

Article

A Significant Moment in History: A Virtual Living Lab. LifeStyle Narratives That Are Shaping Our World; the Cases of Japan and UK 2019–2020

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Abstract: 2020 will go down in history as a tipping point when societies reassessed the fundamental objectives and principles that they had seen their communities develop. As a basis for investigating a broad sense of LifeStyle *by* Design, some 20 potentially rich narratives are used as the basis for these empirical analyses. They are our Virtual Living Lab at a time of unparalleled attitudinal and behavioural change and uncertainty. Social sharing is more authentic and trustworthy than traditional forms of mass communications. We explore our narratives in the UK and Japan and draw novel yet consistent, scalable implications for policy makers and public and private institutions alike. We track what people think is important to them and thus lay a foundation for engagement, in contrast to the traditional advertising communications approach of intrusion. Some of the new behaviours may become permanent, but there is a general need to streamline and simplify. People are against the complex, not because they want a simple life but because they want more time to enjoy enriched life experiences. At times of change, especially when uncertainty can bring negative outcomes, it is critical to be able to know what to say and how to say it so that leaders can establish trust and the right tone for the moment.

Keywords: lifestyle; quality of life (QOL); informed choice; key narratives; transformational; timeless; business; social media; policy; engagement; trust; community; affect; sustainability

1. Context for Change

For a moment in history, everybody—every institution, public, private, and family—shared the same simple, mission statement: Protect our community, Protect our colleagues, Protect our customers. Fuelled by (anti) social media, heightened inequality, and governments that have often been caught off guard and unprepared, COVID-19 became an Internet virus as well as a biospheric virus. This means that minds have been altered, opinions changed, and attitudes adjusted. Already, social and political commentators are referring to the tectonic shift created by the pandemic in terms of different eras: BC, DC, and AC (Before-, During-, and After COVID-19; Nelms [1]).

One significant consequence is that both health and well-being have moved up the agenda. As healthy lifestyle choices become increasingly important, so social sharing of new ideas and practices will have the potential to drive major behavioural shifts and improve our QOL (Quality of Life). Healthy lifestyle choices can drive shifts that enhance life satisfaction (Clark [2]) or happiness (WHR [3]; Galloway [4]; Layard [5]).

Human choice is a basic freedom and, philosophically, can have several dimensions. A core tenet of LifeStyle *by* Design (LifeStyle *by* Design is a research unit in The University of Tokyo's Institute for Future Initiative; it promotes and delivers healthier lifestyles, bringing a new balance to the

physical, nutritional, and social needs to enhance an individual's QOL) is to empower the individual to make an informed choice about his or her life options. For that, multiple constituencies will need to communicate clearly and coherently about what is possible and why. There is growing evidence that the current health systems of nations around the world will be unsustainable if unchanged over the next 15 years [6–12]. Globally, healthcare is threatened by a confluence of powerful trends—increasing demand, rising costs, uneven quality, misaligned incentives. If ignored, they will overwhelm health systems, creating massive financial burdens for individual countries and devastating health problems for the individuals who live in them. A key element going forward will be to have sustainability as a central theme—but if we empower individuals they can go beyond to personally thrive!

Healthy lifestyle choices can drive shifts that enhance QOL—then we must collectively think more about 'healthspan', the number of years we are healthy, than about longevity, or how long we live.

COVID-19 has led to differing responses at the national level, and this has been seen by many as likely to have a long-term impact on globalization, beyond the near-term fall in trade and foreign direct investment that fueled globalization in the first two decades of the new millennium.

2. New Globalism

More important and independent of COVID-19 is the digital reality of social media and social sharing that has created a flat network in which anyone from anywhere can participate, a stark dichotomy from the past top-down, hierarchical, and largely Western approach of traditional media. This was characterised by Marshall McLuhan's [13] seminal treatise *The Medium Is the Massage*, which looked at the global impact of mass media. Today (Riley [14]), it is a new globalism where a diversity of perspectives will flourish and demand a deep understanding of cultures, as we seek to collaborate and create trust.

While Society 5.0 in Japan (Keidanren [15]; Hitachi [16]) means that science and technology innovation will lead changes that create a new society, it does demand that any communications must be inclusive and understood and embraced by multiple constituencies. The diffusion of new ideas is greatly enhanced by our almost ubiquitous participation in social media. Indeed, narratives and social media are integral parts of today's connected world.

Critically, trust is paramount as it is amplified in a social setting, and, more than ever, people find trusted voices in their networks; people trust people! Trust is at the heart of all relationships and is a cultural variable (Edelman Trust Barometer 2020; [17]). It is influenced by economics, especially economic inequality. Going forward, we can imagine value created in like-minded (closed) communities whose discussions can have broader influence.

Stories fuel our imagination today. Narratives are now constantly fed by content creation and engagement that shape our lives and the world we live in. It is now possible to identify and characterise narratives, their key opinion drivers and the most significant content, and engagement wherever it is: whether websites, traditional media, blogs, or social media.

While many economists are still busy creating mathematical formulas to decode and contextualise our supposedly 'rational' behaviour, people's actions are more often based on human interest stories than on hard data. In *Narrative Economics*, Shiller [18] went much broader and deeper, looking at how the stories we tell ourselves about the world drive our behaviour—and thus the world itself, if enough people buy into them. Thus, LifeStyle *by* Design needs to align with and create popular stories that go viral and affect collective and individual behaviour.

Design thinkers are leaders who couple the skills of a designer with conventional corporate strategy to drive the open and unashamed innovation that revolutionizes everything from products to processes. Design thinking as a process is essentially condensed to a concentration on experiential (sensory), emotional, and integral (cross-sector) intelligence. Thus, in a period of renewal, the character of any specific LifeStyle *by* Design initiative would need to be:

- ✓ progressive (a questioning, disruptive innovator);
- ✓ collaborative (brings multidisciplinary skills and melds a team to holistically explore ‘what can be’);
- ✓ authoritative (focused, with access to execute material change).

