

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in
in International Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

Has the Covid-19 pandemic made customers more concerned about sustainability?

**- A closer focus on great success factors for the sales profession during and after the
crisis.**

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Spring Semester

21.05.2021

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Abstract

This master thesis investigates whether the Covid-19 pandemic has made customers more concerned about sustainability and examines the success factors of sales managers during the pandemic. To get better insights, sales experts were interviewed and hypotheses were tested. The analyses show that there is a significant tendency for people to be more sustainably concerned during Covid-19. It also shows that younger customers have a higher level of concern and those who showed a high level of concern will also most likely maintain this after the crisis. Moreover, the qualitative research results revealed that not only the continuous rise of digital transformation shapes the way of working for sales professionals but also the global trend towards a more sustainable living, which is a result of the increasingly important customer-oriented business approach.

Keywords (at least 4): Covid-19 pandemic; Concern about sustainability; Sales profession; Customer-oriented; Adaptability

This work used infrastructure and resources funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2013, UID/ECO/00124/2019 and Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209), POR Lisboa (LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722 and Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209) and POR Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209).

1. Introduction

After years of continuous economic growth during the past decade, the Covid 19 pandemic has turned the world upside down. The year 2020 has tremendously changed the lives of all people, as well as almost all businesses and industries. Well known politicians such as António Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, describe the pandemic not only as a global health crisis, causing countless human suffering, but also as the greatest economic crisis since the second world war (Business Today, 2020). Furthermore, the numbers speak for themselves. An example is Portugal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that shrunk by 7,6% in 2020 (Statista, 2021). European wide, the impact gets even clearer when looking at the total economy decline of 7,4% (Statista, 2021), the increase of the unemployment rate from 7.3 % to 8.1 % (Trading economies, 2021) and the according measures that were worked out together by the EU Council. In order to jointly fight the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 27 EU member states agreed on a recovery fund of 750 billion euros and on the EU budget for the next seven years amounting to 1074 billion euros. Taking together, at 1.8 trillion euros, this is the largest financial package the EU has ever put together in its history (European Council, 2021). Having all these facts in mind, it becomes clear, that the Covid-19 pandemic is an example of one of the greatest challenges for firm management, including the sales management profession. Now more than ever, business executives have to rapidly respond to abrupt and unanticipated circumstances in the market and dynamically adapt their business strategies (Dewar, 2020). Especially in times of economic downturn, executive management needs to fully embrace a new agile working approach that avoids customer dissatisfaction, loss of customers but rather focuses on innovative ways to satisfy existing customers and potentially even win new ones.

Successful companies focus on different areas of their business. Some focus on product innovations. Others on marketing campaigns, corporate culture or continuously develop

existing brands (Dannenberg, Zupanic, 2009). However, they all need sales and customer management, in order to become successful and generate revenue. This is strongly dependent on global trends and customer preferences. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the ever-increasing trend of sustainability. On a deeper level, how the customer perspective towards sustainability has changed during the Covid-19 crisis and how sales managers integrated new strategies to be able to adapt quickly to customer needs.

2. Literature review

The following chapter presents the theoretical foundation of this master thesis. The aim here is to separately address the effect of Covid-19 on sustainability for customers and the adaptation of sales managers to changes in customers buying behaviours and new working approaches. For this purpose, the theoretical part is structured like the following: The sales department is first defined in 2.1. with an overview of its different roles and their tasks within a team. Section 2.2. then defines sustainability and how important it is perceived in today's world. Furthermore, this chapter continues with section 2.3. and 2.4. where a deeper focus of the development of sales and sustainability in the recent years is elaborated. At the end of this chapter, the connection of both parts is explained and why this topic is of great importance.

2.1. The Definition of Sales

When thinking about sales, it mainly gets associated with cold calling (Brüggemann, 2021). However, sales is much more than that. The success of a company is highly dependent on a strong sales team, since they are responsible for growing the business and generating revenue (Accenture, 2020). In detail, sales starts with identifying prospective clients, continues with delivering presentations and proposals to convert a customer and finally ends with closing deals (Dannenberg, 2009). Furthermore, a key success factor of a sales department is building ongoing long lasting customer relationships. "A good quality salesperson can identify a customers need by professionally tailoring their pitches" (Levinson, 2018). This early

understanding of the importance of the customer relationship is reflected in today's most successful companies, such as Amazon, which believes that a customer-focused strategy is the key to long-term growth and success (Amazon,2021). One key approach in pursuing this strategy is to continuously improve the conversion rate, which is defined as the percentage of customers who complete a sale after the contact with a sales representative. An ambitious sales department always strives for new methods to improve the conversion rate because this will lead to overall less spending per customer and hence result in a higher profitability. Another crucial function of the building long lasting relationships is the customer retention. Research has shown that attracting new customers instead of maintaining existing ones' costs 5 to 25 times more money. Furthermore, research has also shown that increasing the customer retention rate by 5 percent can result in a company profits increase of 25 to 95 percent (Levinson, 2018). Especially now, during the Covid-19 crisis, customer retention can turn out to be a great success factor of the sales department (Mercuri Int., 2020). In order to successfully achieve long lasting customer relationships, a sales team has to closely work together and divide responsibilities within different roles. This split between roles and according tasks can be seen in Appendix 1.

2.2. The Definition of Sustainability

Due to tons of plastic in the oceans, emission scandals within big car manufacturers and poor working conditions in the textile industry, sustainability is now more present than ever before and a major topic of discussion. Due to the high media attention, it can be concluded that sustainability also becomes increasingly relevant in the corporate context and has become a relevant success factor to remain competitive and overcome new challenges (Brugger, 2010).

However, the increasing importance of the "sustainable development" concept, lacks a uniform understanding since it is characterised by many ambiguities (Pufé, 2014). The most popular definition to date emerged from the UN's World Commission "Our Common Future" in 1987: "Sustainability was defined as development that meets the needs of the present generation

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." (UN, 1987). This definition aims to maintain a future-oriented concept that achieves environmentally and socially sustainable development over generations (Balderjahn, 2004).

5 years later, during the announcements of the environmental conference in Rio de Janeiro the defined sustainable development was further expanded into the "three-pillar model" in Agenda 21 (Sawcyn, 2010). Since the term sustainability has long been understood to mean more than just the ecological aspect, this model is intended to view, combine and harmonise the ecological, social and economic aspects in an integrated manner (Griese, 2015).

