Goals

CTAP – Under the Climate Transition Action Plan

USAC – Unilever Sustainable Agriculture Code

RSPO – Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

PLR – post-consumer recycled

SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Sciences







# CHAPTER 1

## *Introduction*

### **1.1. Contextualization**

The demand to be more sustainable has grown significantly in today's society. Driven by the need to improve human actions for the well-being of the planet. We see an increase in human awareness of the importance of sustainability, which guides individuals and organizations in the search for alternatives that minimize the damage caused by human actions (UCLA Sustainability, n.d.).

By identifying the problem, the lack of sustainability in human practices that cause negative impacts on the environment and society as a whole, resulting in problems such as environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, pollution and climate change, the need for a response arises. As a result, forces committed to sustainability emerge, acting as fundamental pillars in promoting change and raising awareness of sustainable practices among the population (Ruggerio, 2021). The trend towards being more sustainable is supported by the most widely recognized definition of sustainability proposed by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in the report "Our Common Future" or the "Brundtland Report". According to this definition, sustainability is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). The increase in awareness has spread to many people and institutions, leading many companies to adopt sustainable practices and communicate their commitment to this cause. However, we can observe two distinct approaches when companies approach the subject of sustainability: those that genuinely care about the planet and act in accordance with their values, and those that communicate sustainability because it is a modern trend and sometimes an obligation (Serafeim, 2021). When communicating their sustainable initiatives, companies mainly seek to improve their reputation, meet customer expectations, reduce costs and risks, anticipate changes in the market, comply with regulations or satisfy other stakeholders (Holt, 2020). Given this scenario, there is a need to understand whether companies' sustainable communication corresponds to the practices they adopt. In response to this question, the main focus of this research is to assess whether companies that use marketing campaigns focused on sustainability actually fulfil the sustainable practices they promote. However, since there is a possibility that companies are not communicating sustainability or, on the contrary, are communicating sustainable practices or ideals that they don't practice, a

new approach has emerged with the intention of making ESG (Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance) mandatory. ESG, according to the United Nations, is characterized by "Environmental, social and governance aspects, previously considered non-financial elements, are now emerging as core values of companies, major financial institutions and shareholders around the world" (Nações Unidas, 2022), which aims to assess an organization's commitment beyond the traditional goal of maximizing profits for shareholders, also considering broader social and environmental objectives. Under this new regulation, companies will be obliged to comprehensively disclose all their sustainability practices. This will enable us to analyse the possible implications of these practices on their day-to-day operations (Moyo, 2022).

## **1.2. Motivations and Research Aims**

Communication around sustainability has been highlighted by several organizations globally with the aim of raising public awareness of environmental protection and promote more conscious choices. In addition, such communication is often used by organizations as a way of demonstrating their commitment to sustainability standards and regulations.

The increase in environmental concerns has affected not only the Portuguese population, but also the practices of organizations. Many companies have chosen to communicate their actions in favour of sustainability, either to strengthen their image as defenders of the environment or due to the pressure of the current sustainability trend that is being imposed on companies today. So, the question arises: Does sustainability communication correspond to the business practices adopted by companies?

In this context, the central aim of this study is to understand how companies are approaching sustainability communication. More specifically, the research aims to analyse whether the practices actually adopted by companies are aligned with the sustainability messages they disseminate.

## **1.3 Research questions and objectives**

To achieve the above-mentioned objective, this research will answer the following questions:

**RQ1:** How effectively are companies communicating their actions towards sustainability?

The first research question is addressed to evaluate how the selected companies are communicating sustainability.

**RQ2:** To what level are companies fulfilling the sustainability promises made in their communications?

The second research question is addressed to verify if the practices of the companies correspond to the sustainable promises and messages made.

**RQ3:** How do consumers perceive the companies' sustainable practices?

The third research question is addressed to analyse if consumers' perception of the companies corresponds to the company's sustainable practices.

#### **1.4. Structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation is structured into five separate chapters. The first chapter consists of an introduction to the study, which addresses the context in which it is set, emphasizes the relevance of the topic, outlines the objectives, research questions and research goals, and presents the overall structure of the dissertation.

In the second chapter, a literature review is carried out, analyzing pertinent and relevant publications on the subject. The procedures adopted in the literature review are discussed, namely the criteria used to select the articles, the databases consulted, the keywords used, the search periods and the areas of research focus.

The third chapter describes in detail the methodology adopted to collect and analyse the data, including a previous case study and the administration of a questionnaire.

The fourth chapter focuses on the empirical analysis of the results, presenting and interpreting the conclusions of the pre-case study and the analysis of the questionnaire.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, the dissertation culminates with the presentation of the research conclusions and a discussion of the results in relation to the literature review carried out previously. The limitations of the study are also identified, suggestions for future research are offered and the contributions of this study to the field of project management are presented.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### *Literature Review*

#### **2.1. Literature Research**

In order to analyse the topic in question and obtain the answers to the questions proposed above, it was necessary to carry out a literature search, which will allow us to construct the literature review.

For the purpose of obtaining this information, a review of the relevant literature will be carried out with the aim of addressing topics related to the theme and ensuring its relevance. The following variables were analysed for this study: Sustainability, Sustainable Communication, Sustainable Practices and Organizational Sustainability. These variables were chosen because they are all related, especially to the central concept of this study, Sustainability. Since the variables chosen are interrelated, they will make it possible to assess sustainability and its practices in the organizational and communication context.

The literature review will be supported on online platforms such as Scopus and Web of Science, which make it possible to analyse books, articles and academic publications on the different variables, focusing mainly on the central theme of the study, the communication of sustainable practices by companies. For this collection, the keywords were used, with a specific period of five years (2018 - 2023) for the articles used, selecting only documents in English and Portuguese.

Using the literature review the author will be able to construct a questionnaire that will allow him to understand consumers' perceptions of a given company, assessing whether consumers consider a company to be sustainable or not, based on its communication.

#### **2.2. Sustainability**

The word sustainability can be defined as the quality of something that is sustainable or, on the other hand, as a condition in the sense that something can be maintained at a certain level, degree or value (Porto Editora, n.d.). However, the most common way of defining sustainability is in environmental terms, sustainability is a balance between economic, social and environmental development.

In the course of the research, it was possible to analyse some more precise or targeted definitions of sustainability, such as "sustainability is a characteristic of an economic development model that seeks to improve people's standard of living while ensuring the

preservation of the environment and natural resources, by subjecting economic and industrial activities to principles of ecological balance, so as to meet the needs of existing generations without compromising the needs of future generations" (United Nations, 1987).

The concept of sustainable development is often considered synonymous with the concept of sustainability, and as a result, both terms are used interchangeably, including in academic and scientific domains (Ruggerio, 2021). In this way, it becomes possible to direct environmental sustainability in the direction of ecological sustainability and more oriented towards human activities, which means that environmental sustainability is a deeper concept of sustainable development. Certainly, with the diversity of definitions, sustainability can mean different things to different people. However, the different definitions are far from comprehensive or even global, since sustainability is not well defined for the majority of the population, also because many people do not attempt to know more about the topic.

It was possible to verify, through the analysis of various authors, that the concept of sustainable development was already a subject of discussion in the early 1970s. During this period, studies began to emerge highlighting the pressing need to set limits on our behaviours for the well-being of the planet. This awareness gained momentum due to the accumulating evidence of adverse environmental impacts, both related to agriculture and industrial pollution. Thus, it became evident that ecosystems, both those directly affected by human action and those unaffected, were vulnerable to changes resulting from various factors such as climatic variations, geological processes, solar activity fluctuations, among others (Ruggerio, 2021).

The concept of sustainable development has become a central reference in scientific research on the environment and has acquired a paradigmatic status for development since its introduction in the Brundtland Report in 1987. The concept has become widely accepted and has been incorporated into international treaties as well as the constitutions and laws of many countries worldwide. Furthermore, it has been applied in business contexts, agricultural production, industry, urban development, and has served as a conceptual basis for theoretical approaches such as the green economy and the circular economy. Ultimately, we understand that this concept has become part of the common sense for a significant portion of the world's population and is often adopted in political slogans related to environmental protection (Ruggerio, 2021).

On January 1, 2016, the United Nations (UN) initiated the year with a new resolution, entitled 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,' consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The need for the development of this agenda, approved by world leaders in 2015, arises from the urgency to address the needs of the world's

population, contributing to sustainable development. Ultimately, we understand that the so-called 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to address the numerous dimensions of sustainable development, including the social, economic, and environmental aspects of the world, with the aim of promote peace, justice, and effective institutions (Global Compact, 2016).

Sustainability is undeniably one of the most pressing issues of our time, attracting the attention of various sectors of society. The population demonstrates an increasing desire to become informed and to contribute to the well-being of society, and this commitment to sustainability is not limited to individuals but also extends to institutions and organizations seeking to follow the same path. When examining various research on the importance of sustainability, it becomes evident that sustainability emerges as a new paradigm in society, but primarily as a new management paradigm (Serafeim, 2021).

### **2.3. Sustainable Communication**

Interest in communication has been awakened due to advances in science and technology, which, by their nature, have highlighted the human capacity to communicate. Among the earliest remarkable examples of innovations resulting from technological ingenuity are the telegraph and the telephone, followed by others such as wireless radio and telephoto devices. The development of popular newspapers and magazines, broadcasting, cinema, and television brought about institutional and cultural changes that allowed for fast and effective communication, reaching not only individuals but also large populations. These means of communication played a pivotal role in the rise and social influence of the new phenomenon of mass communication (Gordon, n.d.).

When we delve into the subject of communicating sustainability, we understand that one of the strategies is to communicate to consumers the need to adopt sustainable practices. However, it was evident through the analysed literature that it's not enough to communicate. In other words, it's necessary to communicate not only the sustainable practices to be adopted, appealing to consumers' emotions and logic, but also to communicate and transmit experiences that demonstrate which practices to adopt and the benefits resulting from these practices. Furthermore, when analyzing the importance of communicating sustainability, we examined one of the major strategies predominantly used by companies, which is the power of social influence. This strategy involves the use of influential individuals to communicate the objective and influence consumers to have the same behaviors. Taking as an example, companies that

communicate sustainability and opt for the use of influential figures in the field to communicate their intentions and sustainable practices, with the aim of influencing consumers to change their practices and to perceive the company as an environmentally friendly one (White, K. et al., 2019).

However, communication, like everything in life, also presents its challenges. In this case, it's that we don't always know how to communicate in the best way, which can lead to serious problems of interpretation or potential falsehoods. Regarding the communication of sustainable practices, one of the major mistakes made by companies is to believe that merely presenting sustainable information on their websites or associating with other sustainable brands is enough. When analyzing different authors who emphasize the importance and the best way to communicate sustainability, we understand that to ensure success and a credible reputation concerning sustainable practices, companies should ensure a direct line of communication, measure and communicate the results of their initiatives. It's crucial to move from the intention of communicating what we want or claim to be, to effectively communicating the results of our behaviors (Serafeim, 2021).

Referring to the topic of sustainable communication by companies, they must set their objectives, meaning communicating their financial and sustainable performance through reports and narrating their history in a coherent manner that truly demonstrates their sustainable actions. Furthermore, one of the most secure standards that ensures the viability of a company's communication, in this case, is the publication of a sustainability report prepared in accordance with the Global Reporting Initiative's Sustainability Reporting Standards (Serafeim, 2021).

In response to deceptive communication from institutions, standards and examples of data communication have been implemented, demonstrating the correct way to communicate information to consumers. Given that sustainable communication carried out by companies was incomplete and often unaudited, the idea emerged that companies were conveying unreliable information (Pucker, 2021).

In conclusion, communication proves to be the most effective way of conveying our thoughts and ideas on a specific topic, allowing for transparent expression of our opinions and the establishment of trust with our audience. However, for our ideas to be communicated accurately, it is essential to begin by understanding and being knowledgeable about what we are communicating. In this case, a lack of understanding of the sustainability theme can often lead to the transmission of incomplete or incorrect ideas.



## **2.4. Sustainable Practices**

Sustainable practices promote the health and vitality of ecosystems, society, and the economy. Sustainability is based on the principle that resources are finite and should be used conservatively and thoughtfully, considering long-term priorities and the consequences of how they are utilized (UCLA Sustainability, n.d.).

As mentioned earlier, sustainability is now considered a megatrend, which means it is being embraced by many. The message of sustainability is being transmitted to everyone, along with the need to change our behaviors by adopting more sustainable practices that do not jeopardize the future of our planet. However, it is crucial that this message is passed from the outset by global leaders, including governments, civil society, businesses, and other stakeholders (United Nations, 2016).

With the increasing impact of climate change, there arises a persistent global challenge that requires cooperation from all of us to improve our actions. While it is encouraging to see a growing concern for the environment among the population, it is important to recognize the difference between wanting to do good and believing we are doing it, and actually adopting sustainable practices. For instance, many people have adopted common sustainable practices, such as using paper plates instead of plastic, opting for public transportation or bicycles instead of private vehicles, and recycling, among other actions. However, here's the challenge in being fully sustainable: the sustainability megatrend has led to changes in small daily behaviors but not enough to change larger behaviors, such as changing product consumption (Johns, L. et al., 2023). Unfortunately, sustainability is still seen by many as a passing trend that encourages the adoption of certain behaviors to fit into society, rather than being perceived as a necessary urgency for social coexistence.

