

Beyond the obvious: How to make your brand more relevant during COVID-19

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[Research](#)

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Explores new research into the changes in consumer motivations during the Covid-19 crisis, as opposed to before.

- Based on implicit testing, the research uncovered five key drivers: Safety, Sociability, Optimism, Joy, Independence.
- When linking a brand to a social-emotional goal, marketers must consider relevance, credibility, and distinctiveness of the communication.

Marketing in the COVID-19 crisis

This article is part of a special WARC Snapshot focused on enabling brand marketers to re-strategise amid the unprecedented disruption caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak.

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Why it matters

Brands and products act like placebos; they can help us to reduce the gap between our actual and our ideal selves – based on the brand associations built over time – while functional motivations haven't changed much, there are several surprises in the social-emotional motivations that brands can leverage to create more effective advertising during Covid-19.

Takeaways

- Thinking about motivation involves understanding how your brand or product can help the buyer to close the gap between their actual and ideal selves; goals, or ‘jobs-to-be-done’ are crucial to this.
- The guiding question for communication is ‘How should we stage the product to be an effective means to this end using narratives, claims, symbols or other executional cues like music or language?’
- While the study uncovers aspects like security, friendship or caring among the top social-emotional motivations, less obvious goals like freedom, zest for life or going my own way also emerge.

The turmoil of Covid-19 means an existential threat for some businesses. Unfortunately, some brands will need to shift all focus onto survival. Many other brands will continue to operate, but must find ways to adapt their initiatives, communication strategy and executions to this unique situation.

Using behavioral science principles, this study will inform brand builders, regardless of the category, of consumers’ current desires and provide data-based inspiration for creating timely communication strategies and initiatives to strengthen their brands now and in the future.

What drives purchase behavior?

The starting point of any decision and behavior – here brand purchase – is motivation (lat. *move*re). Without motivation, there is no action. Even during Covid-19.

But how does motivation evolve? We have two versions of ourselves represented in our brains:

- The *actual self*: what we experience, expect, feel and think at a given moment.
- The *ideal self*: the reference against which we judge our actual state.

In short, the ideal self represents what we want to do or what we’ve learned we should do, and the actual self is what we really experience and do.

Motivation occurs if we experience or expect a discrepancy between the ideal and actual selves. If both are aligned, we do nothing. If there is a discrepancy, then the *goal* to reduce that discrepancy is activated and we are motivated into acting to bring the actual self closer to the ideal self.

Jobs to be done

The best way to think of goals is to think of them as jobs-to-be-done (JTBD): anything we do aims to achieve the goal of reducing this experienced or expected discrepancy. Whether goals are short term (e.g. reduce thirst) or long-term (e.g. be a good parent, be successful), they guide the decision-making process from perception and attention all the way through information processing and the valuation of choices.

We are consciously aware of some goals, but our brain is also able to implicitly monitor our goal achievement. In this situation, we are not aware of the impact that goals have on our decision-making.

Priorities matter

The brain's motivational system – the *reward system* – is determined by the goal that is the highest priority at that moment. Different choices are assigned a reward value (or goal value) depending on how much that choice can narrow the gap between the ideal and actual self.

Brands with a high reward value are perceived to be an effective means of achieving our goals. The reward system is found to be the key gatekeeper of choice: it is proven to determine both willingness to pay and actual brand choice.

Discrepancies rely heavily on internal states (e.g. low blood sugar, mood) as well as situation and environment (e.g. public, private). These factors change constantly, but the way the brain assigns value to choices always remains the same: high-value choices are instrumental in accomplishing the highest priority, or currently active, goal. Meanwhile, the discrepancies between the actual and the ideal self are also constantly changing, hence the values of brands and product categories also change.

As internal states and the external environment change, so do our active goals. This explains why consumer behavior is dynamic but not random. For example, we only value food if we are hungry. The finest meal would not motivate us to eat or spend money to purchase it if we've just come out of an all-you-can eat restaurant. The basic principle behind this dynamic decision-making is always the same: we do and choose what promises to close the gap.

Expectations

Given it is inefficient to try every option or brand in order to work out whether it was a good choice, the brain has a way of assigning reward value based on the *expected* goal achievement.

It values brands based on the expected ability to bring us closer to the ideal. Imagine you want to have beautiful hair, but you have a dandruff problem. Brand X will have a higher value if you expect it to offer the best anti-dandruff solution because brand X promises to close the gap and get you closer to your ideal and its promise is credible.