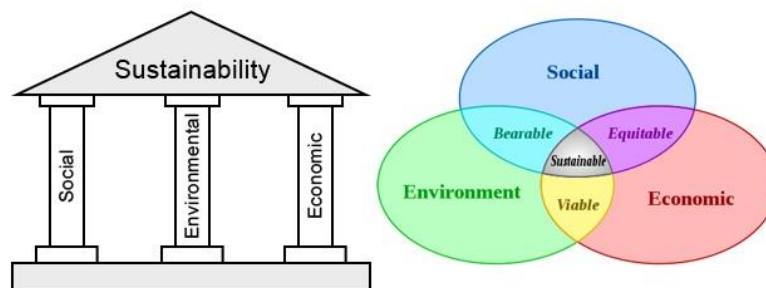


Figure 1 Three Pillars of Sustainability; Source: (Singh)

The ecological pillar focuses on the targeted reduction of environmental pollution for the benefit of human society (Kopfmüller, 2001). Economically, a society is considered sustainable if it does not live beyond its means, but instead operates its economy on a sustainable basis without major problems (Sustainable People, 2019; Rogall, 2012). The social dimension is the most discussed one and at the same time entails the most diverse requirements. The main goal is an equitable distribution of resources, which means that social justice, fair jobs, education and enough qualification for the next generation are supposed to be guaranteed. (Seybold, 2019). In theory, these three dimensions are easy to determine and to enforce as one package. However, in practice, it proves to be a major challenge. As soon as three equally important different goals stand next to each other, it is difficult to find a perfect and at the same time fair strategy. The reason for this is that there is large flexibility in the respective intersections (Griese, 2015). Therefore, according to today's view, a complete sustainable development is only possible if all three dimensions are considered to the same extent (Bassen, 2005).

2.3. Sales during the recent years

During the past two decades, digitalisation and all adaptations that came with it has been impacting our society and economy massively. Industry 4.0 is shaping the production of the future through digitalisation and automation, and work 4.0 allows us to work flexibly and from any location. These major changes have also had an impact on the sales profession, where accustomed processes changed constantly. Moreover, the digitalisation also leads to changes on the customer side. Whereas in the past the stationary retailer dictated availability to the customer through opening hours and the range of products on offer, the modern customer expects to get everything at any time and now dictates the framework conditions to the retailer (K&P, 2020). The modern customer is accustomed to satisfy his consumer needs quickly and to find out about the product in advance. According to a Google and Roland Berger study, the customer 4.0 has already gone through more than half of his decision-making process of the customer journey, before the first contact is made with the sales department due to e.g. online evaluation portals (Roland Berger, 2015). Therefore, customers become increasingly resilient to traditional methods of outreach and buy things differently than ten years ago which clearly shows that the approach to get their attention has also evolved (Mottier, 2020). A much more customer-oriented way of working is needed in today's business world to be able to compete against the competition.

In fact, now, with Covid-19 and all impact that comes along, sales approaches must adapt quicker than ever before. An example for this is the ecommerce growth. In the US, ecommerce has grown 44% in 2020, which is nearly triple as high as the 15,1% jump in 2019 and the highest annual US ecommerce growth ever (Ali, 2021). However, since many business models worldwide and their sales approaches were not prepared for the year 2020, it led to mostly negative effects, which can be seen at e.g. Germany. Within the strongest economy in Europe (Silver,2020), 88% of the companies proof a decrease in revenue and that 69% also expect

negative impacts in the future. Nonetheless, 64% learned the lesson to be more customer focused in order to be better prepared for the future and more importantly 58% see big chances in sales digitalization (Covid-19 -Sales-Pulse-Check, 2021).

The Covid-19 crisis has not only shown how adaptable and innovative companies need to be, but more importantly that the potential has not been fully used in the past and that there is big room for improvements in the digitalisation of processes (Philipp, 2020).

2.4. Sustainability during the recent years

On the 20th of August 2018 the 15-year-old Greta Thunberg protests in front of the Swedish parliament by holding up a shield with the words “school demonstration for climate” (Business Insider, 2020). This was the beginning of a whole new era. For the first time in history, kids started to skip classes in order to protest against climate change worldwide (Fridays for future, 2021). The so called “Fridays for future” protests were clearly targeting the governments and their not sufficient enough measures against global warming. The fact, that even kids protested against the biggest problem human beings are facing at the moment indicates, that there is a great shift in people’s mind towards a more sustainable life, where individuals can determine their own impact as well (Rebekah Askew, 2019). This can be seen in facts, such as that 77% of Americans want to learn how to live more sustainably and even 83.4% have already taken steps to become more green, such as to recycle, to reuse bags or to avoid single-use plastics (Forbes, 2019).

This trend has been confirmed even more through the pandemic. A global survey by the management consultancy firm Accenture has found out that 60% of the consumers were making more environmentally friendly, ethical or sustainable purchases and the survey also concluded that nine out of ten were likely to continue with this behaviour even after the pandemic (Accenture, 2020). All these tendencies and strong movements towards sustainability form the foundation of the research question of this thesis.

2.5. The connection between both topics

Although continuous changes and adaptations, have shaped the way of working within sales departments for the past 2 decades, Covid-19 brings completely new challenges with it (Robinson, 2019, Thürling, 2021). For this reason, it is very interesting to research about sales managers and their strategy to overcome these challenges, especially by following a customer centric approach. Following on that, the uniqueness of this work results from a point of intersection between two aspects. On the one hand, the impact of Covid-19 on a potential higher concern about sustainability for customers. And on the other hand, the causes of Covid-19 on the sales profession and the appropriate changes in their working practices.

3. Methodology and Research Design

The following chapter presents the methodology and the research design of this thesis. As previously discussed, this thesis aims to investigate whether customers have become more concerned about sustainability during the Covid-19 crisis and if that was part of the success factors within sales approaches that sales managers adapted during the crisis. In order to be able to investigate this topic properly, the methodology of this thesis was split into two parts. The first part focuses on the qualitative research approach. Sales experts got interviewed in order to understand their new working approach adaptations to overcome the Covid-19 crisis as well as to get opinions on potential customer preference shifts towards a stronger concern about sustainability behaviour during the pandemic. Furthermore, the second part of the methodology is focused on a quantitative method where the hypotheses of this thesis are tested through certain variables that resulted from the survey. The first two variables that were compared with each other are the sustainability concern before Covid-19 and the sustainability concern during Covid-19. Moreover, the next steps included the relationship investigation between the sustainability concern during Covid-19 and the variables age and long term perspective.