Alongside sustainable practices, the problem persists that, in general terms, society does not truly understand what sustainability entails. This issue results in an increasing number of individuals who do not care or do not adopt sustainable practices simply because they do not comprehend the implications. Faced with this challenge, the mentioned global leaders must take action to address it. This may involve starting by communicating common societal wrong behaviors, explaining the reasons and consequences of these behaviors for our future, and subsequently introducing and explaining new habits aligned with sustainable practices (White, K. et al., 2019). From this point onward, companies play a crucial role. This is because they should begin by clarifying the concept of sustainability, highlighting the inadequate practices they were adopting, and showcasing the changes implemented to contribute to a better world. It is imperative that they demonstrate these actions, and the positive results achieved.

## **2.5. Organizational Sustainability**

As mentioned earlier, the increase in harmful human practices has been contributing to the degradation of the planet. Faced with this issue, sustainability has become an increasingly relevant topic, especially across various sectors that make up our society. With the urgency to address environmental problems, or conversely, to positively contribute to one of our society's megatrends, the population has been showing growing interest in seeking information and engaging in sustainability. However, this concern isn't limited to individuals but also extends to institutions and organizations that play a fundamental role in society (Serafeim, 2021).

Analyzing different perspectives on the integration of sustainability in organizations, it has become evident that nowadays, a company that doesn't communicate or adopt sustainable practices runs the risk of being at a disadvantage compared to its competitors. Furthermore, it risks not being recognized for the right reasons and may be negatively judged by consumers or employees. This understanding highlights the widespread recognition of sustainability communication within the business environment (Moyo, 2022).

Within the scope of organizational sustainability, one of the most significant aspects discussed in various analysed articles is ESG, defined as "an acronym for Environmental, Social, and Governance, representing a measurable evaluation of a company's overall sustainability performance" (Pedroto, 2023). Consequently, companies adopt ESG practices to prevent value loss and simultaneously reduce the risks associated with climate change, while also creating more sustainable systems and economies, aiming for long-term growth and success in the business and strategic context.

Nevertheless, organizations should not view organizational sustainability solely as a strategy or a means to create value, but rather as a necessity and an opportunity to become globally conscious companies and alter their behaviors in favor of the environment. One of the articles emphasizes the importance of the "triple bottom line" concept within organizations, encompassing profits, the well-being of people, and the preservation of the planet. Thus, when a company aligns its actions with these three components, it can build a sustainable enterprise capable of generating profit, fulfilling social responsibilities, and preserving our planet's resources (Salazar, 2019).

By reviewing various articles on organizational sustainability and its communication, we can see that companies account for a significant portion of external global emissions, responsible for 71% of these emissions. This emphasizes the urgency for companies to change their behavior to reduce emissions and waste, contributing to the planet's sustainability. In reducing these emissions and contributing to environmental protection, it has been highlighted that

companies can be responsible for 60% of emission reductions by 2030, as per the Paris Climate Agreement (Salazar, 2019).

For companies to genuinely contribute to the planet's well-being, it's not enough to simply communicate sustainable practices. It's essential for companies to effectively implement these practices and then communicate the results of these changes to encourage other companies and society at large. However, for these efforts to be effective, it's necessary for the intention and change to come from all employees, from executives and shareholders to managers, human resources, and staff (Salazar, 2019). It's crucial to understand that sustainability benefits not only the environment and society but also fosters a company's growth from the outset by incorporating ESG practices into the company's strategy, vision, and future plans (Serafeim, 2021).

## **2.6. Synthesis**

Sustainability involves maintaining resources at a certain level while ensuring economic, social, and environmental balance. It is a multifaceted concept, often synonymous with sustainable development, adopted in various sectors across the world. The Brundtland Report (1987) introduced sustainability as a central reference in scientific research and international agreements, promoting peace, justice, and effective institutions.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, initiated by the United Nations in 2016, underlines the commitment of world leaders to address the social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Sustainability is rooted in social speech, leading to a paradigm change in management practices and communication strategies.

Sustainable communication has a fundamental role to play in promoting consumer awareness and changing behaviour. However, effective communication requires more than the simple transmission of information, which means demonstrating tangible results and the authentic involvement of the stakeholders. Companies must adopt transparent communication practices, such as publishing sustainability reports in line with global standards, to build trust and credibility.

Although awareness is growing, adopting sustainable practices remains a challenge.

While individuals become involved in small-scale actions, systemic changes are needed to address larger issues, such as the consumption of products. In addition, a lack of understanding complicates the mainstream adoption of sustainability initiatives. Therefore, global leaders and

companies should educate and encourage sustainable behaviours to achieve significant changes.

Organizational sustainability integrates environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices into business strategies to reduce risks and create long-term value. Adopting the "triple bottom line" approach - profits, people's well-being and preserving the planet - promotes sustainable business models. Companies are required to take proactive measures to reduce emissions and waste, contributing to global sustainability goals.

Ultimately, sustainability transcends simple rhetoric, requiring collective action and a commitment from society as a whole. By encouraging a culture of sustainability in organizations and promoting transparent communication, we can lead the way to a more sustainable and resilient future.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Research Methodology*

#### **3.1 Research Context**

The main aim of this research is to assess the extent to which the practices adopted by companies in Portugal correspond to the sustainable communication they present. To achieve this understanding, a Unilever case study and a quantitative research approach will be used to analyse consumer perceptions related to the brands under study. A questionnaire will be carried out to capture the opinions of a sample of the Portuguese population in relation to the companies chosen.

The sample used in this research will be a convenience sample, selected on the basis of the researcher's contacts on social networks. This method was chosen due to its ease of access and ability to quickly collect data from a large and diverse group of respondents. Although this approach may limit the generalizability of the results, it provides valuable information about the perceptions of consumers within the researcher's network, which may also reflect broader trends in Portuguese society.

In this context, it is crucial to analyse the country's demographics and their changes over the years. In 2022, Portugal's population will be around 10,444.2 million. In terms of gender distribution, women represent 52.3%, while men make up 47.3% of the population (PORDATA, 2022). This demographic distribution directly influences the country's social and economic dynamics.

In terms of education, in 2022 approximately 22.5% of the population had higher education. In 2021, the distribution of education levels indicated that 5.9% of the population had no formal education, basic education comprised 49.7%, while secondary education accounted for 23.5% and higher education reached 19.8% of the population, highlighting that there was a drop in the rate of population with higher education in the last year, (PORDATA, 2022).

This demographic and educational context lays the foundations for the research that follows. By understanding the dynamics of the Portuguese population, we can effectively target the questionnaire, ensuring that the observed sample is representative of the various facets of society. Analysing the results will allow us not only to assess the alignment between business practices and sustainable communication, but also to offer valuable insights for developing strategies that are more in line with the expectations and values of the Portuguese population.

### **3.2. Research Design**

As explained earlier, the central aim of this dissertation is to investigate the coherence between companies' sustainable communication and their actual practices. Specifically, the purpose is to analyse whether the sustainability messages that companies communicate to their customers correspond to the concrete actions implemented in favour of sustainability.

To address this issue, the research uses a quantitative approach complemented by a documentary analysis. The study began with an exhaustive review of existing reports and documents relating to the companies under investigation. This documentary analysis provided the necessary basis for constructing a well-founded questionnaire. The questionnaire is the main methodological tool for collecting data and understanding the perceptions and opinions of the selected sample.

This combination of quantitative analysis and documentary analysis is essential to effectively assess the alignment between the sustainability efforts communicated and the actual practices of the companies studied.

### **3.3. Case study Unilever**

Unilever, one of the largest global consumer goods companies, is distinguished by its diverse portfolio of leading brands, its commitment to sustainability and its presence in future growth markets. In 2022, the company experienced significant changes, implementing the new Compass Organization to make its operations more agile, category-focused and accountable.

With more than 400 brands and approximately 3.4 billion daily consumers, Unilever highlights its multi-stakeholder business model, recognizing the importance of relationships and resources along the value chain, present in more than 190 countries (Unilever, 2024b).

Supply chain resilience is a crucial focus for Unilever, which delivers ingredients and raw materials to more than 150 countries, highlighting the importance of partnerships with suppliers for sustainable growth. Unilever's factories, which are key to production, demonstrate a commitment to safety, quality and sustainability, reflected in a remarkable -68% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions since 2015 (Unilever, 2024a).

Unilever's vision is to make sustainable living common, aiming to be a global leader in sustainable business. The company sets ambitious targets, such as achieving zero net emissions, reducing plastic for a zero-waste world, regenerating nature and agriculture, and raising living standards in its value chain (Unilever, 2024a).

The protection and regeneration of nature are key elements of Unilever's strategy, including the commitment to achieve a deforestation-free supply chain in five main products by 2023. The transition to regenerative practices in agriculture is emphasized, with progress evident in 2022, where 81% of major agricultural crops were sustainably sourced (Unilever, 2024a).

Under the Climate Transition Action Plan (CTAP), Unilever outlines actions to decarbonize its business and achieve net zero emissions. Effective water management, reducing the use of virgin plastic and moving towards more sustainable packaging highlight the company's ongoing efforts to achieve a zero-waste world (Unilever, 2024b).

While recognizing the challenges in transforming the supply chain, especially in relation to the limited availability of deforestation-free raw materials, Unilever is committed to diversifying ingredients and adjusting formulations to reduce environmental risks.

The company reinforces its commitment to human rights, the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles and responsible sourcing policy, aiming to contribute to a fairer and more socially inclusive world.

In addressing the global plastic problem, Unilever highlights its progress in reducing the use of virgin plastic and the transition to alternative packaging. Although it faces challenges in effective recycling, the company remains committed to advancing sustainable solutions.

In summary, Unilever emerges as a global leader committed to sustainability, demonstrating concrete actions towards a greener, more inclusive and socially responsible future (Unilever, 2024b).

### ***3.3.1. Unilever Brands***

*Calvé* is a brand focused on offering a wide selection of tasty sauces to enrich any meal. Committed to quality, the brand ensures that their products are made with ingredients of excellence, with the future well-being of consumers in mind. It also guarantees that its products are sourced from sustainable sources, constantly seeking to reduce their environmental impact. However, the brand does not provide any further information about their commitment to sustainability or demonstrate how their practices contribute to a more sustainable world (Unilever, 2024c).

*Knorr* is recognized for its history of innovation and passion for gastronomy. The brand began its journey by dehydrating vegetables and spices, with the goal of preserving the nutrition and flavour of its ingredients. In this way, it is committed to making meals memorable,

guaranteeing high-quality products and following a philosophy of future sustainability (Unilever, 2024d).

The brand highlights that, to achieve these goals, it invests in more efficient processes and adopts sustainability principles in its business. In addition, it collaborates with farmers and sustainability experts, promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

As a brand of the Unilever group, the brand is part of Unilever's Global Commitment to Sustainability, where suppliers must follow guidelines set out in the Unilever Code for Sustainable Agriculture (USAC), which was developed in partnership with registered Non-Governmental Organizations and the Rainforest Alliance, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Fairtrade Foundation (Unilever, 2024d).

Knorr defines itself as a brand committed to sustainable management, soil conservation to ensure future health, animal welfare and the sourcing of sustainably sourced ingredients. It also collaborates with organizations with similar objectives, such as the Rainforest Alliance, the Fairtrade Foundation and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

The *Olá* brand, recognized as the market leader in ice cream in Portugal, has a mission to build a happier and more inclusive world. The brand's founders say that their initial vision was to realize that ice cream has the power to make people happy, highlighting the magic of ice cream that unites and is capable of breaking down barriers between people.

Regarding its commitment to sustainability, the brand emphasizes its purpose of promoting recycling. The company points out that the excessive use of plastic contributes to a culture of waste, where many products are only used for a few minutes. However, the brand recognizes that its products contain a significant amount of plastic, and this is a responsibility they assume. They are therefore committed to contributing to the removal of plastic from the streets, rivers and oceans (Unilever, 2024e).

*Olá's* vision focuses on working collaboratively to ensure that plastic is reused, recycled or composted, ensuring that it stays within a circular economy and out of the environment. They state that for almost 100 years, the brand has stood by its belief in the magical ability of ice cream to melt barriers and promote togetherness. Recognizing the value of plastic as a material, they pledge to work together to end this cycle (Unilever, 2024e).

*Skip* is a leading brand in the Portuguese detergent market, offering a wide range of specialized cleaning products. The brand distinguishes itself by promoting the idea that "dirt is part of healthy growth", emphasizing its commitment to making cleaning simpler. With a successful



journey over the years, Skip has gained recognition in the market, both for its effectiveness and for the emotional connection it establishes with Portuguese families.

Although the brand's main focus is on clothing care, it is important to recognize that the resources used in the production of its detergents, that can generate waste that is harmful to the environment. So, in line with its mother company, Unilever, Skip has made efforts to reduce its environmental impact. The brand has implemented sustainable measures, such as using fully recyclable packaging and producing concentrated detergents in capsules and reducing the use of plastic as much as possible (Unilever, 2024g).

To reinforce its commitment to sustainability, Skip communicates its focus on three fronts: "For a cleaner planet", where it shares its objectives and sustainable practices in factories and in the selection of raw materials, while also offering suggestions to help the environment, such as saving energy, water and reducing packaging waste.

In "My child, a nature explorer", the brand encourages children to take part in protecting the environment and building a better world. In "Ecological ideas for children", the importance of educating children to live in society and contribute to the collective good, particularly the well-being of the planet. By directing its communication towards families, Skip also aims to educate children about responsible consumption and the importance of sustainability (Unilever, 2024g).