This expectation is based on the associative network (intuitive System 1) that a brand activates in consumers' minds (through brand equity). When we recognize the brand (by their iconic brand cues), the brain automatically activates all the associations that it holds with this brand.

The brand gets a high reward value if this associative network (i.e. the brand's equity built over time via brand experience) promises to be an effective means to close the gap between the actual and ideal self.

From theory to practice during Covid-19

Following these principles, we need to focus on the discrepancies that consumers are currently experiencing. We need to position our brands to be effective means of closing the gap.

The current Covid-19 environment changes our internal states because it impacts how we feel, what we think about, and what we can and cannot do. But it also impacts the external environment and our situation.

Therefore, the Covid-19 crisis certainly impacts which discrepancies are currently experienced. Positioning a

brand as an effective means to close the gap, even if only symbolically, will be valued by consumers.

What drives value today?

Here, it helps to distinguish two levels of Jobs to be Done:

- 1) a category-specific, functional level
- 2) a universal, social-emotional level

The functional level

The functional level is straightforward. Any product category or brand that has products in the area of hygiene or health has an obvious link to current consumer goals and can focus on their relevant functional benefits and product characteristics.

Disinfectants, sanitizers and hand soaps are obvious links, but what about non-directly related consumer categories?

We re-ran an analysis of functional value drivers in the Snack category in early April. The original research was done at end of 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The results show that the profile of value drivers in this category did not change, indicated by a correlation of .94 across the 43 attributes. Comparing the re-run with the original study, over 90% of the 43 functional value drivers measured did not show a change in value classification.

Functional benefits that were value drivers before remained important, and less relevant category aspects remained unimportant. In other words, a potato chip is a potato chip is a potato chip – and stays a potato chip even in the Covid-19 crisis.

Of course, the environment changes and hence certain usage occasions become more dominant, but the Covid-19 situation will not change the tangible features and characteristics of the product.

The functional level is not free to deliver anything new – the functional benefits are baked-in to the tangible experience and characteristics. For example, a potato chip cannot become a means to boost our health even though health is currently a relevant need.

Certainly, functional benefits can have direct and credible links to Covid-19. Topics such as health, hygiene or remotely connecting people are currently more significant than they were before. For example, the attributes of hygiene and killing germs, for a detergent or anti-bacterial soap, are more relevant than they were before. But removing stains and providing cleanliness will remain the key goals that consumers want to achieve with detergent.

Despite functional aspects with direct links to Covid-19 related needs, our research indicates that category needs are expected to remain rather stable.

The social-emotional level

A crisis, however, strongly impacts the social and emotional level of motivation. If we feel depressed, we might eat chocolate because we learned to associate chocolate with pampering oneself.

Brands and products are instrumental for us to cope with and alter our emotional states. The principle remains the same: consumers assign a high value to brands and products that are associated with the currently active social-emotional goals. In many categories (e.g. cars, watches, clothes), value perception and willingness to pay more for certain brands are based on social and emotional motivations.

This is what Dan Ariely refers to as *conceptual consumption*: when we feel bored, we will consume the idea of excitement by choosing Skittles over Snickers because Skittles have a stronger link with excitement than Snickers. If we feel the need for a little energy boost in order to keep going, then we are more likely to choose a Snickers bar instead. Brands and products act like placebos; they reduce the gap between the actual and the ideal self – based on the brand associations built over time.

This higher level of motivation remains crucial during Covid-19. The discrepancies of social needs are obvious, and many brands have started to adapt by including remote social connection as a context in their campaigns.

The frozen pizza brand Ristorante stages an intimate dinner via web conference, the German retailer EDEKA shows a family getting together online for Easter.

It appears that most brands are adapting the context in which their products are staged, but they fail to adapt their value proposition.

Including the new reality as a context in the communication is good, but it does not fully leverage the opportunity to increase brand relevance. To do this, and therefore increase perceived value, a brand must show it is an effective means of overcoming the current social-emotional discrepancies.

For which social-emotional discrepancies could our brand be positioned to overcome and close the gap?