Section 3.1. describes why the chosen methods are appropriate for the research question. Section 3.2. then focuses on which experts and variables were chosen in order to make the best out of the research methods. Finally, the end of this chapter, 3.3. provides an overview of the research design, which includes information about the tools that were used.

3.1. Interview selection and data collection

Since the topic of this thesis has not yet been researched extensively enough, the form of expert interviews is the best alternative to get a full understanding of the difficulties and implementations within their profession in times of the crisis. Therefore, current sales managers from different companies and different hierarchies that went through the whole time-span of Covid-19 (March 2020-today) were chosen to be able to get insights from a wide range of opinions towards strategy adaptations within their teams. In order to get the best result out of these expert interviews, 16 questions (Appendix 2) were prepared in advanced that were asked and adapted based on individual responses. Those questions helped to get different perspectives of the overall changes within this area of expertise.

Besides the goal of getting information on how sales teams have adapted during the crisis, it is also of great importance to find out more about the sustainability shift of customer preferences. For this reason, questions such as Nr. 7 *“Have you recognized any shifts in terms of customer preferences?”* or Nr.9 *“Have you realized that your customers have become more concerned about sustainability?”* were chosen to give the respondents some freedom to report changes in their customer priorities. When the results are being analysed in the next chapter, it will become clear how important these questions were because they led to one key findings of the research question. This key finding was then further investigated after the completion of the expert interviews in the form of a quantitative research method.

An online survey was chosen as the quantitative method. The empirical study was carried out with structured standardised questionnaires, so that each respondent answered the same

questions. Although the target group is not clear defined, personal questions such as age, gender, educational background or the country of residence are asked at the end of the survey. The survey starts with questions that focus on the sustainability concern before Covid-19. Such as, rate how concerned about sustainability you would describe yourself on a scale from one to five (1=not concerned at all; 5= super concerned). The transition to the part that focuses on sustainability concerns during Covid-19 is initiated by asking respondents whether Covid-19 has brought any changes in their lives (e.g. financially or sustainably). After understanding that, specific questions were asked to understand in which areas customers are already sustainable aware (e.g. food, beverages & consumer goods, waste reduction or transportation). Moreover, the same question, to rate the sustainability concern in general, was asked when focusing on the time during Covid-19. Additionally, more questions were asked to get a better understanding of the shopping behaviour during Covid-19. Finally, before moving to the demographic questions, the respondents were asked whether they trust sustainable labels and whether they would maintain with their level of concern about sustainability after Covid-19.

3.2. Experts and Variables

In the following paragraph, all 4 respondents are briefly introduced in order to get a better understanding why certain outcomes resulted in this way.

Expert A works as a key account manager at Michelin and started his career 1 year before the start of the pandemic. Expert B on the other hand offers decades of experience in sales for companies such as Merck Group. However, by currently being the Senior Director of Europe for Procter & Gamble he offers great expertise. In order to understand a more customer oriented perspective better, Expert C who works as a Sales Manager for Lidl was interviewed as well. Lastly, Expert D offers a more strategic point of view, since he works for Köber Pharma as a Strategic Account Manager. This helps to understand the more digital strategic oriented questions that were asked. All 4 experts have helped to understand not only current trends,

strategy and technology adaptations but have also been able to give a good understanding of customer preferences during Covid-19.

Regarding the second research method of this thesis, the quantitative survey helped to identify crucial variables. The key variable for this paper is the sustainability concern during Covid-19, because it was used as the dependent variable for each hypothesis test. Another important variable for a comparison test was the sustainability concern before Covid-19. However, the variables that were used for the further hypotheses tests are age, long term view, education and income and are decisive for special insights into the research topic. The variables age, education and income were categorised into certain intervals that can be seen in the appendix 3-5. The variable “long term view” is defined as whether respondents that have had a higher sustainability concern during Covid-19 will continue to live with the concerns also after the crisis. Nevertheless, the variables that were not part of the hypotheses test but part of the survey will still be used for important information within the discussion chapter of this research paper.

3.3. Research Design

The tool used for the qualitative research in form of expert interviews was Zoom since it was accessible for everyone without any pre-downloaded procedures or registration steps. Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes. The answers were summarized in order to get a good overview of all respondent perspectives and be able to compare them. The tool used for the survey was Google Forms, as it is easy to use and can be accessed quickly by the respondents. In addition, Google Forms provides a great visualisation tool where all types of charts can be chosen. Furthermore, Google Forms provides the results structured in a MS Excel form. This form was then used to analyse the data. A T-Test and a multiple linear regression analysis were performed. The tool used for the data analysis was the SPSS Software by IBM.

4. Results

The following chapter presents the results from both researches. Section 4.1. focuses on the results from the qualitative research and section 4.2. focuses on the results from the quantitative research, which includes the hypotheses tests.

4.1. Qualitative Research Results

In order to approve on the researched materials and conclusions that have been made, expert interviews with current sales managers have been conducted to be able to see similarities, differences or further elaborations. As already explained at the beginning of this thesis, sales departments of a company have many responsibilities, such as negotiating contracts, generating leads or growing the business (Flaig, 2020). Nevertheless, several new challenges have occurred due to the restriction measures of the Covid-19 pandemic that need to be tackled now.