With over 150 years of experience, *Vaseline* has established itself as a well-known brand in skin care, offering a wide range of products for all skin types. Vaseline's mission is to protect the skin of consumers and their families in all circumstances, reaffirming the brand's commitment to dermatological well-being.

In the area of sustainability, Vaseline is affirming itself with the "Vaseline Sustainability Journey", where it commits to assessing and mitigating its environmental impact. The brand has implemented several initiatives, including integrating more post-consumer recycled (PCR) materials into its packaging and reducing the use of plastic in its design. However, Vaseline recognizes that this is an ongoing journey, where learning and evolution are key to achieving a more sustainable future (Unilever, 2024h).

To achieve these goals, Vaseline adopts various practices, such as reducing the amount of plastic in each lotion bottle, increasing the use of recycled plastic and providing a recycling guide for its products.

The history of the *Lipton* brand stretches back to the 19th century, created by a visionary entrepreneur born in Glasgow. In 1871, he opened his first grocery store in Glasgow and quickly realized the potential of tea, leading him to acquire plantations in Ceylon.

The iced tea revolution took place at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, when ice was added to tea samples due to the heat, creating a new way of enjoying the drink. Lipton launched its first powdered iced tea in the USA in 1964, arriving in Europe in 1978. In 1991, it introduced Lipton Ice Tea in a bottle, now consumed in more than 100 countries.

Regarding its role in sustainability, in 2007, Lipton's plantation in Kericho, Kenya, became the first to receive Rainforest Alliance certification, reflecting the brand's commitment to sustainable agricultural practices and fair trade. Since 2015, all Lipton tea has come from Rainforest Alliance-certified plantations (Unilever, 2024f).

In partnership with the Rainforest Alliance, Lipton promotes sustainability and supports local communities, preserving biodiversity and improving living conditions for workers. To combat the problem of plastic waste, Unilever committed in 2017 to making all its plastic packaging reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025.

### **3.4. Data Collection and Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, the data collection process began with a detailed analysis of the Unilever company and the brands covered throughout the study, namely: Skip, Knorr, Vaseline, Olá, Calvé and Lipton. The purpose of this analysis is to understand the positioning of these brands in relation to sustainability, specifically whether they communicate sustainable principles and whether they actually apply them. Additionally, an analysis of the previously mentioned brands was carried out to determine whether their sustainability efforts align with Unilever's overarching approach.

Once the above analysis was completed, an online questionnaire was developed using the Qualtrics survey platform, allowing the author to collect and record participants' responses and opinions on the subject. The questionnaire was constructed based on a review of existing literature and similar questionnaires found in other dissertation studies, particularly those available in the ISCTE Repository. This ensured that the questions were relevant and aligned with the research objectives. The questionnaire items were carefully crafted to address the core questions of this research and to yield data that could effectively answer these questions.

Before the questionnaire was made available to participants, a pilot test was conducted with 7 individuals to ensure its comprehension and clarity. Necessary adjustments were made based

on the feedback received. The final version of the questionnaire was distributed in Portuguese and was accompanied by an explanatory note from the author, outlining the research objectives while ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses.

The questionnaire comprised a total of 16 questions, although the number of questions might vary depending on the respondent's answers. The first section included demographic questions such as gender, age, and education level. The second section contained specific questions aimed at assessing knowledge and opinions about the presented brands. Finally, the third section sought to understand respondents' perceptions of Unilever's sustainable communication and practices.

The questionnaire presents different types of questions, including multiple choice, matrix table and rank order questions. Regarding the questions presented through a matrix table, these are presented based on the Likert scale, which means that a 5-point scale is used, where 1 is Strongly disagree, 2 - Partially disagree, 3 - Neither agree nor disagree, 4 - Partially agree and 5 - Strongly agree. The questions were designed not only to reflect the research objectives but also to ensure that the responses gathered would provide insights into the consumers' perceptions of the brands under study.

The questionnaire sample was carefully selected to match a desired profile representative of the broader Portuguese population. The questionnaire was distributed across multiple platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and LinkedIn, to maximize participant reach. It was available from March 26, 2024, to April 26, 2024, to ensure a representative sample.

After data collection, the responses were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to draw comprehensive conclusions for the study.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Data Analysis and Discussion*

#### 4.1. Survey results

To introduce the analysis of the questionnaire, it is important to note that data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to consumers. The sample covered individuals from different age groups and was obtained via various digital platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. After a month of distribution, 208 responses had been collected, which serve as the basis for this analysis.

##### *4.1.1. Analysing Cronbach's alpha*

To assess the reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire, the data analysis began with a Cronbach's alpha evaluation. Cronbach's alpha is a widely used measure to determine how closely related a set of items are, providing an estimate of the questionnaire's reliability. Typically, a Cronbach's alpha value above 0.7 is considered acceptable, indicating that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

The Cronbach's alpha values for each group were calculated as follows:

| GROUP  | CRONBACH'S ALPHA VALUE | INTERPRETATION   |
|--|------------------------|--|
| Group 1: Communication of sustainability by brands (Question 5.1)      | 0.872                  | High internal consistency - suitable for main analysis |
| Group 2: Effectiveness of brand sustainability (Question 5.2)          | 0.865                  | High internal consistency - suitable for main analysis |
| Group 3: Unilever's perception of sustainability (Questions 11 and 14) | 0.820                  | Good internal consistency - suitable for main analysis |

*Figure 1- Analysing Cronbach's alpha*

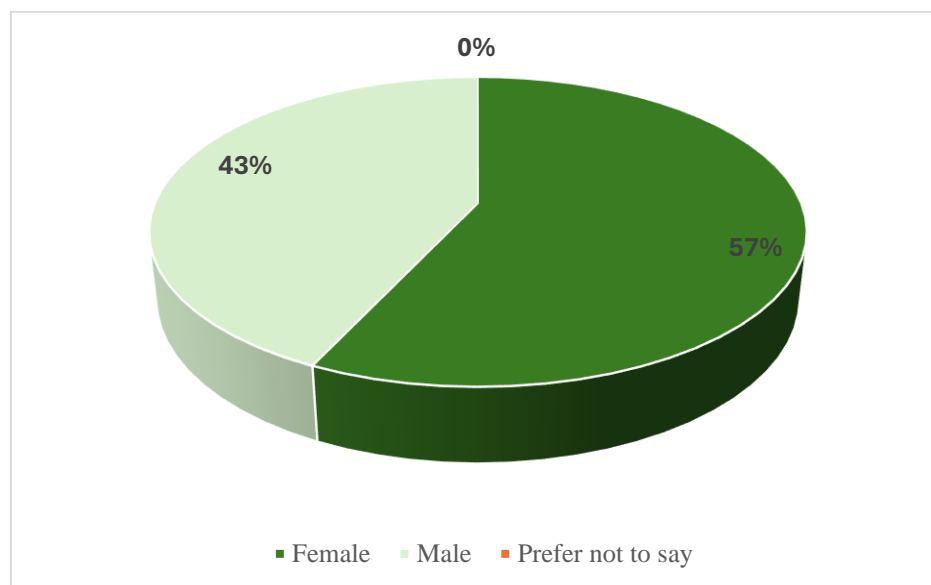
Source: Elaborated by the author based on Cronbach's Alpha analysis

The Cronbach's alpha values obtained (0.872 for the communication of sustainability by brands, 0.865 for the effectiveness of sustainability practices, and 0.820 for the perception of

sustainability at Unilever) suggest that the questions consistently measure the intended concepts. This high internal consistency reflects that the participants' answers are reliable and indicate a cohesive perception in relation to the sustainability dimensions addressed. Therefore, the questions are suitable for use in the main analysis, ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the data are founded on stable and consistent measurements.

#### 4.2. Sample Characterization

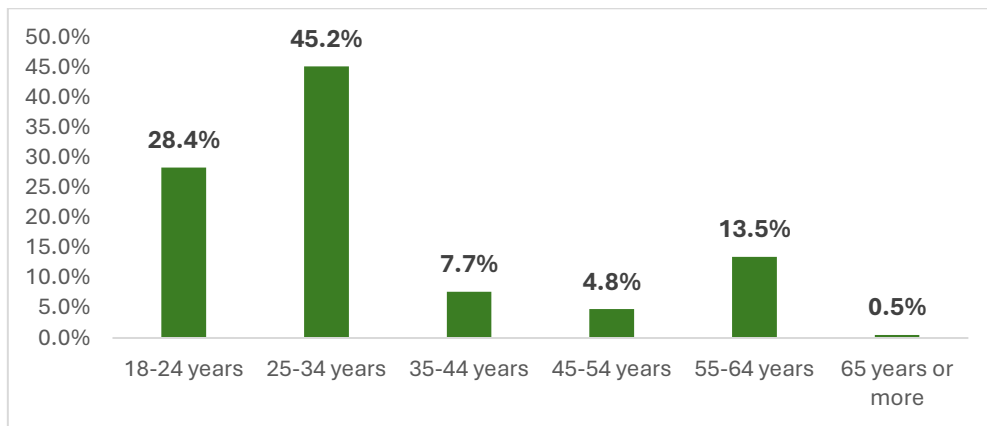
To characterise the sample under study, detailed demographic data was collected from the respondents. This data allows for effective segmentation of responses based on key variables such as gender, age and level of education. This approach enables a more precise and enriching analysis, making it easier to understand the differences and trends within the different groups of the population studied. From the total sample collected (208), 119 respondents (57%) were female and 89 (43%) males.



*Figure 2 – Gender of respondents*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

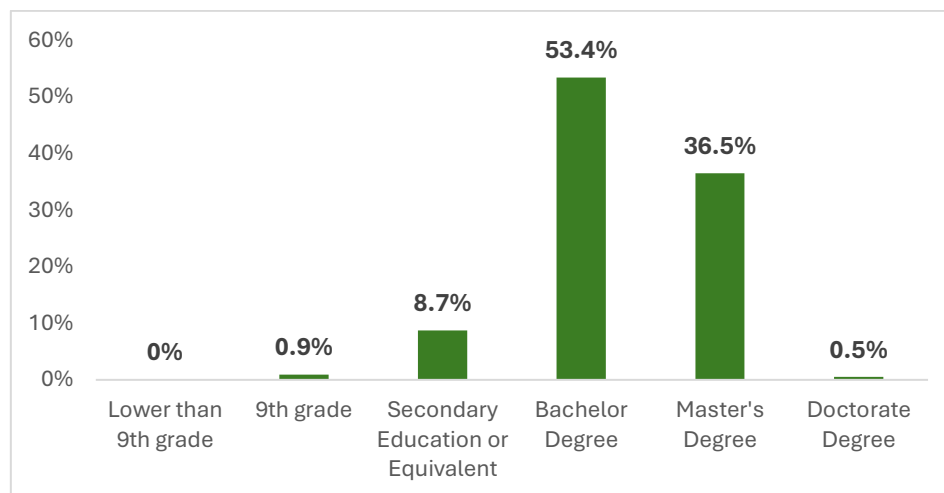
Regarding the age of the respondents, the most represented age group is 25-34 (45,2%), followed by 18-24 (28,4%). The age groups with the lowest representation are: 35-44 years (7,7%), 45-54 years (4,8%) and 55-64 years (13,5%). Finally, the least represented age group is 65 and over, with just 0,5%.



*Figure 3 – Age of respondents*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

Regarding the respondents' level of education, we found that the majority had a bachelor's degree (53,4%), followed by a significant number with a master's degree (36,5%). A smaller proportion have completed secondary education or equivalent (8,7%) and few respondents have a doctorate. Finally, only 0,9% of respondents had completed the 9th grade.



*Figure 4 – Level of education of respondents*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

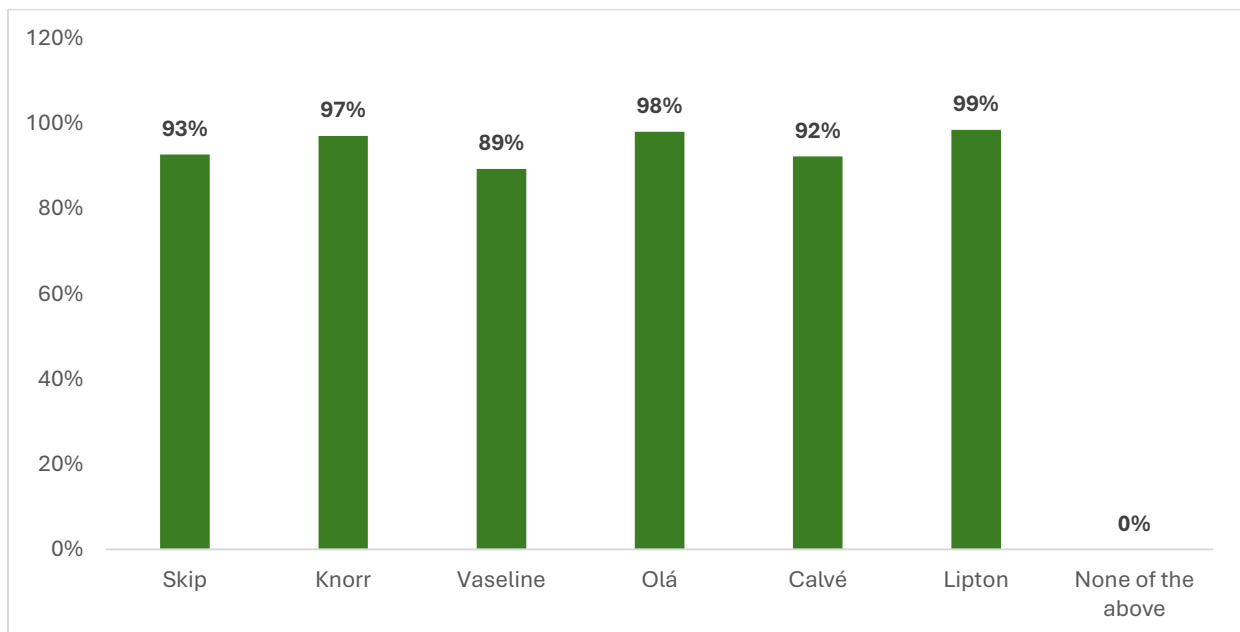
To conclude the characterisation of the sample under study, we can see that the majority of respondents are young adults (25-34 years old) with a high level of education (bachelor's or master's degree) and there is a balanced distribution between genders, with a slight majority of women.