3. Primary Research Focus: Benchmarking LifeStyle *by* Design Narratives

Stories/narratives should be viewed as complex, organic structures, with unique behaviours and characteristics. Some 20 narratives were identified before the pandemic to benchmark potential stories that could help The University of Tokyo’s LifeStyle *by* Design initiative. For comparative cultural purposes, we wanted to simultaneously probe these narratives in both Japan and the UK. It is not unusual that global and local narratives vary in content and structure because of cultural cues (Hofstede [19,20], Neufield [21]).

The narratives used were identified by a subjective pre-search of different current publishing channels broadly related to health, lifestyle, and wellness. This was felt to be most efficient in establishing a diverse but somewhat focused group of narratives. This analysis indicated that what people are thinking is important to them at a point in time. In these unusual times with heightened uncertainty, it becomes more of an imperative to be able to communicate and connect in a relevant and credible way. In many ways, COVID–19 has put all of us in different ‘living’ labs.

4. Engage with Engagement

Significance Systems was founded by the two people, John Ricketts and Darrell Berry, who, according to *Forbes*, first coined the term ‘social media’ back in 1994. The Significance Systems’ platform, earth.ai, exploits big data techniques to analyse the structure of engagement on any topic, across the whole of the Internet. It shows people’s true emotions in a way traditional social or marketing research does not. Critically, one can find the strongest story around any topic.

To leverage the strong story, it is now possible to go beyond traditional media planning considerations and focus on the strong narrative. Simply know

- ✓ What to say,
- ✓ How to say it,
- ✓ Who to say it to,
- ✓ Where to say it.

This state-of-the-art communication science measures long-term engagement for narratives. Naturally, distinctive narratives behave in discrete ways and vary in their value and utility. The categorization of the narratives in Figure 1 is a structural classification built up, over time, using the earth.ai extensive database. We can identify Timeless and Transformational narratives that can affect change and create sustainable value. Most Internet exchanges are white noise, and thus most narratives, unless harnessed, were transient (82%), having low engagement. Transformative narratives, in general, reflected only 2%, while those that were Timeless accounted for 5%. Tribal narratives accounted for some 11%, in general, but while characterised by intense debate it rarely has any impact. If one considers the narratives of the top 100 brands/companies, then their effective communications strategies were focused. One sees Timeless engagement representing at least 90% of the narratives.

Since people find trusted voices in their networks, this type of analysis enables one to ‘engage with engagement’ and thus be part of the ongoing story rather than trying to dominate it from outside, which has been the traditional mass communication and advertising norm of intrusion.

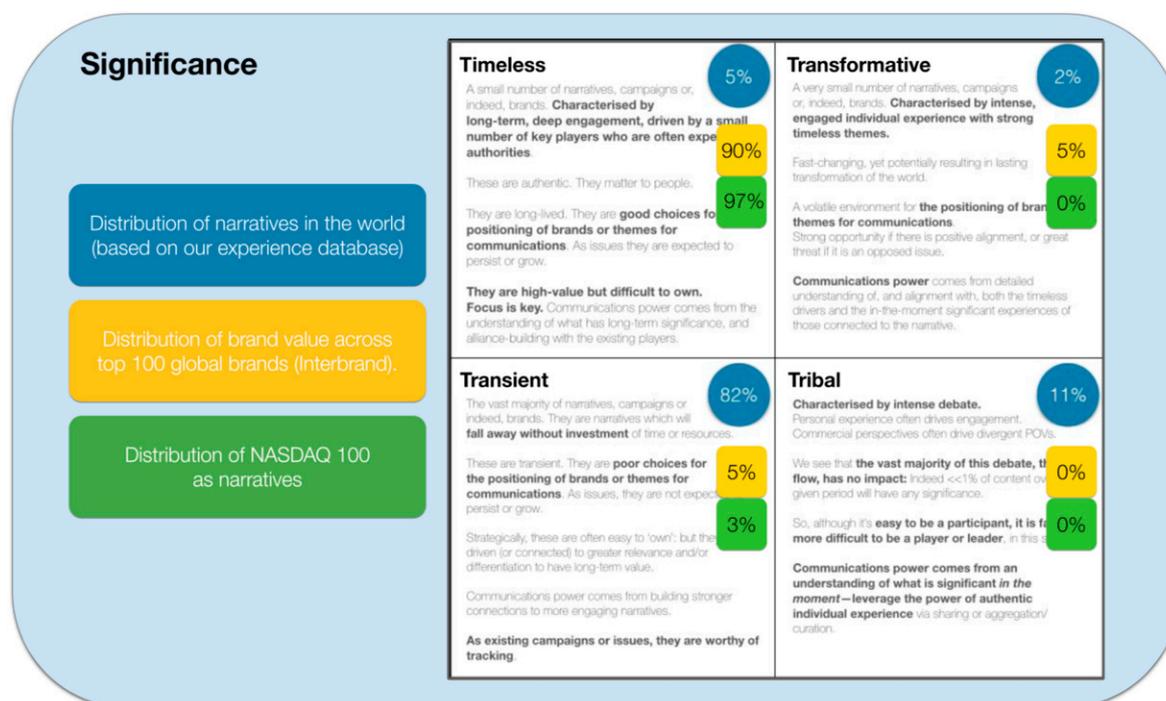


Figure 1. Categorisation of narratives.

5. Our Virtual Living Lab (2019–2020)

The first wave of research was undertaken in June 2019, followed by a second wave in December 2019; with a special third wave, April 2020, when the UK was in lockdown and Japan had the national emergency in place. These, with the latest wave in June 2020, formed the empirical bases for this paper. To develop the narrative landscapes, we looked at all online sources in Japan and the UK, respectively, up to the date of the research wave. There was no time window. Depending on the specific narrative, which self-organised, it could have been dominated by recent content ... or not.

5.1. Before COVID-19 (BC)

The encouraging first observation from the initial wave in June 2019 was that we identified many Timeless narratives, but most had, as yet weak content. Of the narratives, 17 of them in the UK and 11 in Japan were Timeless, but all were currently poorly defined and therein lay an opportunity. The three Transient narratives in the UK may well have been due to inappropriate vernacular. The Timeless Japanese narratives were generally weaker than those in the UK, on average. Content efficiency, distinguished in Figure 2, is the extent to which the existing content was significant. High content efficiency implied that all the content was significant. In contrast, a low score meant that the content was varied and not wholly consistent.