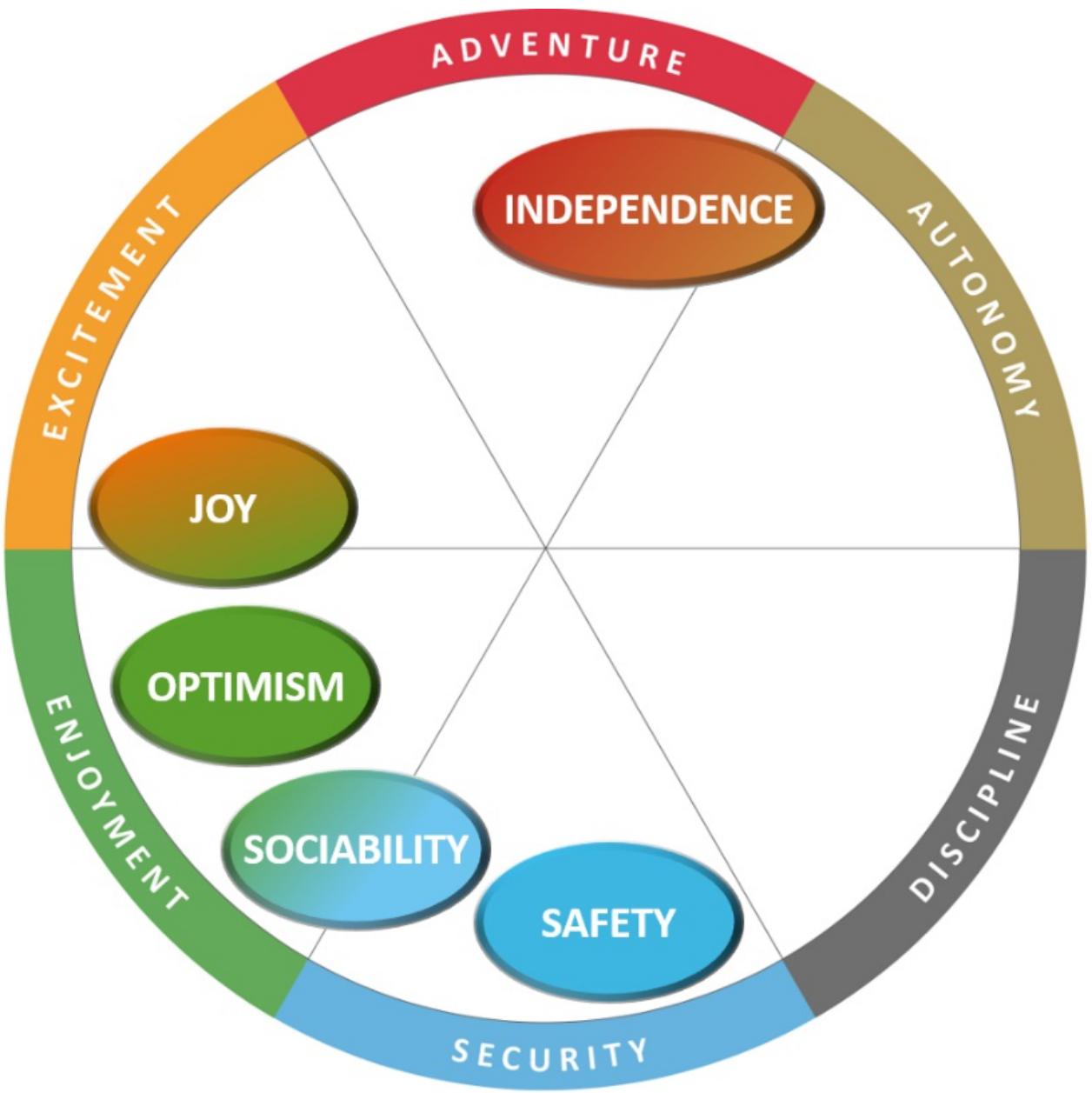
To provide some data-based insights into consumers' current value drivers, we conducted research in Germany in the 1st week of April with a representative sample of 300 women and men.

We did not focus on how they currently feel or what they do. Instead, we focused on what they wish for right now in order to uncover the social-emotional discrepancies they are currently experiencing.

We used implicit methods from cognitive science to measure association strength between the motivations and the experienced discrepancy between the actual and ideal self, to avoid controlled responses and to tap into the associative network that is key to reward value calculation in the brain.