### 4.3. Brand awareness and consumption

The bar graph visually shows the respondents' level of familiarity with the brands mentioned. It can be seen that all the brands have a high level of recognition, with percentages of over 89%.

The Lipton brand is the best known, with 99% of respondents claiming to know it. The Olá and Knorr brands are also highly recognised, with 98% and 97% respectively.

The Vaseline brand, despite being the least well known of those listed, still has a significant 89% recognition. The Calvé and Skip brands have slightly higher levels of recognition, at 92% and 93% respectively.



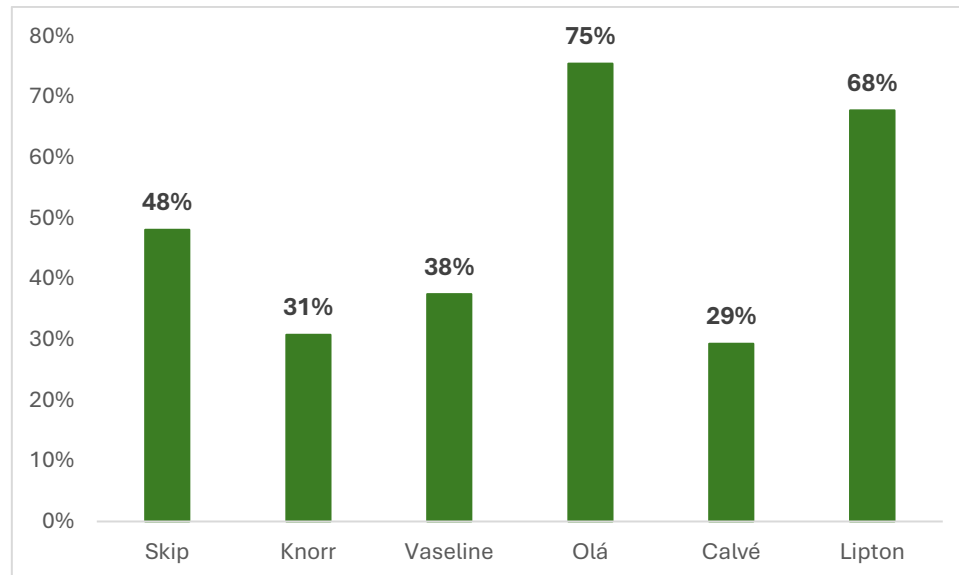
*Figure 5 – Level of familiarity with brands*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

When questioning respondents about the brands they consume the most, it turns out that Olá is the most consumed, with 75% of respondents indicating it. Lipton is the second most consumed brand, with 68%.



Skip is the third most popular, consumed by 48% of respondents. Calvé, on the other hand, is the least popular, with only 29% of respondents. Knorr and Vaseline are at intermediate levels of consumption, with 31% and 38% respectively.



*Figure 6 – Top 3 Most Consumed Brands*

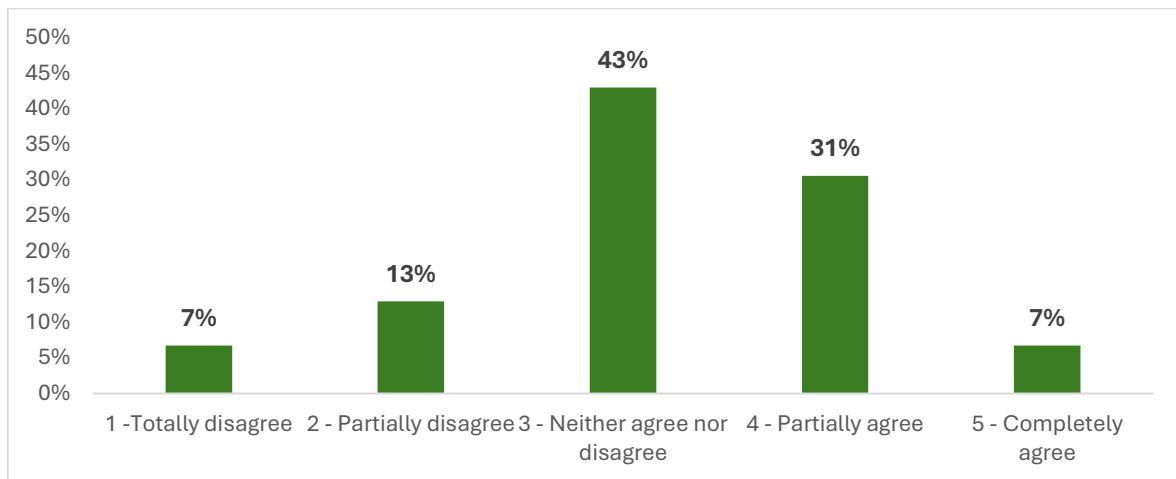
Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

#### **4.4. Perception of sustainability**

When we asked respondents about their level of agreement with the statements 'To what level do you agree that the following brands communicate sustainability?' and 'To what level do you agree that the following brands are effectively sustainable?', we focussed only on the brands that they had identified as well-known in the question 'Which of the following brands do you know? So, we didn't get a total of 208 answers for each brand.

##### ***4.4.1. Perception of sustainable communication: to what level do you agree that brands communicate sustainability?***

The following bar chart shows the respondents' perceptions of the Skip brand's sustainability communication. The majority of respondents have a neutral opinion (43%) about this communication. A considerable proportion of respondents partially agree (31%), while 13% partially disagree. Only 7% of respondents totally disagree, and a further 7% totally agree. This feedback was provided by 193 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.

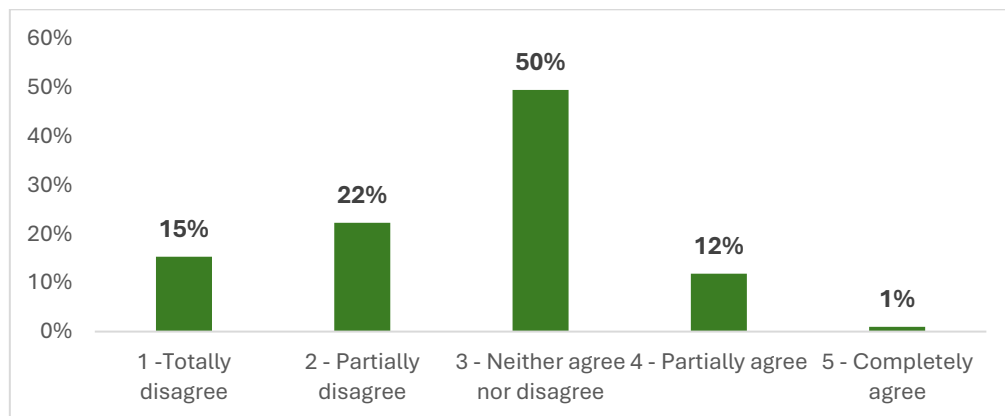


*Figure 7 – SKIP - Perception of Brand Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

Most respondents expressed a neutral stance on Knorr's sustainability communication, with 50% remaining indifferent. A smaller proportion partially disagree (22%) or totally disagree (15%). Only a small proportion partially agree (12%), and almost no respondents totally agree (1%).

This feedback was provided by 202 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.

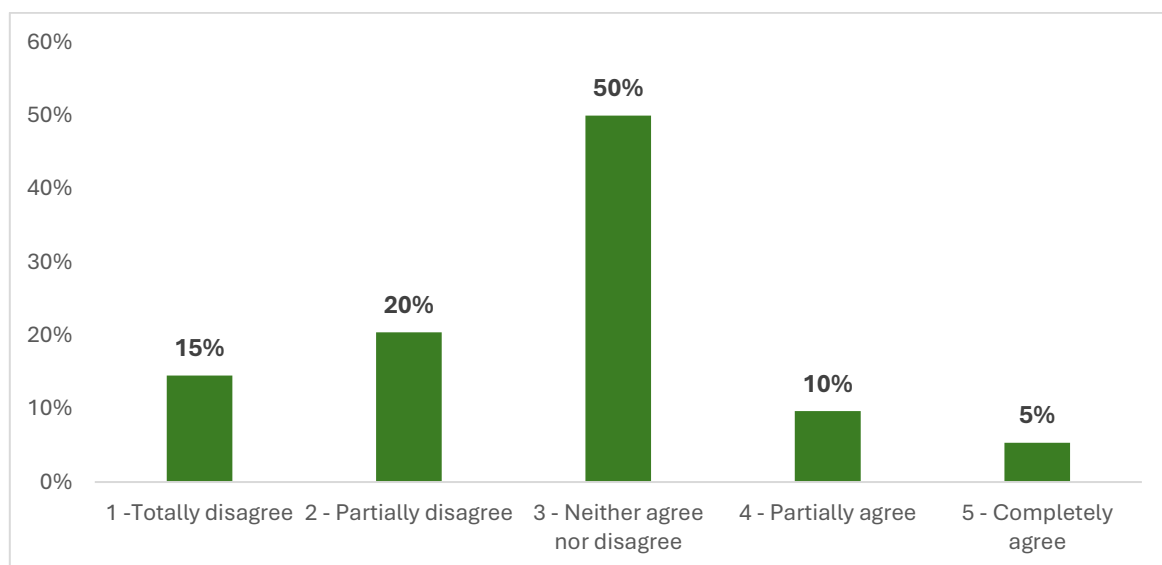


*Figure 8 – KNORR - Perception of Brand Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The majority of people surveyed maintain a neutral stance on the Vaseline brand's sustainability communication, with 50% expressing indifference. A smaller proportion disagrees partially (20%) or totally (15%). Only a small proportion partially agree (10%), and an even smaller fraction totally agree (5%).

This feedback was provided by 186 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.

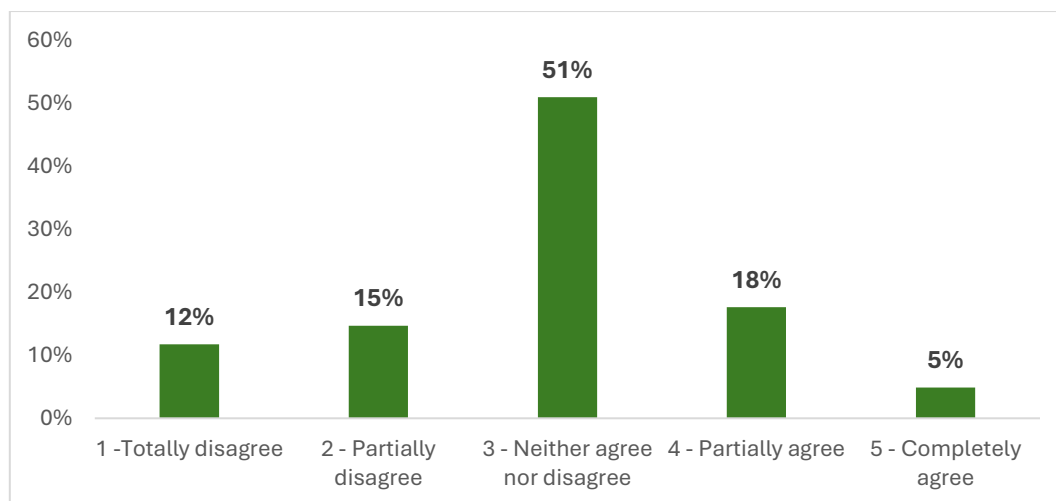


*Figure 9 – VASELINE - Perception of Brand Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

It's possible to observe a neutral opinion of Olá brand's sustainability communication, with 51% taking this view. A considerable proportion partially agree (18%). In contrast, a smaller proportion disagrees partially (15%) or totally (12%). Only 5% of respondents show total agreement with the brand's communication.

This feedback was provided by 204 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.