With the second wave in December 2019, the basis for benchmarking proactive activity was established. That said, it was inappropriate, with only two data points focused on apparent dynamics, since overall engagement was essentially unchanged in each market. So, while there was no evidence of seasonality amongst the narratives, at present there was higher average engagement for the narratives in the UK. Indeed, there was some evidence that the UK market was behaving differently after the Brexit election. For example, the social stability narrative appeared to have been soothed by the clarity of the clear UK election results of early December 2019. For some commentators, the UK between the general elections of 2017 and 2019 had been suspended in mid-air, with no Brexit deal possible. For some, it had been unclear whether the British political system and the traditional two main parties would survive. This, then, was significantly impacted by the pandemic, and during 2020, the social stability narrative in the UK trended to becoming Transient as events overtook expected norms.

the pandemic, the content efficiency of the narratives was generally weak. However, an ability to understand these dynamics on an ongoing basis might have obviated the miscommunications and confusion that was created at different times in both countries during this period.

Physical distancing was a common theme, and this has had perhaps the greatest impact on the family unit, with large numbers teleworking for the first time and children being schooled at home. At the outset of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK, fear and panic swamped the family story. The affective response in Figure 3 is a time series of the UK's emotional response to the COVID-19 narrative over time. The data source was the open web in the UK.

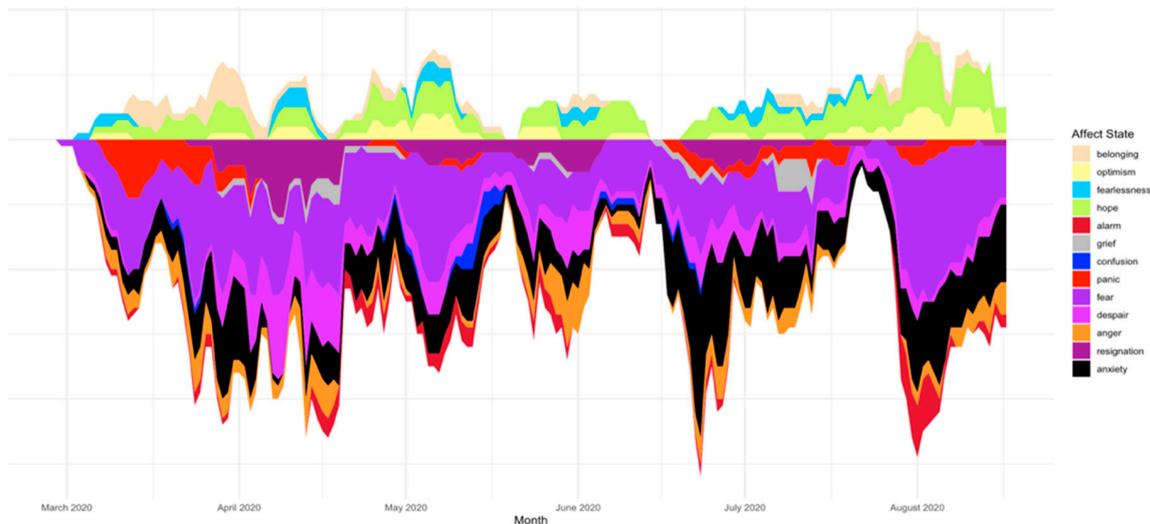


Figure 3. Affective response of the UK population, March–16 August 2020.

Affect is a rich measure of the emotional tone of the narrative. It is felt emotion, which is a powerful descriptor of future behaviour. Affective science [22] recognises the importance of affective processes in people's lives. In Figure 3 we see how the emotions of the UK population changed daily from March to the middle of August 2020. Above the horizontal are positive feelings with the green/grey peaks and troughs reflecting belonging and hope. We can see a lot of red, reflective of panic, in March, and returning in early July when lockdown ended, and fear of a second wave was prevalent. Anxiety (black) also parallels this, and fear and despair (the purples) are very visible throughout. Miscommunications and/or misunderstanding heightened the problems at specific times, and these are shown in blue, with anger (brown) taking on different forms, representing local lockdowns, international exclusions, as well as distrust with how school examinations and university entrance were (mis-) treated.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the narratives (Table 1) tracked in any detail. Rather, we chose to concentrate on: My Community, Social Stability, and Personal Friendship to look at how they changed in the year and highlight differences between Japan and the UK (Figure 4).

My Community in the UK was relatively constant as a Timeless narrative. Regardless of the uncertainty in June 2019 surrounding the impact of Brexit, it was dominant and negative (red), with a sense of belonging creating some joy on a weaker scale. This shifted quickly after the December election when optimism and hope came to the fore and negativity was greatly weakened. By the time of the national lockdown, negativity was once again dominant, but not as strongly as in the previous June. (The strength of the emotion is indicated by the depth of colour on all the snap-shot wheels displayed in Figures 5–10.) Distress at the new situation created anxiety and loss, and a sense of sorrow and sadness.