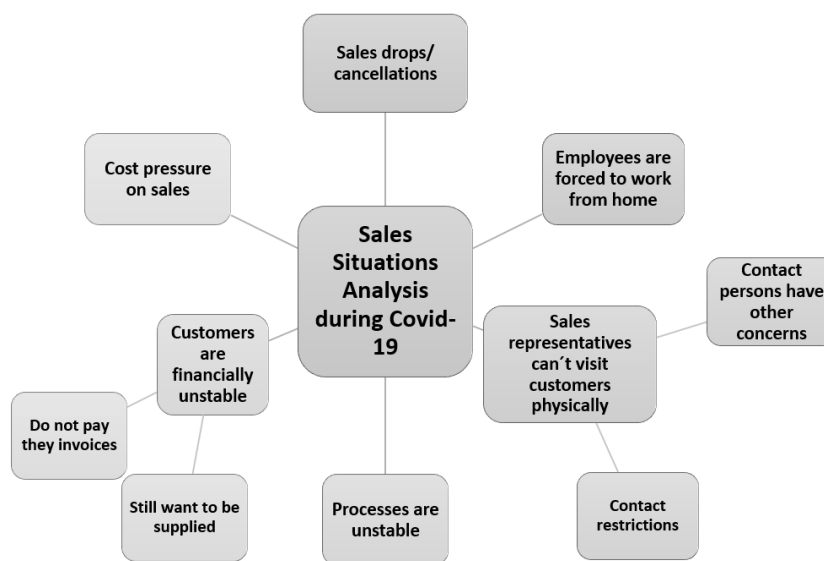


Figure 2 Sales Challenges through Covid-19 ; Source (Own Design)

Internally, sales teams have to organise their work under more difficult conditions and struggle with the negative market consequences of the crisis. First and foremost, they include: Drops in turnover; threats of payment defaults and the loss of entire customer groups. These factors, coupled with the situation that many traditional sales measures and instruments are hardly possible or not possible at all due to the contact restrictions, pose enormous challenges for sales in times of crisis (Kraus and Partner, 2020).

Based on all the challenges that arose from the Covid-19 pandemic, a combination out of the literature review and the results of the expert interviews have helped to elaborate the following 8 points as major success factors for sales managers during the crisis:

1. Focus on customers digitally, since 75 percent of B2B purchasing decisions are now made by representatives of the generation Y, the digital natives (Philipp,2020). The crisis offers sales teams the opportunity to now implement digital processes and the transformation to a digital sales organisation. However, web shops or AI-based applications alone are not the solution. But rather an end-to-end digitally organised customer journey. Particularly in the Covid-19 crisis, this includes for sales to act in a customer-oriented way and consistently use digital communication tools during customer contact (Ehgoetz, 2020).

2. Digital collaboration solutions. According to a YouGov survey from May 2020, employees in particular have come to appreciate the benefits from eliminated commutes (76%) to a free choice of working hours (52%) to reduced stress (34%). Experts expect this form of working to expand. For companies, it means that adequate solutions are needed to keep their sales staff in the company and to attract new ones (Yakushkina, 2020).

3. Focus on existing customers. One smart approach during Covid-19 is to prioritize cross and upselling (Eva-Susanne Krah,2020). Since the sales effort for extension business is usually lower than in new customer acquisition. According to a A.T. Kearney study, successful B2B suppliers achieve a 240% higher growth in turnover and sales productivity over a period of three years compared to average competitors if they combine products with additional products and services or offer the customer holistic solutions. The cross-selling potential is enormous, especially with bigger and complex suppliers (Belz & Lee, 2020). Another part of choosing the right strategy for existing customers is to show care with the right questions. Therefore, good listening skills are highly recommended since it is the most important quality for sales these

times. People who feel understood and appreciate a caring approach are more likely to remember the call positively. Thus, customers will rather reach out to them first after the crisis (Uwe Brüggemann,2021).

4. Digital marketing channels. Since it looked bad with business trips and on-site appointments due to Covid-19 restrictions, companies were offering products and solutions in their own online shop or on B2B marketplaces. However, this is just one option that may have proven successful. In addition, social networks also offer the option of publicising offers or even selling via the customer community. The best example here are the numerous B2B events that have been unceremoniously, but not less thoughtfully, transformed into virtual events. (Michelin, 2021).

5. Sales support through Marketing. During the past decades it became more clear that cross-departmental cooperation between marketing and sales generate synergies from which companies benefit greatly. During times of Covid-19, certain digital marketing strategies can strongly help to boost sales. One area to mention are digital marketing campaigns which are usually useful visualisations in the B2B sector and easily implementable via e.g. Instagram, or YouTube (Matthias Thürling,2021). Another crucial aspect is the integration of SEA (Search Engine Advertising) which is a good way of drawing the attention of buyers that search for offers to the own product portfolio. And SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) which ensures that the company's special offer appears prominently, e.g. as high listed as possible in the search engine results (Matthias Thürling, 2021). Since the decision making process often begins long before sales even notices it, a well thought-out inbound marketing strategy and professional lead management help to fill the sales funnel and prequalify potential customers to then send promising leads to sales. In this way, the sales department not only has a quantitative lead source, but also already receives valuable insights from marketing that help to create custom-

fit-offers. This increases the closing rates and the sales department can use its resources in a more targeted way (P&G,2021).

6. Automated processes. Pressure to generate sales and save costs at the same time is particularly high for those distributors whose companies have had to shut down operations in the meantime. A promising opportunity for sales to become more efficient during Covid-19, is to simplify and automate processes. Sales and Marketing automation solutions offer targeted support in the sales process. This allows existing customer data to be segmented so that target groups can be addressed with individual campaigns on relevant offers. Tracking functions also allows valuable insights to be gained about customers. These in turn can be used for higher-level business decisions, but also for concrete measures (Mercuri International, 2020).

7. Value of sales force. Despite digital penetration, the Covid-19 crisis has shown one thing above all: Personal contact and the human being as an interaction partner are indispensable. The more processes are automated and communication is digitalised, the more important it is to have a personal and competent contact person - especially in the area of products that require explanation, such as in B2B. For sales, it is more important than ever to promote sales skills and strengthen communication skills. The relief provided by technologies such as sales and marketing automation creates the necessary scope for this (Köber Pharma,2021).

Finally, 8. The global trend towards more sustainability continues to be recognised by sales managers and hence needs to be clearly prioritised with new appropriate offers if they want to keep the customers satisfied in times of the pandemic.

4.2. Quantitative Research Results

After conducting qualitative interviews in form of expert interviews, it became clear that all managers had not just only given their perspective on strategy adaptations within their teams but also explained a clear shift in customer preferences towards a more sustainable lifestyle. Since today's world of sales managers biggest focus is the customer, a quantitative research

method was chosen to proof whether customers have become more concerned about sustainability during Covid-19. The type of statistical test that was chosen for this matter is the T-test since it provides an overview of the comparison between the means of the sustainability concern before and during Covid-19 of the respondents. Furthermore 2 hypotheses were tested that provided better insights to the whole topic. Hypothesis 2 states that younger customers show a higher concern about sustainability than older customers. Hypothesis 3 states that people that developed a high concern about sustainability during Covid-19 will also stay high concerned on the long-term. Both hypotheses were tested with a multiple linear regression analysis where the dependent variable represents the sustainability concern during Covid-19 .