The DECODE Goal Map was used to obtain a holistic perspective on the basic social-emotional human motivations. These motivational social-emotional territories were translated into 57 attributes (e.g., freedom, safety, thrill).

The results revealed that people have a broad range of social-emotional discrepancies in the current Covid-19 climate. This means that a wide range of activated goals exist, which can be leveraged by brands to deliver value to consumers.



As expected, we see aspects like *security*, *friendship* or *caring* among the top social-emotional motivations, but less obvious goals like *freedom*, *zest for life* or *going my own way* are also strong motivations.

For example, the goal to *go my own way* sounds counter-intuitive when the current situation indicates that solidarity and standing together is the overall key social objective. However, being constrained by the social norm of lockdown increases the perceived gap with the ideal self of being free to do as one chooses.

Within the current covid-19 climate, there are five motivational themes brands can leverage:

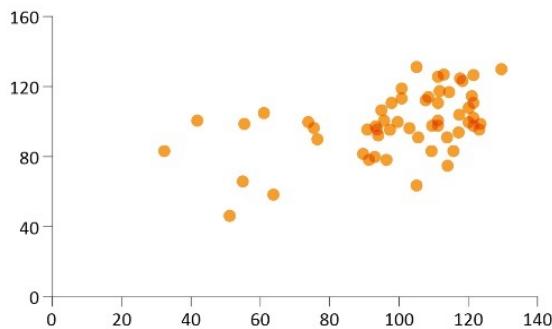
- **Safety** (e.g. security, safety)
- **Sociability** (e.g. togetherness, friendship)
- **Optimism** (e.g. optimism, be at ease)
- **Joy** (e.g. zest for life, energy)
- **Independence** (g. freedom, go my own way)

Despite these common themes, there are differences between age groups. The goal profile of the youngest age

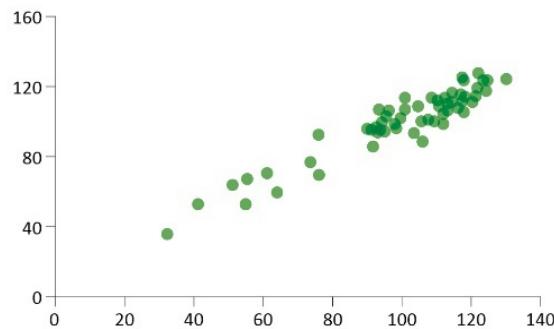
group included in the study (Gen Z: 16 – 22 years old) shows a weak correlation of only $r=0.48$ relative to the representative sample.

Meanwhile, the goal profiles of the other age groups (Millennials, Gen X and Boomers) all show similar patterns and have correlations to the representative sample of $r > 0.90$.

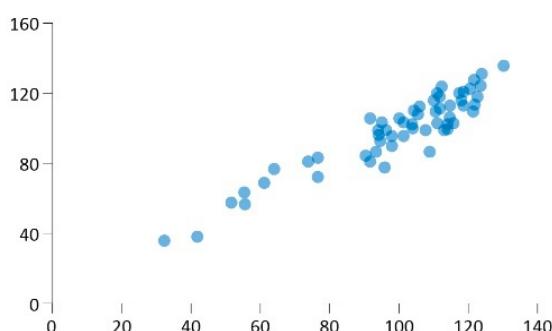
16-22 yrs. (Gen Z) vs. Rep. Sample



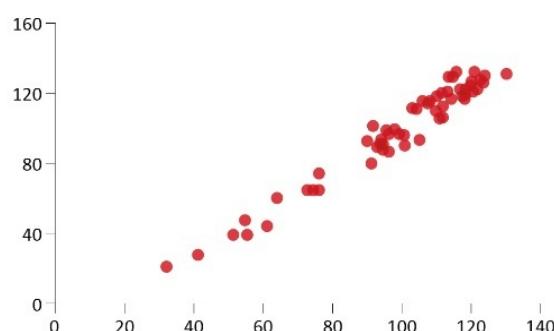
23-38 yrs. (Millenials) vs. Rep. Sample



39-49 yrs. (Gen X) vs. Rep. Sample



50-69 yrs. (Boomers) vs. Rep. Sample



Age correlates with life stages and, hence, with different active goals: the internal and external life context is different, so the ideal self and discrepancies change.

The young age group (Gen Z) currently have a significantly higher needs for *thrill*, *adventure* and *inspiration*. Linking brands to these motivations will resonate with this target group.