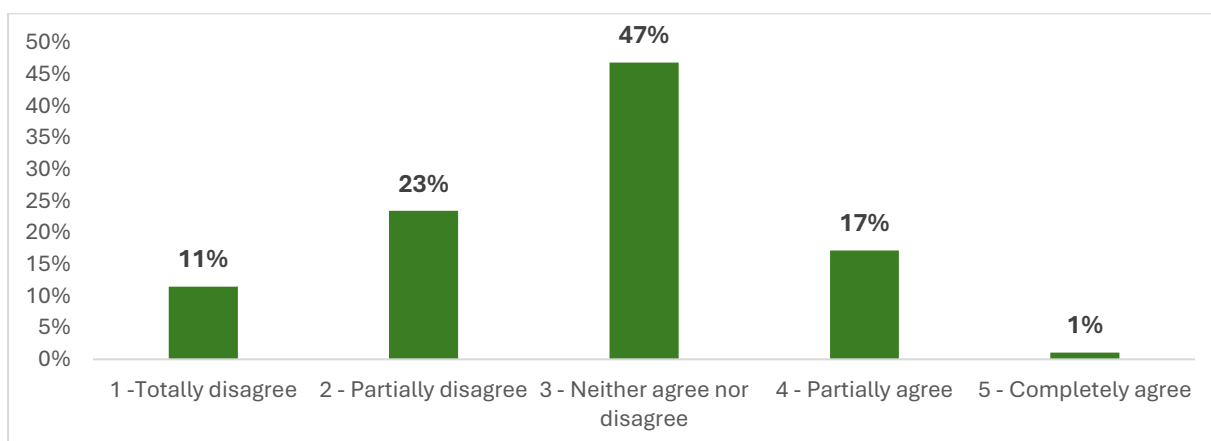


*Figure 10 – OLÁ - Perception of Brand Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The majority of respondents maintain a neutral stance on the Calvé brand's sustainability communication, with 47% showing indifference. A significant proportion partially disagreed (23%). A smaller proportion partially agree (17%) or totally disagree (11%). Only 1% of respondents expressed total agreement with the brand's communication.

This feedback was provided by 192 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



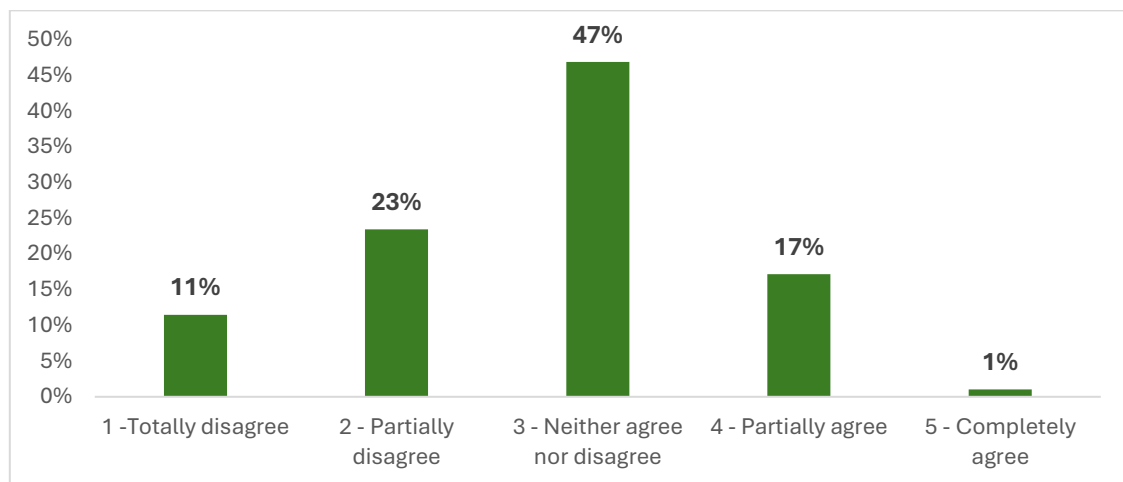
*Figure 11 – CALVÉ - Perception of Brand Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

Many respondents adopt a neutral position in relation to the Lipton brand's sustainability communication, with 47% expressing indifference.

A significant proportion partially disagree (23%). A smaller proportion partially agree (17%) or totally disagree (11%). Only 1% of respondents show total agreement with the brand's communication.

This feedback was provided by 205 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



*Figure 12 – LIPTON - Perception of Brand Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The analyses reveal that the perception of the brands' sustainability communication is moderate, with most respondents not expressing a strong opinion, remaining neutral between agreeing and disagreeing.

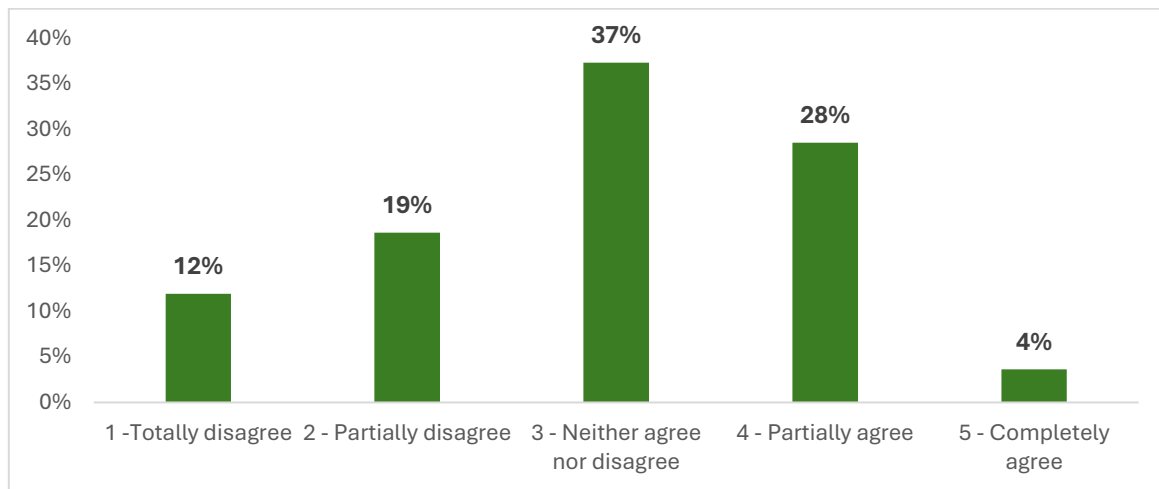
The Lipton and Skip brands stand out in terms of sustainability communication. For Lipton, 17% of respondents partially agree and 1% totally agree. In the case of Skip, 31% partially agree and 7% totally agree.

#### ***4.4.2. Perception of Sustainability: To What Level Are Brands Actually Sustainable?***

Concerning perception of sustainability, respondents adopt a neutral position on the sustainability of the Skip brand, with 37% expressing indifference. A significant proportion partially agree with the sustainability of the brand (28%), indicating that many recognize some sustainable aspects in the brand. However, 19% of respondents partially disagree, and 12% totally disagree. Only 4% expressed total agreement with the brand's sustainability.

Although Skip has a relatively high percentage of partial agreement, the brand still faces a considerable level of neutrality among consumers.

This feedback was provided by 193 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



*Figure 13 - SKIP - Perception of Effective Brand Sustainability*

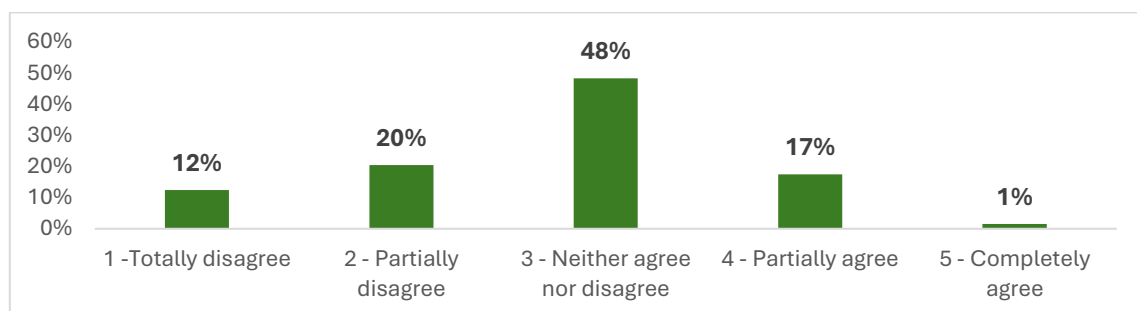
Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

About the perception of effective brand sustainability, respondents adopt a neutral stance on the sustainability of the Knorr brand, with 48% expressing indifference.

A proportion of 20% partially disagree, while 12% totally disagree. On the other hand, 17% of respondents partially agree with the sustainability of the brand, and only 1% express total agreement.

The high level of neutrality towards the Knorr brand may suggest that communication about the brand's sustainability is not sufficiently clear or impactful.

This feedback was provided by 202 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



*Figure 14 – KNORR - Perception of Effective Brand Sustainability*

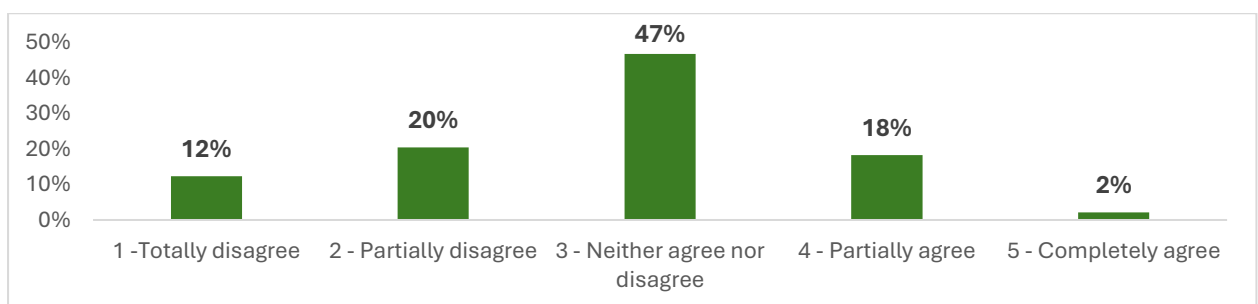
Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The respondents were asked about their perceptions of effective brand sustainability, and they are neutral about the sustainability of the Vaseline brand (47%).

20% of respondents partially disagree, while 12% totally disagree and 18% of respondents partially agree, while only 2% totally agree.

Similar to Knorr, the high neutrality suggests that the Vaseline brand also needs to improve communication about its sustainable initiatives.

This feedback was provided by 186 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



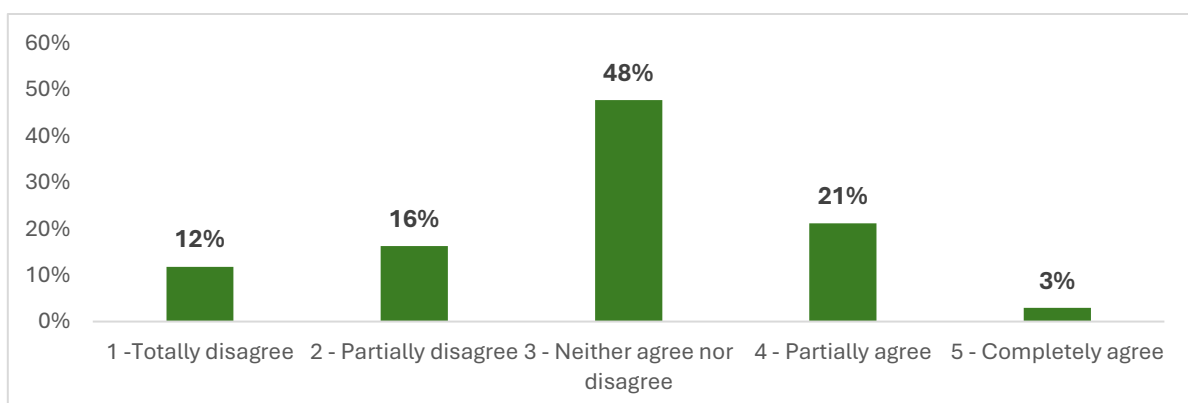
*Figure 15 – VASELINE - Perception of Effective Brand Sustainability*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

Respondents adopt a neutral stance on the sustainability of the Olá brand, with 48% expressing indifference.

Among the respondents, 21% partially agree with the sustainability of the brand, while only 3% totally agree. In addition, 16% partially disagreed and 12% totally disagreed.

This feedback was provided by 204 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



*Figure 16 – OLÁ - Perception of Effective Brand Sustainability*

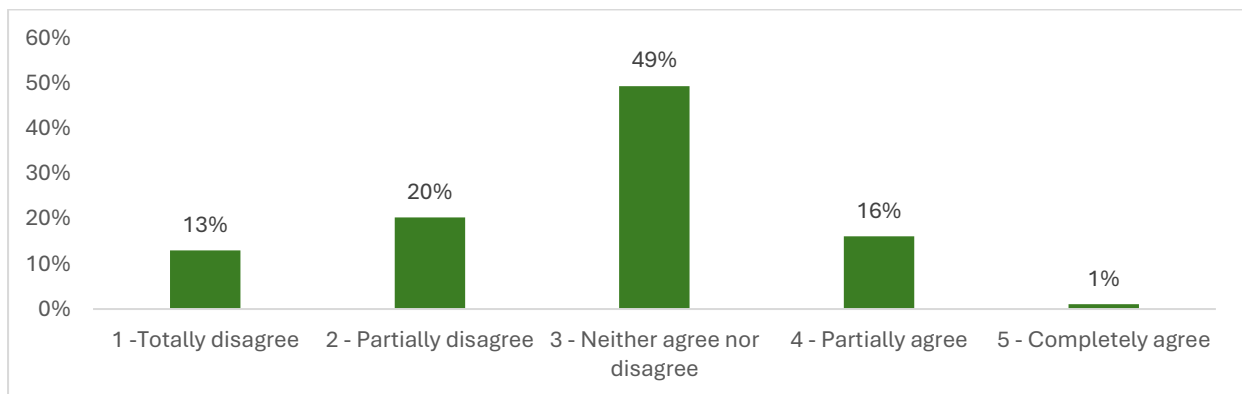
Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

When asking about Calvé brand, respondents maintain a neutral stance on the sustainability of the brand, with 49% expressing indifference.

20% partially disagree and 13% totally disagree. On the other hand, 16% of respondents partially agree with the sustainability of the brand, while only 1% totally agree.