H1: Customers have become more concerned about sustainability during Covid-19.

After the recording of n=104 responses, a T-Test was performed to compare the concern about sustainability of the respondents before and during Covid-19. Two different values can be considered for the comparison: the mean and the median. The following Boxplot and tables present the results from the T-Test that will be interpreted in the upcoming part.

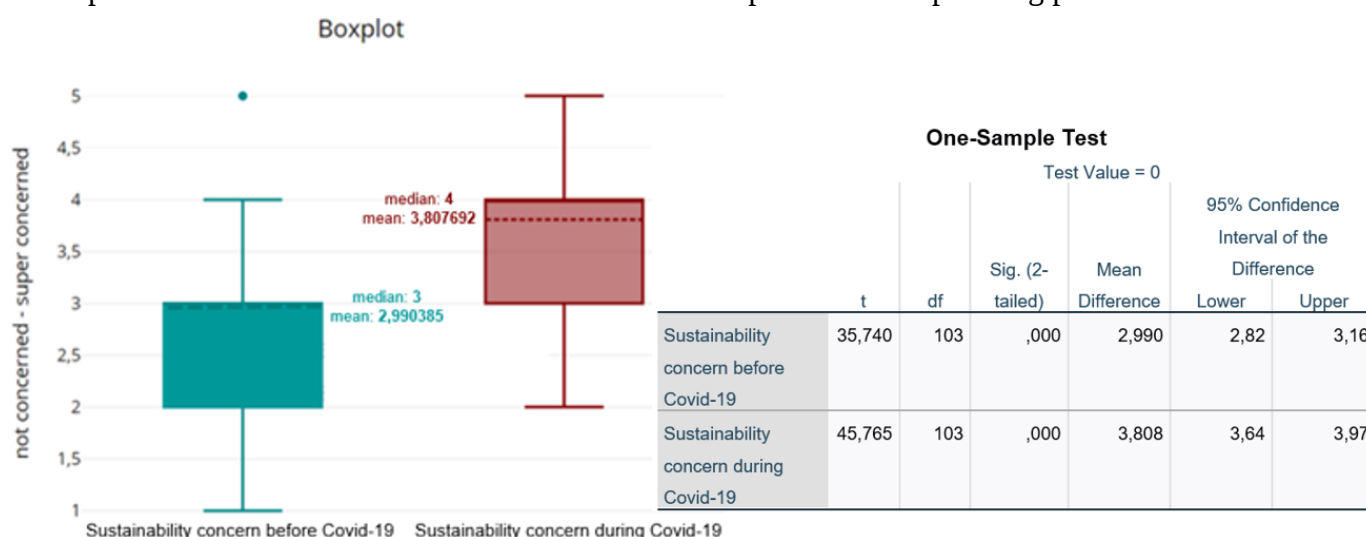


Figure 3 Sustainability concern comparison before and during Covid-19; Source (Datatab.de), (SPSS)

The mean represents the average of all the answers in a data set. The median value, in turn is the number that is in the middle of a data set, with the same amount of numbers below and above. However, for the T-Test it is more common to compare the mean values to be able to reject or accept the *null hypothesis* which is “The mean of the sustainability concern before and

during Covid-19 are equal”. As it gets clear on the boxes within the boxplot chart, there is a significant difference between the sustainability concern before and during Covid-19. In detail, the mean difference is: $3,808 - 2,990 = \mathbf{0,818}$. Since, there is a big difference between both means, the null hypothesis can be rejected. This means, that the quantitative research method shows clear evidence for the fact that people have become more concerned about sustainability during Covid-19 in comparison to their sustainability concern before. Another proof for this hypothesis, can be taken away from the figures that result from the 95% confidence interval. The lower 95% confidence interval part of the sustainability concern during Covid-19 is **0,82 points** higher than the one from the concern before Covid-19 and the higher part is **0,81 points** higher. It indicates that, on the long run, that if many samples are collected for the comparison, 95% of the sustainability concern during Covid-19 samples will be on average around 0,815 points higher than the ones before Covid-19.

Since the first hypothesis of this thesis can accepted by the results of the T-Test, other information of the data set can now be used to state more hypotheses and investigate the sustainability concern after Covid-19. Variables that have been used to investigate the situation closer by stating hypothesis 2 and 3 are the age of the respondents and their long term perspective in terms of sustainability concern to understand how it will continue after the crisis. Furthermore, the variables income and education were also considered for the upcoming multiple linear regression, since they give insights for the upcoming discussion part. Nevertheless, the upcoming two main hypotheses of this thesis are not closer considering the income and educational background of the respondents. The dependent variable is the: sustainability concern during Covid-19. Before the results of the hypotheses can be reported,

the model itself must be examined in more detail. Hence, the following tables help for that matter.

Model Summary ^b				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,713 ^a	,508	,488	,607

a. Predictors: (Constant), Income, Long term view, Education, Age

b. Dependent Variable: Sustainability concern during Covid-19

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	37,685	4	9,421	25,576	,000 ^b
	Residual	36,469	99	,368		
	Total	74,154	103			

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainability concern during Covid-19

b. Predictors: (Constant), Income, Long term view, Education, Age

The model summary presents the dependent variable and all the independent ones that have been chosen for this regression. In addition, it provides the adjusted R square, which should be used for the accuracy interpretation since the regression has more than one independent variable. The adjusted R square of 0,488 indicates that 48,8% of the variance of the sustainability concern after Covid-19 is explained by the variance of Income, long-term sustainability view, educational background and the respondents Age. However, the model only shows a medium high percentage rate, because not all independent variables that were part of the quantitative research method are taking into consideration for the hypotheses tests for this thesis. A multiple linear regression analysis with the independent variables that are missed out in the upcoming one, such as the employment status, the nationality or the gender, can be seen in the attached appendix 6 of this paper.

The ANOVA table provides insights, that any variable of this regression whose p-value is below the .05 alpha level is confirmed to be statistically significant. According to the results, the multiple regression revealed a F-value of 25,576 (4,99), $p < .001$, which evidently shows that the model has a significant explanatory power because it provides a better explanation of the

dependent variable when comparing to the intercept-only model. Therefore, this model is appropriate to be used for further hypotheses tests.