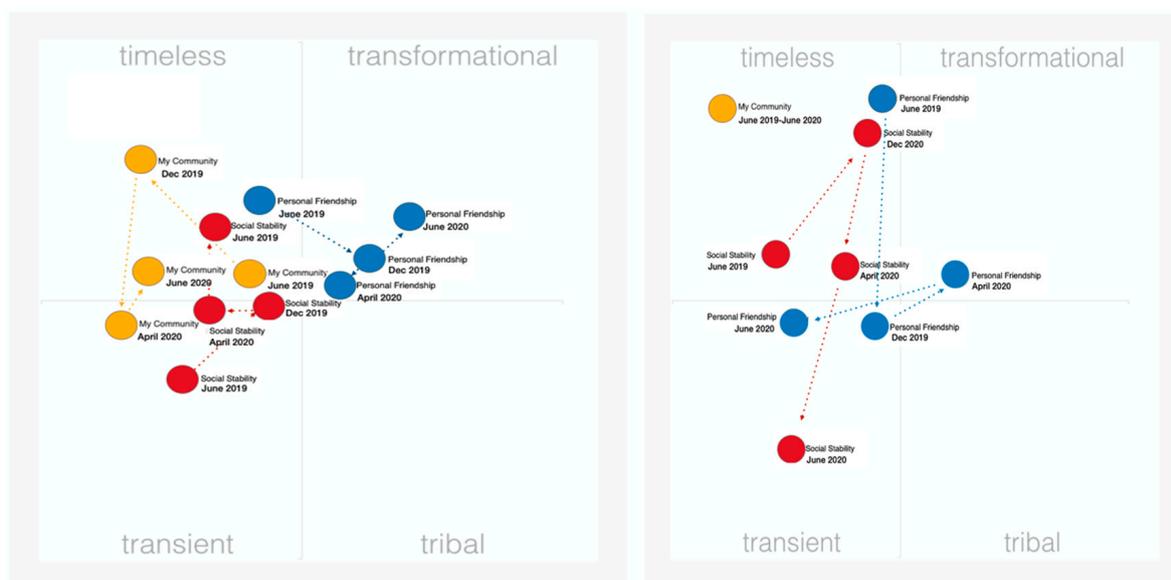


Figure 4. Japan and UK’s (respective) narrative dynamics, June 2019–June 2020.

Table 1. Narratives tracked in the UK and Japan.

English (UK)	Japanese
well-being	ウェルビーイング
wellness	健康
personal happiness	個人的な幸せ
personal satisfaction	個人的な満足
leisure time	余暇
personal employment	個人雇用
personal life balance	私生活バランス
personal friendship	個人的な友情
my family	私の家族
personal nutrition balance	個人の栄養バランス
personal activity	個人的な活動
my free time	私の自由な時間
motivation	動機
my community	私のコミュニティ
personal bonding	個人的な絆
being employed	雇用されている
personal wealth	個人の富
personal relationships	個人的な関係
my resilience	私の回復力
personal confidence	個人的な自信
personal optimism	個人楽観主義
personal pessimism	個人的な悲観主義
social stability	社会的安定
economic growth	経済成長

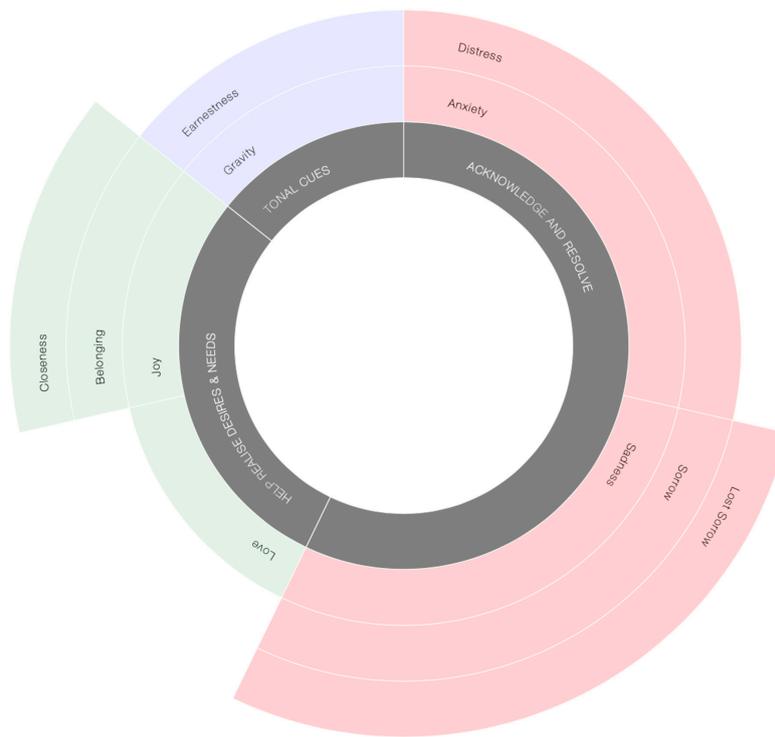


(a) June 2019: Timeless.

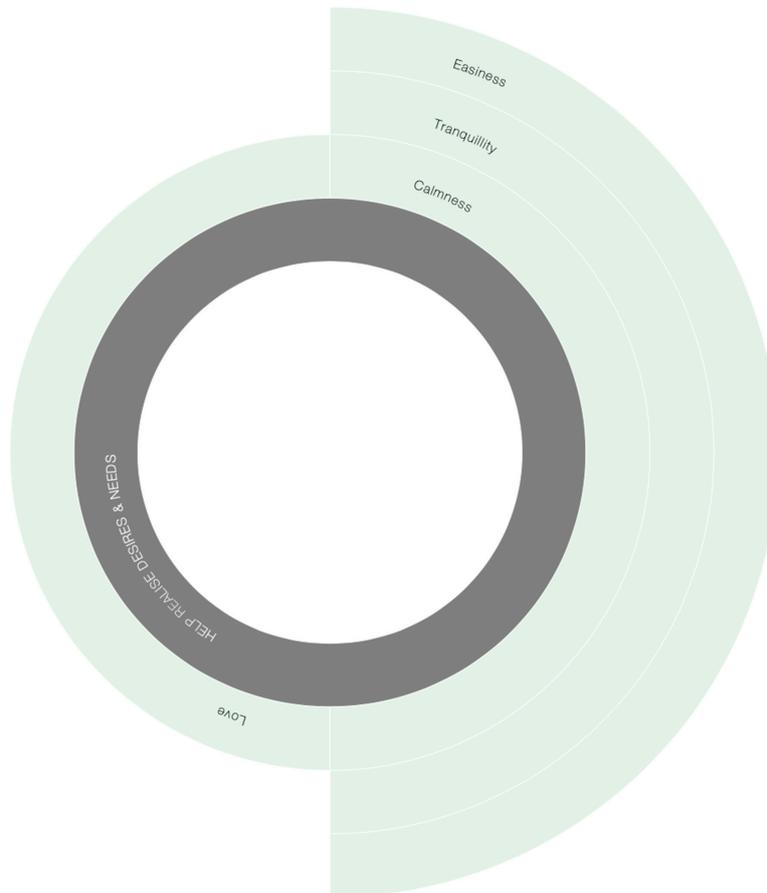


(b) December 2019: Timeless.

Figure 5. Cont.