The high neutrality indicates that Calvé may need to improve its communication on sustainability to achieve a clearer and more positive perception.

This feedback was provided by 192 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.



*Figure 17 – CALVÉ - Perception of Effective Brand Sustainability*

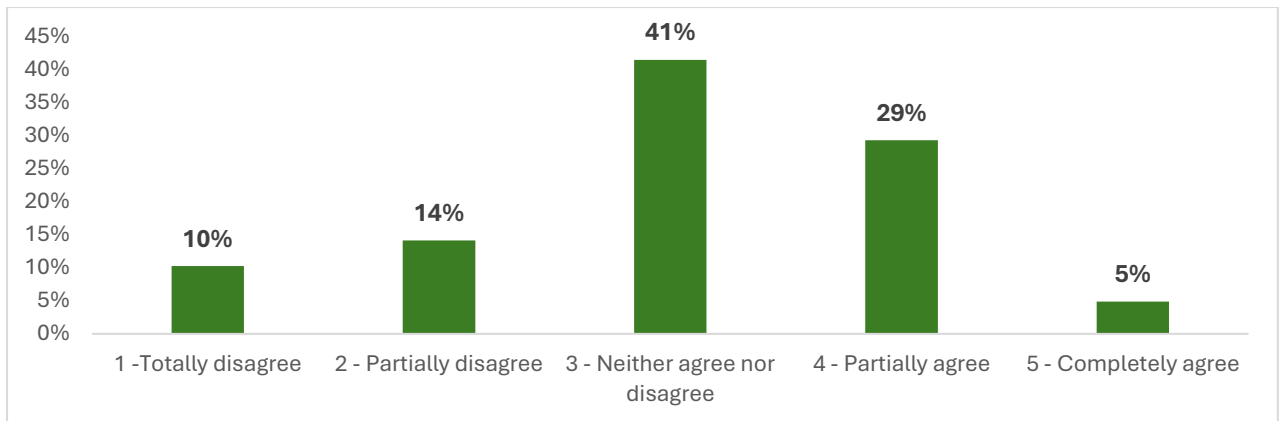
Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The majority of respondents adopt a neutral stance on the sustainability of the Lipton brand, with 41% expressing indifference.

Of the respondents, 29% partially agree with the sustainability of the brand, while only 5% totally agree. In addition, 14% partially disagreed and 10% totally disagreed.

This feedback was provided by 205 respondents, reflecting the number of valid answers to this question.





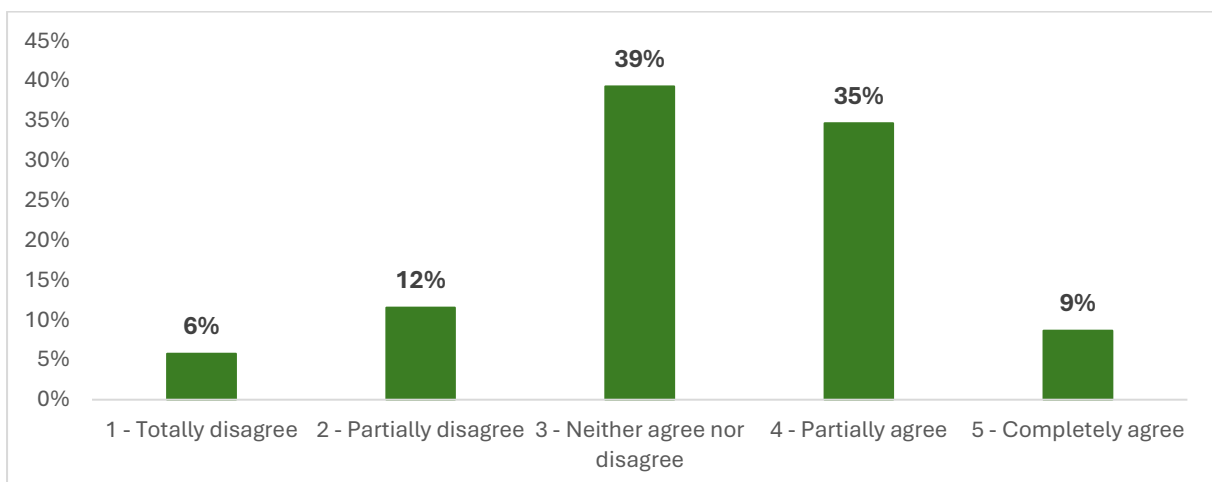
*Figure 18 – LIPTON - Perception of Effective Brand Sustainability*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

#### **4.5. Unilever's perception of communication and sustainability**

The third part of the questionnaire consisted in questions that evaluate consumers' perceptions of Unilever's sustainability communication, using a scale of 1 to 5. The analysis is based on a valid sample of 173 respondents who said they knew the Unilever company.

The first question specifically focused on understanding whether respondents agreed that the Unilever company communicates sustainability. Most respondents (39%) have not formed an opinion, answering 'Neither agree nor disagree', while a significant proportion (35%) partially agree that Unilever communicates sustainability. Only 9% totally agree. A significant minority disagree, either totally or partially, with Unilever's sustainability communication.



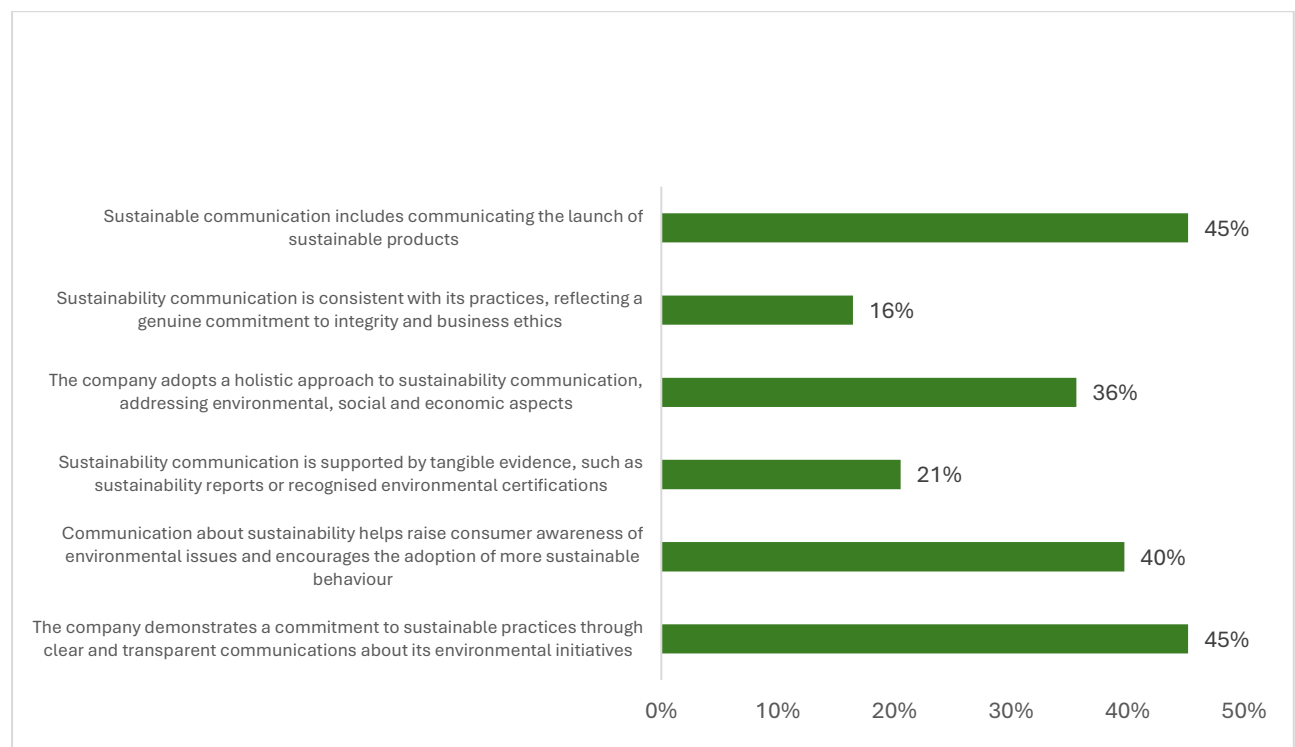
*Figure 19 - Unilever's Perception of Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The second question aimed to explore the reasons why respondents believe that Unilever communicates sustainability. This question was directed exclusively at participants who indicated ‘partially agree’ or ‘totally agree’ in the question about Unilever's sustainability communication, resulting in a valid sample of 73 respondents.

The main reasons cited by respondents for considering that Unilever communicates sustainability are:

- **Launching Sustainable Products and Commitment to Sustainable Practices (45%):** Respondents emphasize that Unilever is committed to sustainable practices and promotes products with ecological characteristics.
- **Raising Awareness of Environmental Issues (40%):** Unilever's communication is seen as an effective tool for raising consumer awareness of environmental issues.
- **Holistic Approach to Sustainability Communication (36%):** Respondents appreciate Unilever's integrated approach to its sustainability communication, which addresses multiple aspects in a comprehensive manner.



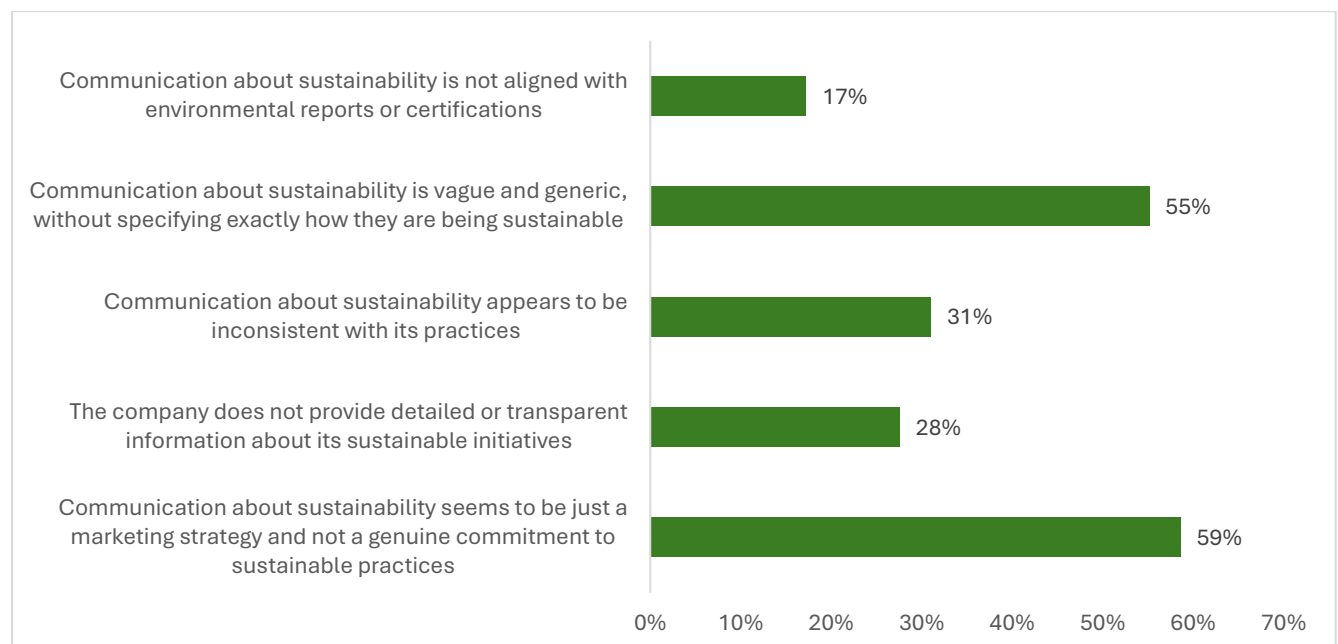
*Figure 20 - Reasons for Agreeing with Unilever's Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

As a way of understanding the reasons why respondents disagree with the idea that Unilever communicates sustainability effectively. This question was addressed exclusively to participants who answered ‘partially disagree’ or ‘totally disagree’ to the question about Unilever's sustainability communication, resulting in a valid sample of 29 respondents.

The main reasons given by respondents for disagreeing with Unilever's sustainability communication are:

- **Perceived Marketing Strategy Without Genuine Commitment (59%):** Many respondents consider that Unilever's communication appears to be more of a marketing strategy than a genuine commitment to sustainability.
- **Vague and Generic Communication (55%):** Unilever's communication is seen as imprecise and generic, with no clear details about how the company is implementing sustainable practices.
- **Inconsistency with Company Practices (31%):** Some respondents feel that Unilever's communication does not match its actual practices, generating a perception of a lack of coherence.