The results of the multiple regression are visible in the table below indicating the coefficients for the unstandardized beta and standard error for each independent variable as well as its standardized beta, t-value and the resulting significance level. It is apparent from the results that the individual variables *education* ($t=1,710$; $p>0,05$) and *income* ($t=-1,232$; $p>0,05$) are insignificant. Therefore, a null hypothesis towards the fact that education and income have no influence on the sustainability concern during Covid-19 cannot be rejected since the $p\text{-value}>0,05$.

However, hypothesis 2 and 3 can still be investigated with the data below and can provide crucial insights on the research question of this thesis.

H2: Younger people are more concerned about sustainability in times of Covid-19 .

Coefficients ^a					
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t
1	(Constant)	4,032	,251		16,094
	Age	-,427	,087	-,443	-4,903
	Long term view	,375	,082	,338	4,559
	Education	,187	,109	,126	1,710
	Income	-,059	,048	-,110	-1,232

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainability concern during Covid-19

All necessary information are provided through the multiple linear regression analysis above to investigate hypothesis 2. In this model, there is a significant negative relation between the sustainability concern during Covid-19 and the individual variable age (Unstandardized B.-0,427; $p<0,05$). This means that with an increase of 1 unite within the variable sustainability concern during Covid-19, the variable age decreases on average by -0,427. Since the age groups were differently wide categorised (e.g. 25-35 or 35-50, see appendix 3), it can only generally be understood into the fact that the younger the customer (within the given age categories), the higher concerned they are about sustainability during Covid-19

As a result, the null hypothesis which would be that age doesn't affect the sustainability concern during Covid-19 can be rejected since there is a proven significance shown by the regression model.

H3: People that show a high concern about sustainability during Covid-19 will most likely maintain this after the crisis.

To investigate hypothesis 3, the same multiple regression analysis can be chosen with "Sustainability concern during Covid-19" as the dependent variable and the "long term view" as the explanatory variable. When looking at the data, the model shows a positive significance, as the p-value is small ($p < 0,01$) and the coefficient is medium high (0,375). This means that if the sustainability concern during Covid-19 increases by 1 unite, the long term view of that person also increases by 0,375. Therefore, the third hypotheses of this thesis can be accepted and proofs that the current level of concern about sustainability will also continue after the crisis.

5. Discussion

The following section of this paper elaborates on the results presented in the previous chapter. The research question of this thesis is: "Has the Covid-19 pandemic made customers more concerned about sustainability? - A closer focus on great success factors for the sales profession during and after the crisis."

Based on professional management insights and existing literature research three hypotheses, that can be seen in chapter 4, were chosen for this study. To summarize briefly: through a qualitative research method in form of expert interviews, this thesis provides certain strategy adaptations for sales managers, including a higher priority towards sustainability during Covid-19. Following up on that, a quantitative research method in form of an online survey provided a data set that was then able to be analysed for all three hypotheses. Through a statistical T-Test, the first hypothesis was able to be investigated closer and the results found indicating

evidence that people have become more concerned about sustainability during Covid-19 than they were before. Afterwards, a multiple linear regression through the SPSS software was performed in order to investigate hypothesis 2 & 3. The results have shown clear evidence, that the younger the respondents the higher the concern about sustainability. Another key takeaway was that, people that have developed a high concern about sustainability during Covid-19 will most likely maintain this also after the crisis.

Having gained these great insights about the customer behaviour during Covid-19, it is now important to look at the results in more detail, which mainly addresses the questions, why people have become more concerned about sustainability during Covid-19 and how sales managers can benefit from it.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, people's lives have changed drastically. Due to the fact, that governments had to enforce measures such as curfews or mandatory quarantines, people have spent much more time at home than usual. Therefore, they also had more time to think about problems they haven't thought about before. The results of this paper's quantitative research has shown that 80% have started thinking about problems during Covid-19 they haven't thought about before (Appendix 7). In regards of sustainability, this can include areas such as energy consumption, water consumption, transportation, waste reduction or healthy diets (Appendix 8). The last point can also be related towards the fact that the Covid-19 virus attacks the immune system and hence people have started to strengthen their immune system more than before the crisis. Thus, to take care of personal health can be linked back to a high concern about sustainability, since a healthy diet is often associated with local and sustainable food. Another crucial argument that can be stated here is that by being forced to stay at home, people are tend to spent their money differently than usual (Financial Times, 2020). Although 38,1% of the respondents have suffered financially during Covid-19, the majority did not. Thus, they have the capability to spend the same amount of money than before (Appendix 9). By

eliminating outdoor activities, people tend to invest more money in other areas, such as household items or high quality food, which in turn can often be associated with the integration of sustainability (Griese,2019). Furthermore, another big key shift during Covid-19 was the rise of empathy. Independent of their nationality, people all over the world had to suffer because of Covid-19. Thus, a special global empathy developed that led people to support each other more strongly, which can also be related to a higher concern about sustainability within the social pillar (Krah,2020).

The fact that the global trend towards sustainability has now been accelerated in several areas by the Covid-19 pandemic became apparent through the results of this paper. According to that, sales managers can greatly benefit from it. As elaborated earlier, one of the biggest focuses that has defined the last decade of the sales profession has been the customer centric approach. In regards to this paper's research topic, it means that sales managers that are aware of the increasing sustainability concern from customers, will most likely have a higher chance to fulfil customer needs (Mottier, 2021). Since the high sustainability concern will also play a big role for customers after Covid-19, sales managers should prioritise it now already to be better prepared for upcoming new customer preference developments in the future. By following a customer centric business approach, companies manage to provide a positive customer experience before and after the sale. This enhances customer loyalty and improves business growth (Philipp, 2020).

However, a customer centric approach cannot only be enforced by the sales team alone but rather needs to be prioritised by the whole company. Only if the business focus is enforced on all sides of a company, a promise towards the customer needs can be really made. Therefore, teams such as e.g. product portfolio department needs to closely collaborate with sales in order to make the best possible use of the rapid trend changes of today's business world. The best-known and most successful structure within business processes to date is the agile way of

working (McKinsey, 2018). Companies are able to work in a more effective way, due to a better communication across departments. As we can see with e.g. sales and marketing, that are no longer separate entities within agile organizations in today's digital transformation. Since all departments contribute differently to the success of the company, it is important to create a mutual benefit. E.g. the product portfolio department benefits from the customer relationships that the sales department has built up and vice versa, sales benefits from the adapted product portfolio that has been launched based on new customer preferences.