The motivational territories of ‘Security’ and ‘Be at ease’ are less relevant overall compared to the other age groups. For the young target group social-emotional goals like *caring*, *be unconcerned* and *reasonare* currently not particularly active.

Although the age groups of Millennials, Gen X and Boomers show a very high correlation with the representative sample, there are some differences as well. The table below shows which motivations are particularly relevant, or not, for the respective age group relative to the representative sample:

	Higher Relevance (vs total sample)	Lower Relevance (vs total sample)
16-22 yrs. (Gen Z)	adventure, thrill	caring, protection
23-38 yrs. (Millennials)	inspiration, structure	protection, carefreeness
39-49 yrs. (Gen X)	experience community, discovery,	discipline, give my best
50-69 yrs. (Boomers)	be unconcerned, be at ease	thrill, adventure

These results among German respondents are likely to be similar to other countries. There could be country differences, however, depending on the prevalence of virus cases, governmental response, and pre-existing governmental support systems. For example, Germany has low unemployment during covid-19, which could contribute to low discrepancy in resilience (e.g. be strong, success). Meanwhile, the US has extremely high unemployment which might lead to a greater need for such social-emotional rewards.

Overall, the results show that the motivational lens adds a different angle and a broader perspective. It offers many opportunities for brands to find distinctive communication strategies and to create focused initiatives that are credible for the brand and relevant in the category. To make these insights actionable, a brand needs to focus its communication efforts.

How to find the right spot for your brand

Think about three elements:

Relevance

To which of the relevant social-emotional motivations is my category already intuitively linked? This step ensures relevance as the consumer's initial choice is for a category before deciding on brands within the category. To *go my own way* is relevant for the fashion and clothing categories but is less relevant for detergents or confectionery. Even within one category there are multiple ways to link it to relevant motivations. For example, vitamin supplements could be laddered up to *be strong* or to *protection*, which are two very different propositions, but both are linked to the category and are currently relevant.

Credibility

What does my brand stand for today? Linking brands to a social-emotional goal to which the brand has no existing connection will not help to build equity. It is much more efficient to link the brand to social-emotional aspects with which the brand already holds a sufficiently strong association.

Associations are built slowly over time, so trying to establish new associations with the brand just takes too long and might be an overstretch and not credible. By going through these research results, brands can double check if they need to adapt their communication priorities and can decide which aspect of their brand's heritage should be focused on at the moment. Brands should choose the relevant social-emotional goal that is in line with existing brand strategy and brand equity.

Distinctiveness

With which of these social-emotional goals is my brand distinctively connected? Which points of difference does

my brand have? To focus on a social-emotional aspect that is not only relevant in the category and credible for a brand, but that also focusses on a current or intended point of difference ensures equity building and effective brand assignment.

A brand with a point of difference of ‘individuality’ can leverage the goal of ‘go my own way’ as this is currently valued by consumers and contributes to equity building. A focus on the PODs of the brand not only builds brand equity, it also makes sure that the communication will be assigned to your brand – communicating messages that are owned by other brands leads to misattribution and wastes money supporting competition.

How to turn these insights into action?

After the brand has identified what to focus on, the next step is to use the goals as springboards for initiative and messaging development. Let’s take *go my own way* as an example. Firstly, this goal can be used by many categories be it hair coloring, clothes, fragrance or any category that is intuitively linked to individuality or self-determination. Individualization of products, like shoes or the packaging of FMCG products, are means to the JTBD of closing this gap.

But even mobile network providers or banks could think of offers that enable individual tariffs or flexibility to adapt the tariff to one’s individual preferences and needs. Also, communication can be informed by this social-emotional goal. The short-term effect of communication is to increase mental availability. However, to build long-term equity, the communication needs to establish an association between the brand and the social-emotional goal.

The guiding question for communication is “How should we stage the product to be an effective means to this end using narratives, claims, symbols or other executional cues like music or language?”

Most teams are used to starting with the functional level to define their initiatives. In this case the functional level remains more or less the same, so teams need to think about initiatives through the social-emotional motivation lens.

The results of this study can inform brand builders, irrespective of the category, which social-emotional goals are currently activated among consumers. These insights provide inspiration to develop initiatives and communications that are relevant, credible and distinctive to build brand equity that is valued by consumers both during and after the Covid-19 crisis.

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