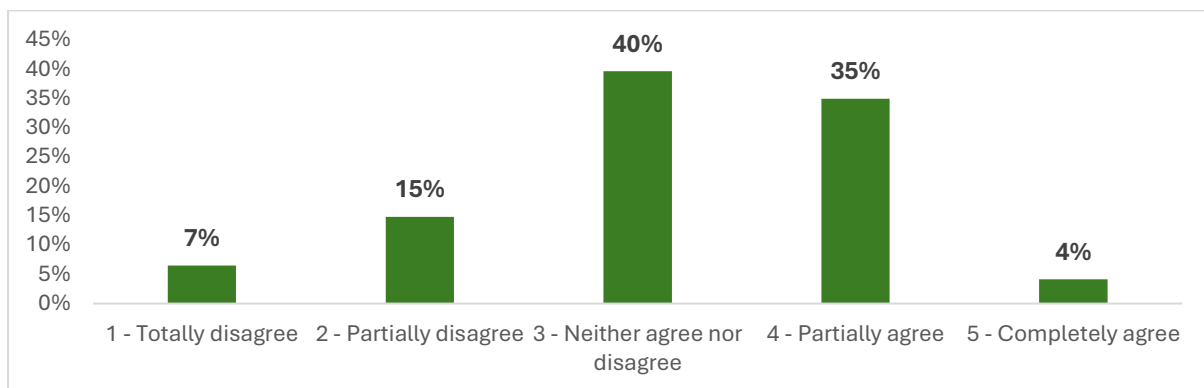


*Figure 21 - Reasons for disagreeing with Unilever's Sustainability Communication*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The last part of the questionnaire aimed to evaluate respondents' perceptions of Unilever's sustainability, using a scale from 1 to 5. This analysis is based on a valid sample of 169 respondents who confirmed that they knew the Unilever company-

The results show that most respondents (40%) remain neutral, answering ‘Neither agree nor disagree’ about Unilever's sustainability. A significant proportion (35%) partially agree with the statement that Unilever is a sustainable company, while only 4% totally agree. On the other hand, a minority (22%) disagree, either totally or partially, with the idea that Unilever is a sustainable company.



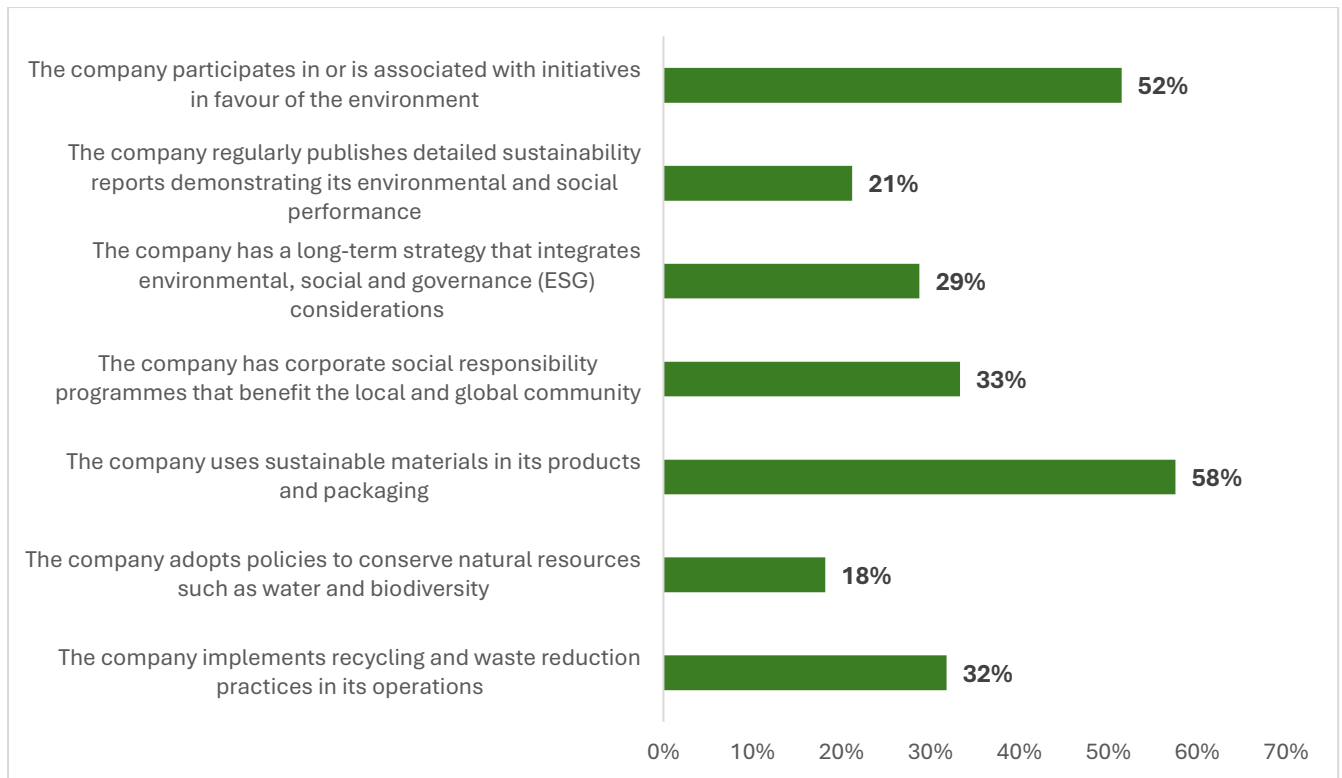
*Figure 22 - Unilever's Perception of Sustainability*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

The second question was focused on exploring the reasons why respondents believe that Unilever is a sustainable company. This question was addressed exclusively to participants who answered ‘partially agree’ or ‘totally agree’ to the question about Unilever's sustainability, resulting in a valid sample of 66 respondents.

The main reasons given by respondents for considering Unilever a sustainable company are:

- **Use of Sustainable Materials in Products and Packaging (58%):** Many respondents emphasise that the use of sustainable materials in their products and packaging contributes to their perception of sustainability.
- **Participation in Environmental Initiatives (52%):** Unilever's participation in various environmental initiatives is seen as an important factor that reinforces its image as a sustainable company.
- **Implementation of Recycling and Waste Reduction Practices (32%):** The adoption of recycling practices and waste reduction are also recognised as significant components of the company's sustainable approach.



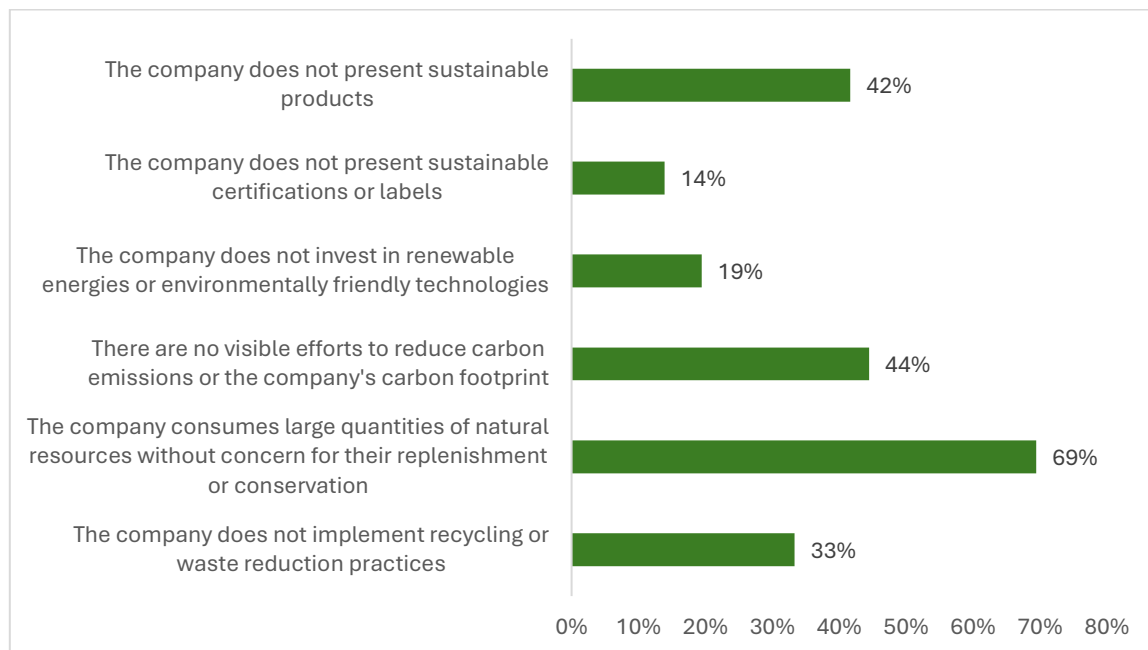
*Figure 23 - Reasons for Agreeing with Unilever's Sustainability*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

With the aim of identify the reasons why some respondents disagree with the statement that Unilever is a sustainable company. This question was addressed exclusively to participants who answered 'partially disagree' or 'totally disagree' to the question about Unilever's sustainability, resulting in a valid sample of 36 respondents.

The main reasons given by respondents for not considering Unilever a sustainable company are:

- **Excessive Consumption of Natural Resources Without Adequate Replenishment or Conservation (69%):** Many respondents point out that Unilever consumes large quantities of natural resources without demonstrating sufficient effort to replenish or conserve them.
- **Lack of Visible Efforts to Reduce Carbon Emissions (44%):** The lack of clear and visible initiatives to reduce carbon emissions is cited as a significant reason for disagreement.
- **Perceived Lack of Sustainable Products (42%):** There is a perception that Unilever does not offer enough sustainable products, which contributes to the negative view of its sustainability.



*Figure 24 - Reasons for disagreeing with Unilever's Sustainability*

Source: Elaborated by the author based on questionnaire's answers

#### **4.6. Discussion of results**

In this section, the main results obtained will be discussed in the light of the literature and in relation to the overall sustainability strategy of Unilever and its brands, as analysed in chapter 3. Unilever is widely recognised for its sustainability commitments, but the results of the questionnaire suggest a disconnect between the communication of these initiatives and consumer perception.

##### **4.6.1. Relations Between questions**

Two groups of questions were chosen to explore the relationship between sustainability communication and the perceived effectiveness of the sustainable practices of Unilever's brands, as well as Unilever itself as a global entity. The aim is to understand whether the sustainability messages that Unilever communicates are aligned with what consumers perceive as real and effective actions, through the results obtained in the questionnaire.

#### **Group 1: Sustainability Communication vs. Effectiveness of Sustainable Practices**

The results show that, in general, consumers maintain a neutral stance towards both sustainability communication and the perceived effectiveness of practices. For example, Skip, one of Unilever's most recognisable brands, distinguished itself with high neutrality (43% for communication and 37% for effectiveness). This response pattern indicates that although sustainability messages are present, they are not convincing or clear enough to generate a more positive or negative perception.

In point 3.3.1, it was emphasised that Unilever has communicated various sustainability practices, such as reducing plastic waste and using sustainable raw materials. However, consumers do not seem to associate these initiatives with concrete changes in the product or its environmental impact, which can be explained by the concept of 'involuntary greenwashing' (Pucker, 2021). The communication of sustainable practices needs to be accompanied by tangible evidence demonstrating the real benefits of these actions for consumers to recognise them as authentic.

An additional example is the Knorr brand, whose communication emphasises sustainable practices in agriculture. Despite this focus, 50 % of respondents maintained a neutral perception of sustainability communication, and 48 % were equally neutral about the effectiveness of these practices. This data is in line with the literature, which suggests that when consumers do not have clear and tangible evidence of the positive impact of these actions, they tend to adopt a neutral or sceptical stance (Serafeim, 2021).

### **Group 2: Unilever's Sustainability Communication vs. Effectiveness of Practices**

At a global level, Unilever as a company shows similar results to its brands. Of those surveyed, 39 % maintained a neutral position on Unilever's sustainability communication, and 40 % remained neutral on the effectiveness of its sustainable practices. These results raise questions about the effectiveness of Unilever's communication in conveying the relevance and impact of its sustainable actions. Unilever is known for its Sustainability Plan, which sets ambitious targets for reducing emissions and using recyclable materials. However, the data shows that these messages are not being perceived as effective by consumers.

As discussed in section 3.3.1, brands such as Lipton and Knorr, which integrate certified sustainable practices such as the Rainforest Alliance, should be perceived more positively, but the high neutrality suggests that consumers are not understanding the concrete impact of these initiatives. The literature emphasises that for sustainability practices to be valued, they need to be accompanied by visible and measurable evidence, something that seems to be lacking in Unilever's communication (Holt, 2020).

#### ***4.6.2. Final discussion***

Analysing the data reveals a significant disconnect between Unilever's sustainability communication and consumers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these practices. Although the company has adopted numerous sustainable initiatives, as discussed in section 3.3.1, consumer perception remains predominantly neutral. This result suggests that although Unilever is communicating these actions, the way in which the messages are conveyed is not generating the desired impact.

The literature indicates that for sustainability communication to be effective, it must be clear, transparent and accompanied by concrete examples that show the positive impact of the company's actions (Serafeim, 2021). However, in the case of Unilever, the concept of 'involuntary greenwashing' seems to be at play, since consumers find it difficult to distinguish between marketing messages and real actions that make a difference (Pucker, 2021).

The commitments established in Unilever's Sustainability Plan, which include waste reduction and the use of sustainable agricultural practices, are clear examples of significant efforts on the part of the company. However, the research reveals that the communication of these commitments is not being tangible or relevant enough for consumers, who continue to adopt a neutral stance on their effectiveness. To reverse this situation, Unilever should focus on improving the transparency of its actions, publishing more accessible and clear reports that unequivocally demonstrate the results achieved.

In addition, the company could directly involve consumers in sustainability initiatives, such as recycling programmes and community campaigns, creating a closer link between reported practices and the direct impact on consumers' lives. This kind of approach would help convert neutral perceptions into more positive ones, reinforcing trust in brands and in Unilever itself.



## CHAPTER 5

### *Conclusions*

#### **5.1. Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to analyse Unilever company's' sustainability communication and how consumers perceive sustainable practices, by answering three research questions. The research included collecting data through a questionnaire, the results of which reveal important insights into sustainability communication, the fulfilment of promises and consumer perceptions of Unilever and its brands.