In addition to the benefits that the sales departments can gain by working closely with other departments, it is often questioned whether the current sales manager will become superfluous in the future due to the increase in digital sales processes. Since tools that promote business deals without personal communication and automated processes in target group analysis and advertising become more common to use for organizations, sales staff might become less relevant for companies in the future (Blum, 2020). However, this is not the case. It is still up to salespeople themselves to get to know their target groups and potential customers and their needs, to analyse their behaviour and to build personal relationships with them - not only to close a sale, but also to keep them as customers. This requires human skills first and foremost. Emotional intelligence, the ability to listen as well as learning and effective negotiation skills are necessary to successfully close or renew contracts. Sales managers must have comprehensive problem-solving skills, be able to motivate their team and manage as well as resolve conflicts. They must be able to lead the way into a new digital era in which people will continue to be the central element of technological progress (Hughes, 2021).

6. Limitations

This thesis includes a few limitations that also need to be considered. Nevertheless, before these limitations can be elaborated, it must be pointed out that the results of this thesis are based only on the qualitative and quantitative research. Accordingly, the data sets do not represent the

overall population. One of the main limitations is that the research has only been done within industrial states. This means that developing countries have not been taken into consideration for both types of research methods. Industrial states have had different possibilities to fight against the Covid-19 pandemic than developing countries, which includes higher investment possibilities, different governmental interventions as well as financial support. All experts that were interviewed work within the European job market and the majority of the survey respondents as well. Therefore, the statements that are made within this paper, can only be related to European customers. To find out whether customers in other continents have developed a higher concern about sustainability, another survey would have to be conducted with this target group as a focus. Moreover, although sustainability has been defined in detail at the beginning of this thesis, it is important to say that all customers understand the term sustainability differently. Therefore, sales managers need to be clear about how this relates to their business models and product portfolios in order to properly satisfy the customer needs of their target group. Another key limitation of this paper is the limited amount of variables that were able to be used for the hypotheses. Due to the fixed number of pages of this work, the research topic couldn't be processed as extensively as desired. However, the variables selected for the hypotheses are the ones that were perceived as the most meaningful and informative. The complexity of the research topic and the fact that so little research has been done so far offers a high level of interest in further research. After the Covid-19 pandemic, this topic will most likely attract more attention and therefore more literature will be available.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to find out whether customers have developed a higher concern about sustainability during Covid-19. In addition, the relationship between customer needs in fast changing times and sales managers' success was measured. Based on quantitative research in form of an online survey, it can now be stated that customers have developed a

higher concern about sustainability during Covid-19 and will most likely maintain this also after Covid-19. Reasons for this are that people spend more time at home and thus deal with new different problems (80%), which have an effect on people's sustainable needs (Deloitte, 2021). In addition, less money is spent outside the home and therefore this leads to higher investments in other areas that benefit from sustainability. Moreover, people want to prevent diseases and prioritise healthy diets, which often depend on sustainable and local products. Developing empathy for each other has also played a big role within times of Covid-19.

Furthermore, the qualitative research in form of expert interviews of this paper confirmed that sales managers approve the high concern about sustainability during the pandemic and also focus on the inclusion of sustainability as a great success factor during the crisis. However, a major part of the big success factors for sales managers during Covid-19 is the customer focus. This mainly involves a focus on customers digitally as well as a priority on existing customers. Additionally, points such as digital collaboration solutions are very important, which gives the sales employees more appreciation and the opportunity to organise their work more freely with e.g. flexible working hours or home office options. Automated processes also play a great success factor in times of Covid-19 to be able to save costs but still work efficiently. Finally, the interaction between departments in an agile way of working is very decisive. Sales support through marketing, especially with digital marketing channels turned out to be a major success factor for sales departments during Covid-19.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused some new issues in today's society. However, the results of this research paper have shown that the future way of working of the sales profession will be shaped by two main factors: further digitalisation and the very present global trend towards sustainability. The sales teams that see these learnings from the crisis as a real opportunity will now benefit from a transformation and will also be well equipped for the future.

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Appendix

1. **Sales development representative:** They are responsible for the first step: researching, identifying and contacting leads. They are usually a cold caller or the ones who make the first contact with a prospective client. Once the customer lead has been identified as a qualifying lead, the responsible person passes that lead to a higher-level sales representative.
2. **Account executive:** They are responsible for bringing in new business and making sales. Often called closers, since they are fully responsible for the success of the deal. They run demonstrations, write proposals, create tailored presentations, identify obstacles and negotiate contracts to then make the sale.
3. **Sales Specialist:** They have in-depth knowledge of the product/service and the industry. They handle complicated issues or customer requests. They take over any complex sales or advanced challenge.
4. **Customer Success Representative:** They are responsible for following up and renewing sales. This role is the key for customer retention. They keep the customers happy and find new ways to improve the relationships.
5. **Sales Manager:** They are the team lead, responsible for making sure team hits their goals and meets their responsibilities. They determine the direction of the team as well as measure and improve outcomes.

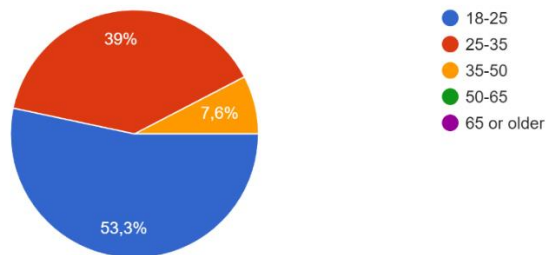
Appendix 1 Different Sales positions and their responsibilities; Source (Own Design, 2021)

1. What has changed for you when dealing with customers before and after Covid-19?
2. How did your customer relationships evolve during the last year?
3. What did your company actively change in terms of sales during covid? E.g. different approaches?
4. How did you maintain existing customer relationships? Did you create new ones? How?
5. Have you adapted any new sales related technologies during covid? CRM?
6. How did you involve customer digitally?
7. Have you recognized any shifts in terms of customer preferences?
8. Have you recognized any external trends that influenced your customer choices?
9. Have you realized that your customers have become more concerned about sustainability?
10. Have you realized a higher demand for sustainable products/services?
11. Have you changed your product portfolio in a more sustainable oriented way according to the shift in customer preferences?
12. Did you change or even increase your marketing activities?
13. Did you include any new digital marketing channels or even marketplaces during covid?
14. Did you include any automated processes, such as sales and marketing automation solution offers or campaigns during covid?
15. How did you support your employees overall during the crisis? Do you think they felt more valued during covid?
16. How did you strengthen employees to work digitally?