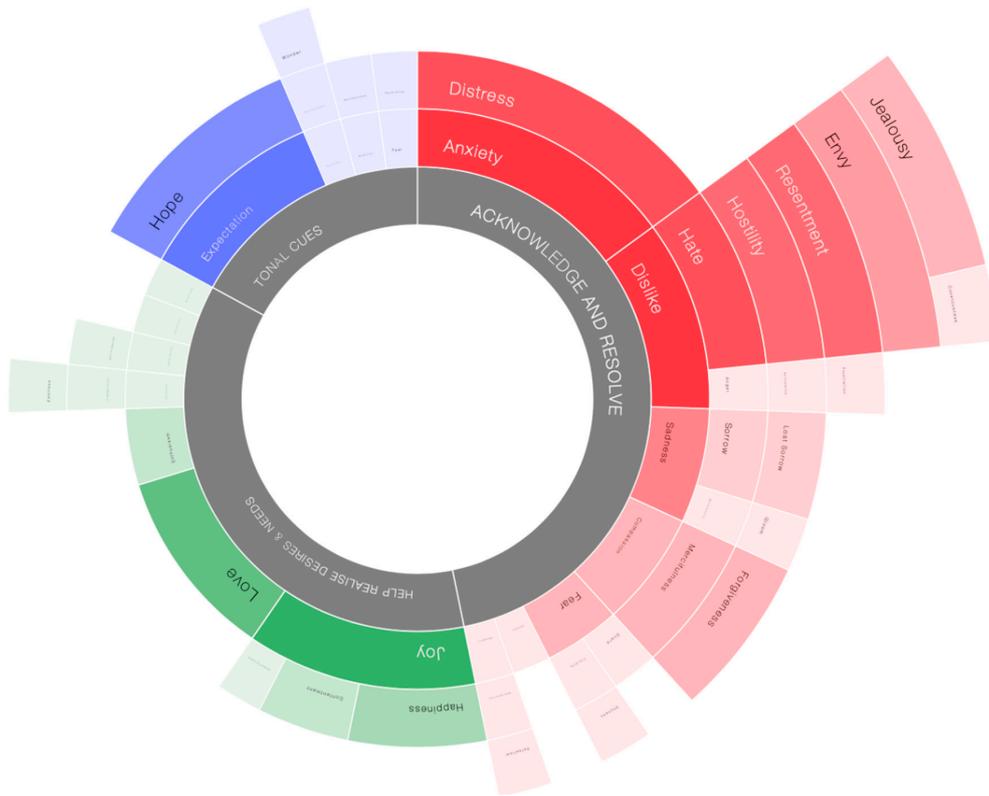


(c) April 2020: Timeless.

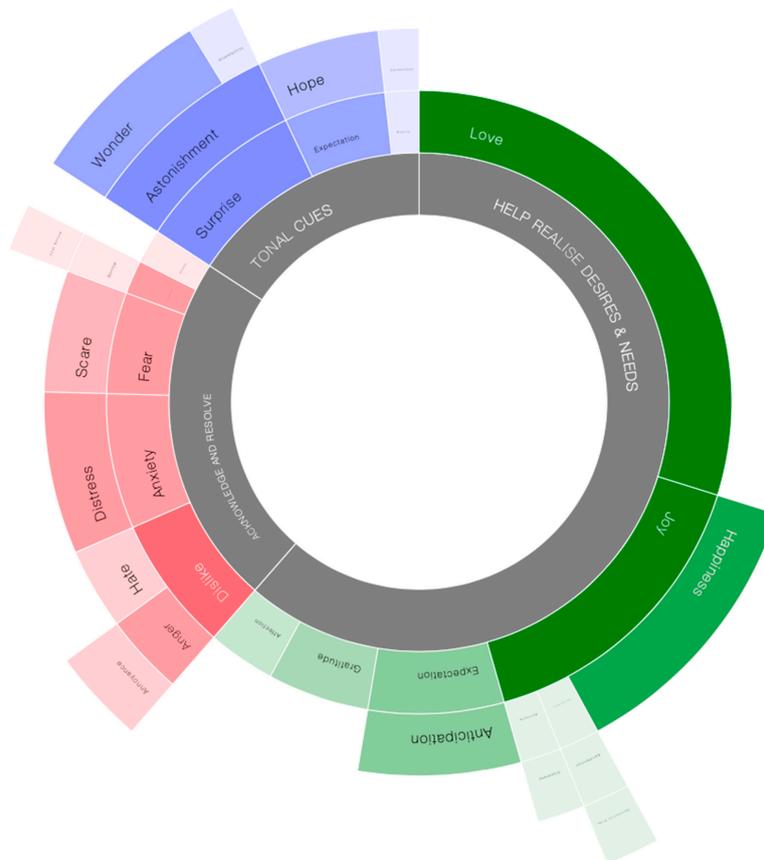


(d) June 2020: Timeless.

Figure 5. My Community in the UK.

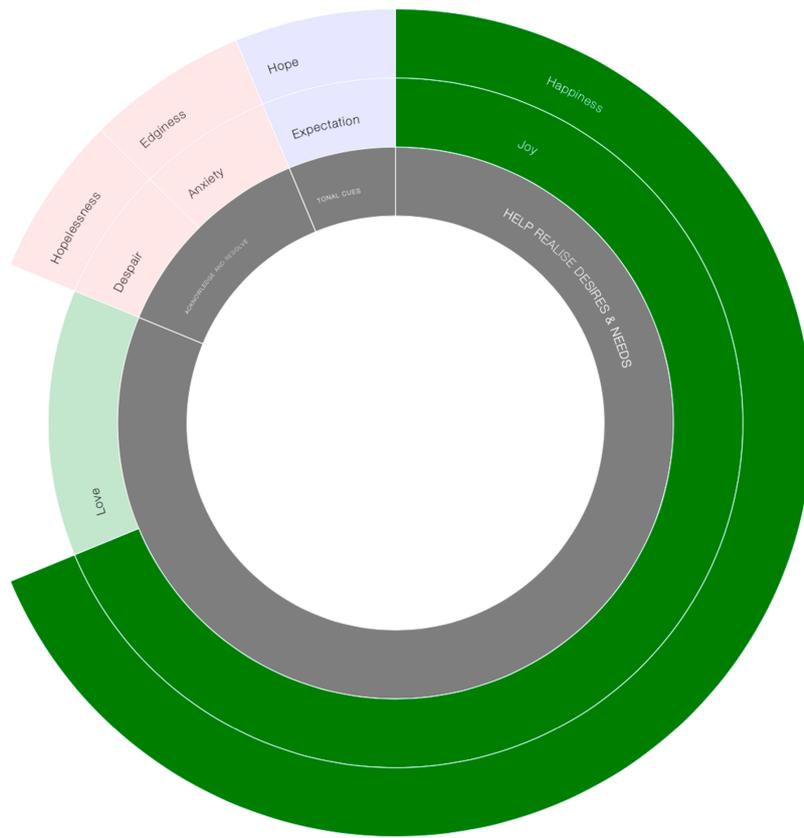


(a) June 2019: Timeless.