To answer the first research question: 'How effectively are companies communicating their actions towards sustainability?'

The results of the analysis indicate that the sustainability communication of brands is still moderately perceived by consumers. Although brands such as Lipton and Skip stand out positively, with 17 % and 31 % of respondents, respectively, partially agreeing that these brands communicate their sustainable practices well, the majority of consumers maintained a neutral position. This finding suggests that although brands are adopting sustainability-focused communication strategies, these are not being convincing or clear enough for the target audience.

When relating these results to Unilever's sustainability report, it can be seen that the company stands out for communicating its initiatives on various fronts, such as reducing carbon emissions and using recyclable materials. However, the neutrality observed in the questionnaire results suggests that Unilever's communication may not be being perceived in a clear and impactful way by consumers. According to the literature, the effectiveness of sustainability communication depends not only on the frequency and comprehensiveness of the message, but also on its authenticity and ability to generate trust, (Serafeim, 2021). In order to improve the effectiveness of its communication, Unilever should invest in more transparent and detailed narratives that clearly demonstrate the concrete impact of its actions in favour of sustainability. The implementation of regular reports that bridge the gap between promises and results achieved, using objective and verifiable metrics, would be a recommended approach.

The second question was: 'To what level are companies fulfilling the sustainability promises made in their communications?'

The study revealed a considerable gap between the sustainability promises communicated by company and consumers' perceptions of the fulfilment of these promises. Brands such as Knorr and Vaseline showed a high rate of neutrality or distrust, with 50 % and 47 % of consumers,

respectively, not taking a clear position on whether these brands are implementing their sustainable promises. In addition, sustainability communication was seen by some consumers as a marketing strategy rather than a genuine initiative.

These results, when compared with Unilever's sustainability report, suggest that although the company communicates its sustainable actions extensively, there is a disconnect between what is communicated and what consumers perceive as actually being implemented. The literature review indicates that such a disconnect can negatively affect consumer trust, who may begin to see companies as less transparent and more focused on maximising profits through sustainability as an empty slogan, (Pucker, 2021). To address this challenge, Unilever and other companies should better align their practices with communication, perhaps through the adoption of independent audits that verify the fulfilment of sustainability promises and offer a seal of trust that can be clearly communicated to the public.

Thirdly, 'How do consumers perceive companies' sustainable practices?'

It was found that consumers 'perception of companies' sustainable practices is also unclear, with the majority of respondents expressing neutrality regarding the effectiveness of brands' sustainable practices. In the case of Unilever, 39 % of respondents maintained a neutral position in relation to sustainability communication, and 40 % were indifferent about the effectiveness of their practices. This data suggests that consumers are not yet seeing a direct and consistent link between Unilever's communication and the tangible actions they take in favour of the environment.

To change this perception, companies, including Unilever, must adopt more participatory communication practices, involving consumers in building sustainable initiatives. The literature emphasises the importance of authentic and participatory communication to strengthen consumer trust, (Holt, 2020). Including consumers in concrete actions, such as recycling campaigns or community projects, can help transform the company's image and strengthen trust in its sustainable actions.

In conclusion, this study highlights the need for more effective and transparent communication on the part of companies in order to align their sustainable practices with the messages communicated to the public. The neutrality observed in consumer responses indicates that although Unilever has made progress in communicating sustainability, there is still a way to go to convert this neutrality into positive perceptions and trust. To do this, it is essential that companies not only communicate their intentions, but also clearly implement and demonstrate the results of their sustainable actions. Unilever, in particular, by aligning its practices with more transparent and participatory communication, can strengthen its position as a leader in

sustainability, fulfilling not only consumer expectations, but also making a tangible contribution to preserving the environment.

## **5.2. Limitations and contributions**

This study is based on self-reported data from consumers, which can introduce biases, such as the tendency of participants to provide socially preferable answers. This subjective data may not accurately reflect actual actions and perceptions, creating a limitation in the validity of the results. The limited size of the sample can restrict the ability to generalize the results to a wider population. Furthermore, if the sample is not sufficiently diverse in terms of age, gender, geographical location or other socio-demographic characteristics, the results may only reflect the perceptions of a specific group.

This study adds value to the existing body of research by exploring the discrepancy between companies' sustainability communication and consumers' perceptions of these practices. Analyzing this phenomenon in different economic sectors may reveal distinct patterns, which would represent a significant additional contribution.

The results of the study emphasize the importance of more transparent communication in line with companies' actual sustainable practices. For managers, this means that effective communication of sustainable practices should not only focus on marketing, but also involve independent audits and reports that validate these practices. This kind of approach not only improves a company's reputation but can also build a more loyal consumer base.

## **5.3. Suggestions for future research**

The study's analysis focuses only on the perspectives of Portuguese consumers. However, as a suggestion for the future, this study could be applied to other countries, other companies and other areas. Furthermore, in the future it would be interesting to develop a study using technologies such as blockchain, which can provide an innovative solution to guarantee the transparency and traceability of companies' sustainable practices. For example, blockchain could be used to trace the origin of materials in supply chains, ensuring that declared practices are actually followed. Therefore, it would be possible to investigate how the implementation of these technologies' impacts consumer trust in sustainable brands.

On the other hand, it may also be relevant to analyse other external stakeholders, such as NGOs, consumers and industry experts, who can increase the credibility of companies' sustainability

statements. For example, this engagement could be formalised through partnerships or advisory councils that act as independent verifiers of sustainable practices.

#### **5.4. Contributions to management**

The contributions to management derived from this thesis are significant and can help companies and managers to improve their sustainability and communication strategies. Below are some of the main contributions to management identified from the research:

**The alignment between Communication and Practice:** One of the clearest contributions is the need to align the sustainability messages communicated by companies with the actual practices implemented. Companies should develop internal and external verification mechanisms (such as independent audits or sustainability reports) to ensure that their communications are rooted in tangible and verifiable actions. **The adoption of verifiable sustainability reports:** The thesis also suggests that one of the most effective ways of increasing consumer confidence is through detailed and verifiable sustainability reports. Managers should ensure that their companies produce sustainability reports based on globally recognised standards that are clear, accessible and audited by third parties, which will increase the companies' credibility and reduce the risk of being accused of greenwashing.

**Consumer education and involvement:** one of the most important findings was the realisation that many consumers maintain a neutral or sceptical attitude towards companies' sustainability initiatives. This reflects a failure in communication or a lack of consumer education about sustainable practices. Managers need to invest more in consumer education, clearly showing how their sustainable practices have a positive impact on the environment and society

**Integrating ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) into Business Strategy:**

the thesis emphasises the importance of ESG practices for the long-term success of companies. By integrating ESG principles into their operations and strategies, companies not only reduce environmental and social risks, but also create sustainable value.

These contributions offer practical guidelines for managers who want to improve the communication and implementation of sustainable practices in their organisations. Ultimately, the key lies in transparency, consistency between promises and actions, and a genuine commitment to sustainability as a central part of the business strategy. By doing so, companies will not only meet the expectations of modern consumers, but also ensure a more robust, resilient and future-orientated operation.



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## ***APPENDIX:***

### ***Questionnaire***

Olá,

Obrigada por participar no questionário. A sua opinião é extremamente importante e os resultados obtidos serão utilizados apenas para fins académicos.

Sou estudante do último ano do Mestrado em Gestão, no Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE). Este questionário foi criado como parte da minha Dissertação de Mestrado, que se centra na compreensão das percepções dos consumidores relativamente à comunicação e às práticas sustentáveis das empresas.

Se tiver dúvidas ou comentários sobre o questionário, por favor contacte:

mmcao@iscte-iul.pt

Agradeço muito a sua resposta e participação neste inquérito!

Muito obrigada.

#### **Aviso**

A sua participação é voluntária.

A sua resposta baseia-se em convicções pessoais e será utilizada apenas para esta investigação.

As informações obtidas serão tratadas de forma anónima, e de acordo com as regras da regulamentação da Proteção Geral de Dados. O questionário terá uma duração aproximada de 5 minutos.

Obrigada.

1. Indique o seu género:

☐ Feminino

☐ Masculino

☐ Prefiro não dizer

2. Indique a sua idade:

☐ 18-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ 55-64

☐ 65 anos ou mais

3. Indique por favor qual o nível de escolaridade mais elevado que conclui:

☐ Inferior ao 9ºano

☐ 9º ano

☐ Ensino Secundário ou Equivalente

☐ Licenciatura

☐ Mestrado

☐ Doutoramento

4. Quais das seguintes marcas conhece?

*Nota: Assinale por favor todas as marcas que conhece*

☐ Skip

☐ Knorr

☐ Vaseline

☐ Olá

☐ Calvé

☐ Lipton

☐ Nenhuma das anteriores

5.1. Até que ponto concorda que as seguintes marcas comunicam sustentabilidade?

|          | 1 - Discordo totalmente | 2 - Discordo parcialmente | 3 - Nem concordo nem discordo | 4 - Concordo parcialmente | 5 - Concordo totalmente |
|----------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Skip     | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Knorr    | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Vaseline | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Olá      | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Calvé    | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Lipton   | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |

5.2. Até que ponto concorda que as seguintes marcas são efetivamente sustentáveis?

|          | 1 - Discordo totalmente | 2 - Discordo parcialmente | 3 - Nem concordo nem discordo | 4 - Concordo parcialmente | 5 - Concordo totalmente |
|----------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Skip     | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Knorr    | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Vaseline | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Olá      | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Calvé    | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Lipton   | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |

6. Das seguintes marcas escolha as três que mais consome.

☐ Skip

☐ Knorr

☐ Vaseline

☐ Olá

☐ Calvé

☐ Lipton

7. Na compra de um produto, ordene as características que mais valoriza, da que considera mais importante para a menos importante.

Embalagem sustentável

Fabricado com ingredientes sustentáveis

Certificação nacional e internacional de sustentabilidade/verde

Origem do produto

Preço acessível

Credibilidade da marca

Outra. Qual?

8. Conhece a empresa Unilever?

☐ Sim

☐ Não

9. Sabia que as marcas referidas anteriormente pertencem ao mesmo grupo empresarial (Unilever)?

☐ Sim

☐ Não

10. Até que ponto concorda que a Unilever comunica sustentabilidade?

*Utilize a seguinte escala:*

|                                    | 1 – Discordo totalmente | 2 – Discordo parcialmente | 3 – Nem concordo nem discordo | 4 – Concordo parcialmente | 5 – Concordo totalmente |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Unilever comunica Sustentabilidade | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |

## 11. Porque que motivo concorda que a Unilever comunica Sustentabilidade?

- ☐ A empresa demonstra um compromisso com as práticas sustentáveis, através de comunicações claras e transparentes sobre as suas iniciativas ambientais
- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade ajuda a consciencializar os consumidores sobre questões ambientais e incentiva a adoção de comportamentos mais sustentáveis
- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade é apoiada por evidências tangíveis, como relatórios de sustentabilidade ou certificações ambientais reconhecidas
- ☐ A empresa adota uma abordagem holística na comunicação de sustentabilidade, abordando aspectos ambientais, sociais e económicos
- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade é consistente com as suas práticas, refletindo um compromisso genuíno com a integridade e a ética empresarial
- ☐ A comunicação sustentável passa por comunicar o lançamento de produtos sustentáveis

## 12. Porque que motivo discorda que a Unilever comunica Sustentabilidade?

- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade parece ser apenas uma estratégia de marketing e não um compromisso genuíno com práticas sustentáveis
- ☐ A empresa não fornece informações detalhadas ou transparentes sobre as suas iniciativas sustentáveis
- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade parece ser inconsistente com as suas práticas
- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade é vaga e genérica, sem especificar exatamente como é que estão a ser sustentáveis
- ☐ A comunicação sobre sustentabilidade não está alinhada com relatórios ou certificações ambientais



13. Até que ponto concorda que a Unilever é uma empresa Sustentável?

Utilize a seguinte escala:

|                                    | 1 – Discordo totalmente | 2 – Discordo parcialmente | 3 – Nem concordo nem discordo | 4 – Concordo parcialmente | 5 – Concordo totalmente |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Unilever é uma empresa sustentável | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>         | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>   |

14. Porque que motivo concorda que a Unilever é uma empresa sustentável?

☐ A empresa implementa práticas de reciclagem e redução de resíduos nas suas operações

☐ A empresa adota políticas de conservação de recursos naturais, como água e biodiversidade

☐ A empresa utiliza materiais sustentáveis nos seus produtos e embalagens

☐ A empresa tem programas de responsabilidade social corporativa que beneficiam a comunidade local e global

☐ A empresa tem uma estratégia a longo prazo que integra as considerações ambientais, sociais e de governança (ESG)

☐ A empresa divulga regularmente relatórios de sustentabilidade detalhados, demonstrando o seu desempenho ambiental e social

☐ A empresa participa ou associa-se a iniciativas em prol do meio ambiente

15. Porque que motivo discorda que a Unilever é uma empresa sustentável?

- ☐ A empresa não implementa práticas de reciclagem ou redução de resíduos
- ☐ A empresa consome grandes quantidades de recursos naturais sem preocupação com a sua reposição ou conservação
- ☐ Não há esforços visíveis para reduzir as emissões de carbono ou a pegada de carbono da empresa
- ☐ A empresa não investe em energias renováveis ou em tecnologias ambientalmente amigáveis
- ☐ A empresa não apresenta certificações ou rótulos sustentáveis
- ☐ A empresa não apresenta produtos sustentáveis

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.  
Your response has been recorded.