Appendix 2 Expert Interview Questions; Source (Own Design, 2021)

Which category below includes your age?

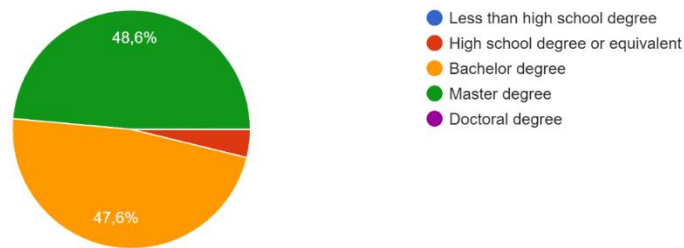
105 Antworten



Appendix 3 Overview of the age of respondents; Source (Google Forms, 2021)

What is the highest degree you have received?

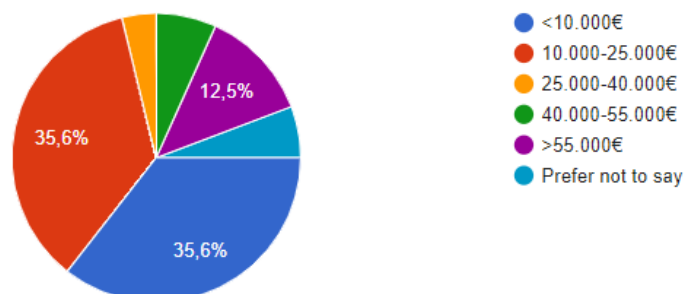
105 Antworten



Appendix 4 Overview of the educational background of the respondents; Source (Google Forms, 2021)

What was your yearly income in 2020?

104 Antworten



Appendix 5 Overview of the income of the respondents; Source (Google Forms, 2021)

Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,809 ^a	,655	,613	,528

a. Predictors: (Constant), Nationality_, Long term view, Financially suffered, Income, Gender, Education, Sustainability concern before Covid-19, Employment, Company more sustainability, New problems through COVID19, Age

b. Dependent Variable: Sustainability concern during Covid-19

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	48,544	11	4,413	15,854	,000 ^b
	Residual	25,610	92	,278		
	Total	74,154	103			

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainability concern during Covid-19

b. Predictors: (Constant), Nationality, Long term view, Financially suffered, Income, Gender, Education, Sustainability concern before Covid-19, Employment, Company more sustainability, New_problems_through_COVID19, Age

Coefficients^a

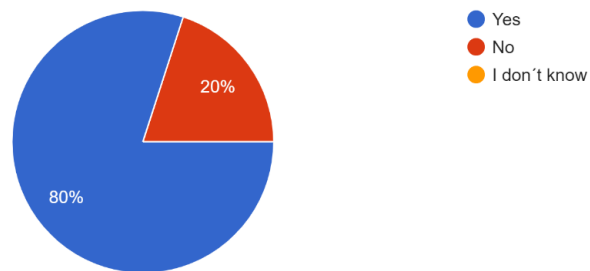
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,877	,377		7,628	,000
	Age	-,382	,078	-,396	-4,910	,000
	Long term view	,239	,089	,216	2,698	,008
	Education	,196	,098	,132	1,996	,049
	Income Categories	-,049	,045	-,091	-1,096	,276
	Financially suffered	-,051	,116	-,029	-,437	,663
	Sustainability concern before Covid-19	,222	,069	,224	3,209	,002
	New_problems_through_COVID19	,066	,160	,031	,413	,680
	Company more sustainability	,406	,101	,305	4,009	,000
	Gender	-,211	,110	-,123	-1,915	,059
	Employment	,122	,062	,139	1,953	,054
	Nationality_	,014	,016	,053	,846	,400

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainability concern during Covid-19

Appendix 6 Multiple linear regression analysis with further variables; Source (SPSS, 2021)

Have you started thinking about problems during covid-19 you haven't thought about before?

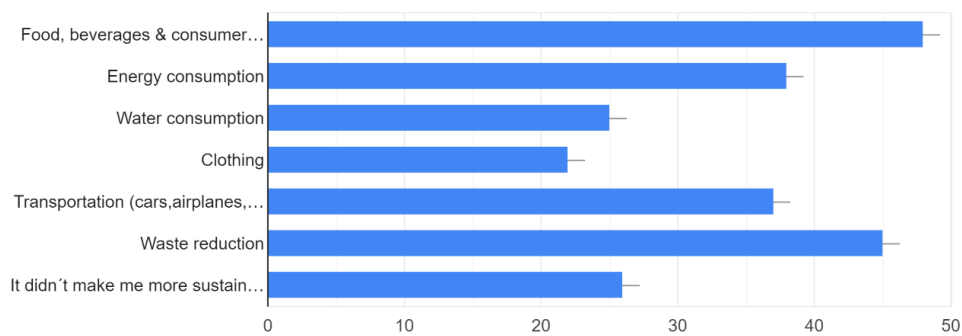
105 Antworten



Appendix 7 Overview of problems that have occurred before; Source (Google Forms, 2021)

If yes, in which areas are you more sustainable aware? (If not, choose last option) (You can choose more than 1)

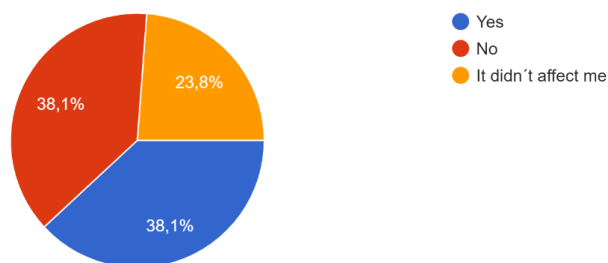
104 Antworten



Appendix 8 Overviews of areas of sustainability interests; Source (Google Forms, 2021)

Have you financially suffered because of reasons that resulted from covid-19?

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Appendix 9 Overview of respondents suffering financially through Covid-19, Source (Google Forms, 2021)