(b) December 2019: Timeless.

Figure 6. Cont.

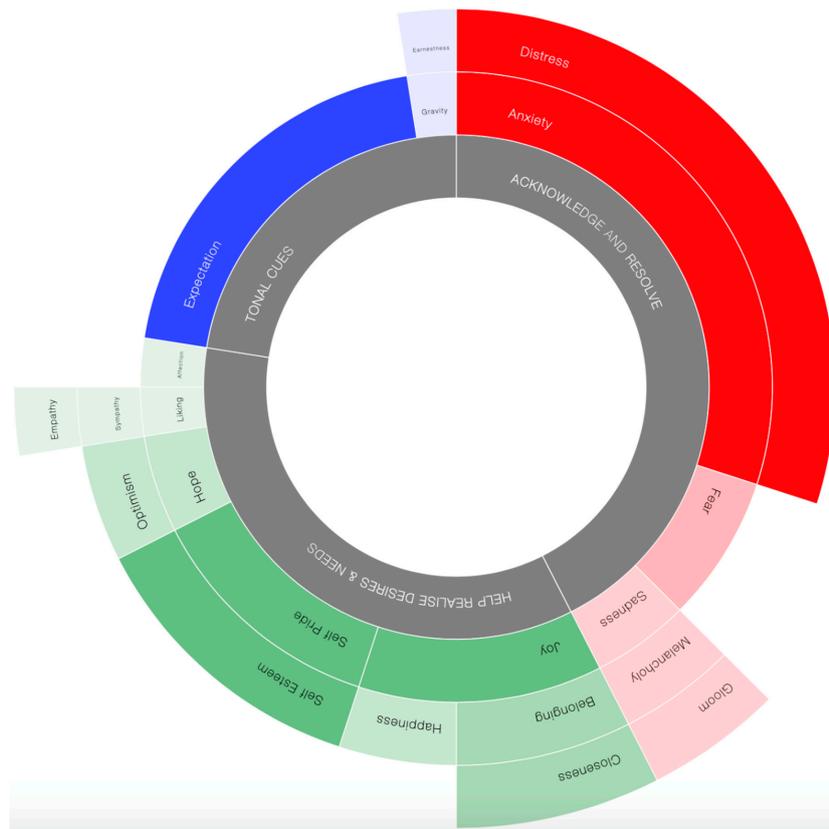


(c) April 2020: Transient.



(d) June 2020: Timeless/Transient.

Figure 6. My Community in Japan.



(a) June 2019: Timeless.



(b) December 2019: Timeless.

Figure 7. Cont.



(c) April 2020: Timeless.

Figure 7. Social Stability in the UK.

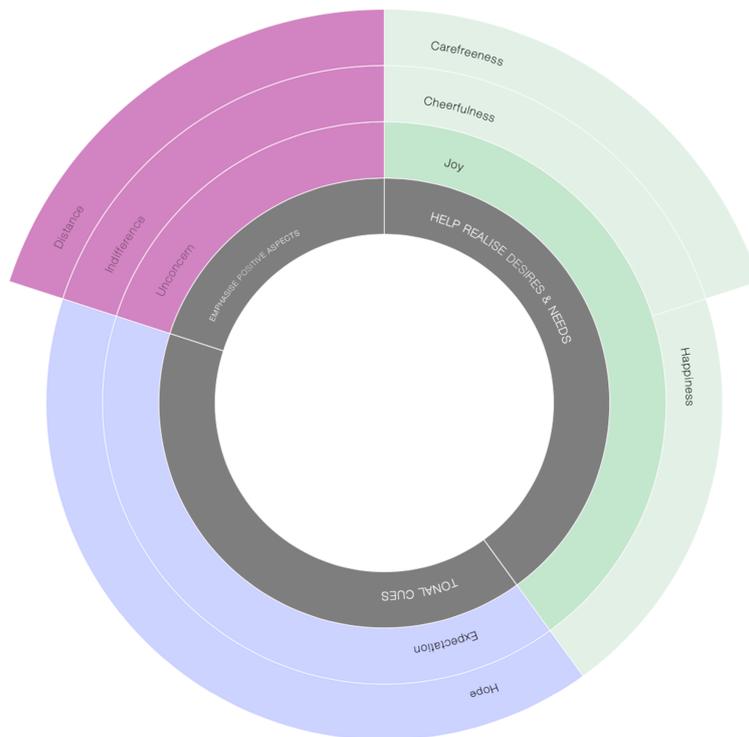


(a) June 2019: Timeless.

Figure 8. Cont.



(b) December 2019: Timeless.



(c) April 2020: Timeless/Transient.

Figure 8. Cont.



(d) June 2020: Transient.

Figure 8. Social Stability in Japan.



(a) June 2019: Timeless.

Figure 9. Cont.

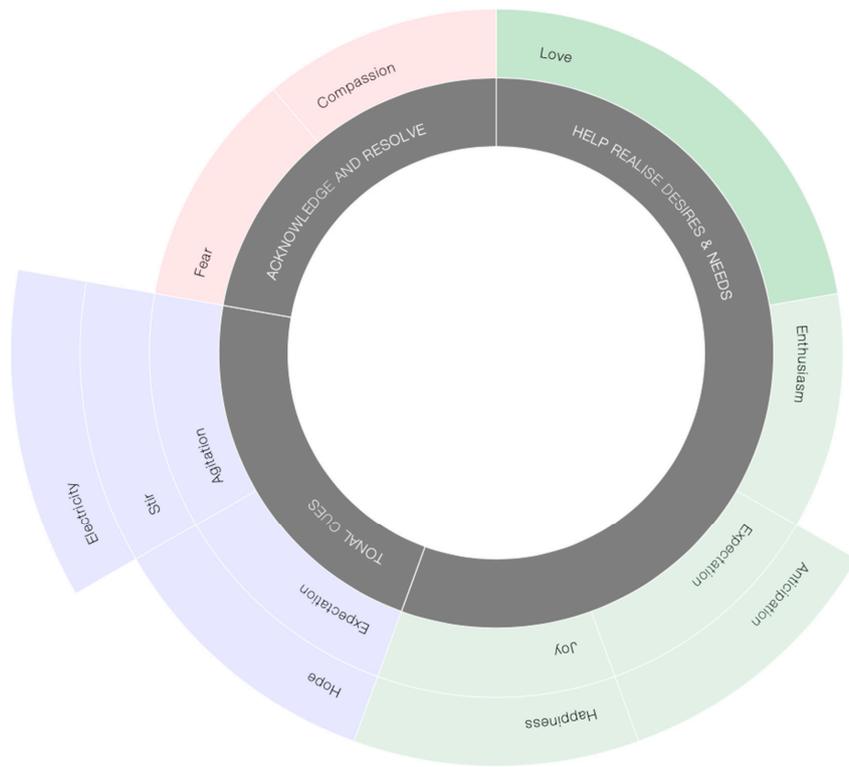


(b) December 2019: Transient.

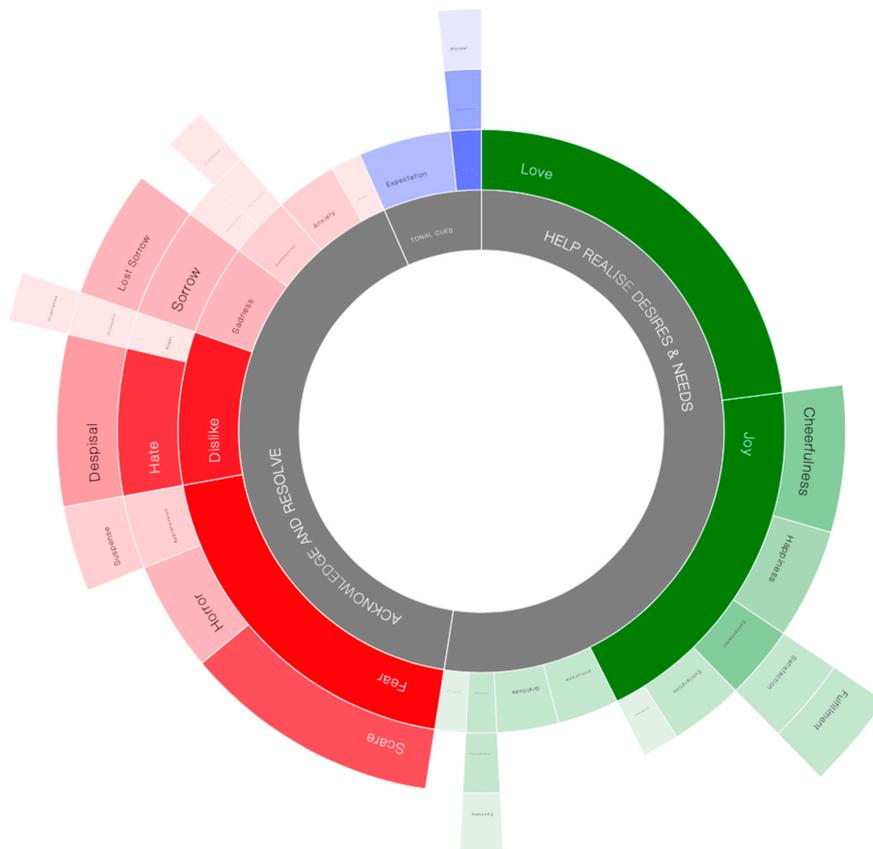


(c) April 2020: Transformational.

Figure 9. Cont.



(b) December 2019: Transformational.



(c) April 2020: Timeless/Transformational.

Figure 10. Cont.

this negativity was stronger but rooted differently in defeatism, resignation, and despair, creating a sense of instability and insecurity. This continued and by June 2020 this hitherto Timeless narrative had become Transient, and such was the flux that there were no clear emotional responses, as Social Stability was far from the actual reality, a fact reinforced by daily national news.

In Japan any negativity in June 2019 was removed by December, with joy and hope prevailing as the Japanese, as a country, looked forward to 2020. By April 2020 and the national emergency, however, this Timeless narrative had started to become Transient, and the associated emotions were much weaker, being reflective of this flux. Indeed, there was a sense of distance from Social Stability by April, associated with an indifference and unconcern as people felt it was too macro and not personally relevant.

When we probed Personal Friendship it was evident that, whether associated with positive or negative emotions, these emotions were consistently stronger in Japan than the UK. This was likely to be reflective of cultural differences, the different sense of individuality, and the nature of personal relationships between the two countries. What was common was that the challenging times during the last year took on a previously Timeless narrative, which for a time at the outset of the pandemic made a potentially Transformational pivot, but by June 2020 had become Transient in the UK, as family came to the fore. In these difficult times it became evident in the UK that people saw who their true friends were.

As well as Personal Friendship being Transformational, in the most recent wave in late June in Japan (Figure 11) so was the Personal Bond narrative, which may also be reflective of cultural nuances and the fact that in Japan relationships really matter! Moreover, the focus on family and community were heightened as they, along with health/well-being and leisure/free time, are Timeless. All narratives remained weak in terms of content efficiency, and, not surprisingly, many remained Transient, especially those relating to work, finance, and free time. Significantly, the affect around the family was both active and positive, and, despite being surprised and astonished by the situation, there was a sense of calmness, love, and joy in the family unit. COVID-19 was first a human tragedy, and we witnessed in this Virtual Living Lab universal human values of love, purpose, and connectivity uniting us.

Although there are, at present, no clear topics or themes, nhk is the key source of content. Indeed, it is fair to say that both Japanese and British now feel more connected to family, friends and immediate neighbours. As we look to the future, we should support the things that bind us together and invest in our communities at scale. Considering the future culture of shopping, we can imagine that the role of convenience stores will have the potential to become more integral to daily 'community' living—less about casual shopping but more mainstream, as people are now concerned about dining out and queueing in supermarkets. We envisage that they may also take an explicit public role as a community magnet reflective of policy decisions that integrate postal services in keeping with drives for social efficiency.

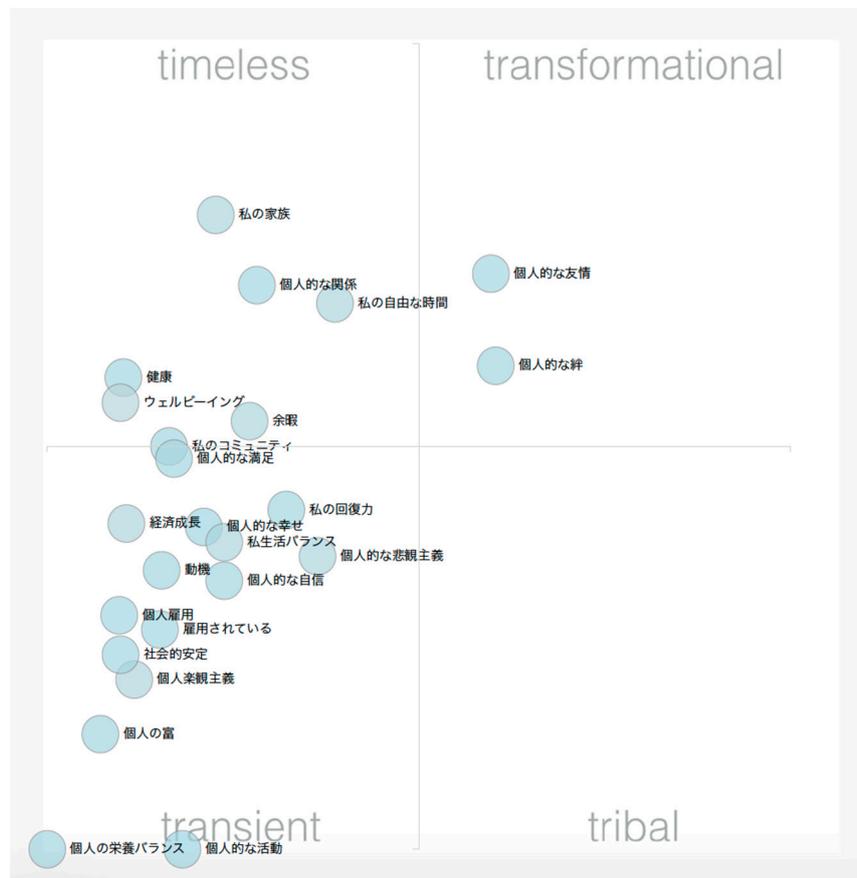


Figure 11. June 2020; Japan Landscape.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The recovery will not be a straight line, nor will it be on the same timetable in different countries/regions. There is a need for optimism as we evolve from DC to AC. There must be a positive tone to the messages, and transformative collaboration can lead to improvements in QOL and productivity. Many people will remain cautious about returning to activities that involve close human proximity, so we cannot be frustrated by heightened attention to risk management. There will be a spectrum of behaviour.

The pandemic has moved health, in the broadest sense, to the top of people's values. It is a concept that crosses all categories from healthy food to healthy finances, healthy workplaces, healthy home, to healthy computer networks—out of adversity creativity and innovation can blossom. To effectively build broader self-health and healthy lifestyles a commitment to improve health literacy to empower informed choice will be a necessary prerequisite, whether demanded or not by consumer advocacy groups.

A new social contract is what business needs, not just a marketing strategy within a new culture of uncertainty and anticipation. Social wisdom will be as important as market insights. Ethics have become a powerful cultural value for public and private institutions, as well as branded businesses. Agility and adaptiveness have come to the fore and indicate that going forward we need to have the mentality of a learning organisation.

In creating a bridge to the future, how do we make sense of how the crisis is changing the world as we are living through it, so that we may remake the future? Short-term changes to ways of living amid the pandemic can give rise to longer-term consumer trends. Thinking through responses to COVID-19—the stopped activities, paused activities, temporary measures, innovations can help us focus on new ways of doing things. The end of lockdown will be a process, not an event, and we may

well need at least a ‘year of stabilisation’. This crisis highlights the need for an equilibrium between resilience and efficiency.

Some 60% of mortality and 80% of the global disease burden are functions of just four lifestyle choices—lack of exercise, poor nutrition, smoking, and alcohol abuse. The pandemic is demanding that people also pivot, and it provides a timely opportunity to empower people to adopt a LifeStyle *by* Design. That said, it will be imperative to understand: Why don’t people always do what they intend to do? In healthcare, why don’t patients change their lifestyles? Changing behaviour will increasingly be at the heart of healthcare and lifestyle choices. Understanding how people make decisions will help us to identify the gap between intention and action to facilitate action. We hypothesise that the awareness of health insurance has increased, and the increasing importance of the digital is also clear to everyone. For many traditional companies there is an immediate need to consider the strategic impact of ever-increasing direct to consumer digital commerce going forward (as evidenced by the shift in emphasis of the My Community narrative in the UK between June 2019 and June 2020; Figure 12).



Figure 12. My Community (UK): scope of narrative.

Streamlining will be much more important, and so we need to simplify because people will reject the complex as enriched experiences become more important. Public and private institutions will need to accelerate their digital investments and increase (begin) participation in ecosystems, where aligning with the narratives as outlined above is likely to become very important and to aid how one can smoothly evolve the agile practices adopted during the crisis. At times of change, especially when uncertainty can bring negative outcomes, it is critical to be able to know what to say and how to say it so that leaders can establish trust and the right tone for the moment. For public and private entities alike, it is possible to track how things are evolving so that there can be both trust and efficacy in communications.

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