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The Impact of COVID-19 on the Unconscious Mind

A Deep Dive Into the Metaphors, Emotions, Attitudes and Behaviors of Boomers and Gen Z

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"*Metaphor plays a role in the creation of reality. When that created reality is a grim reality, it becomes all the more important to understand the reasoning that helped create it.*"

George Lakoff

Why study the unconscious mind during a pandemic?

In the face of an unprecedented health crisis, we believe it is critically important to understand the **unconscious sentiments** surrounding COVID-19.

As humans, we often struggle to articulate our thoughts clearly, especially in times of crisis which tend to trigger intense emotional reactions. Rationality is the first to go out the door, as evidenced by our current shortage of toilet paper. We are not great at knowing why we feel the way we feel, language alone deprives public health officials, business leaders, and communications professionals of the insight they need to **deliver messaging that is both empathetic and effective in changing behavior.**

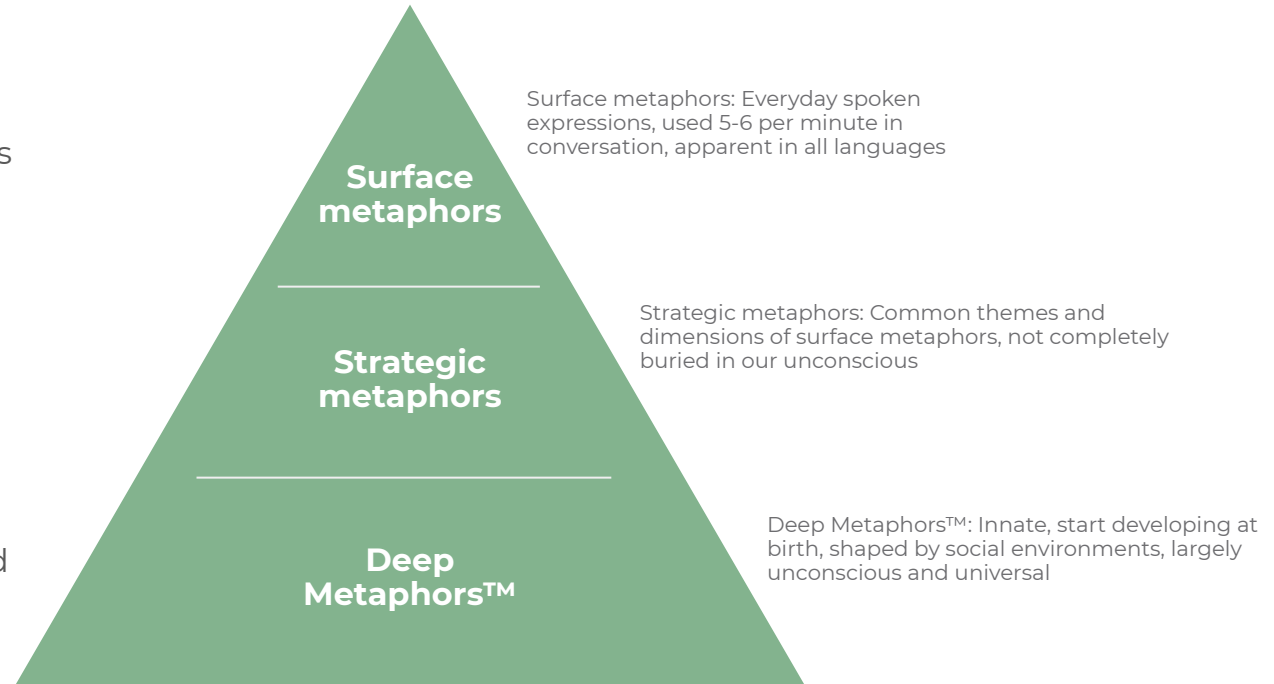The pressing need for this type of understanding prompted us to conduct this study.

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Why use metaphor to understand the impact of COVID-19?

Metaphors are how we understand the world:
Metaphors reveal our unconscious - which generates up to 95% of all thought and decisions.

Metaphors make communication easier:
Activating these metaphors and frames makes behavior change simple, easier to comprehend and act on.

Surface metaphors

Strategic metaphors

Deep Metaphors™

Surface metaphors: Everyday spoken expressions, used 5-6 per minute in conversation, apparent in all languages

Strategic metaphors: Common themes and dimensions of surface metaphors, not completely buried in our unconscious

Deep Metaphors™: Innate, start developing at birth, shaped by social environments, largely unconscious and universal

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Objective:

Identify the deep metaphors™

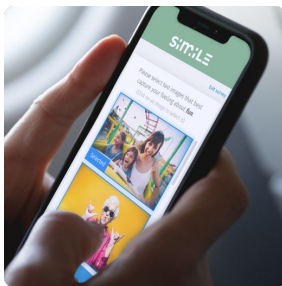associated with Coronavirus/COVID-19 and their degree

Discover segment differences

to understand what is unique and distinctive for Gen Z and Boomers

Understand imagery

to capture intuitive visual cues that shortcut to deeper sentiments

Method:

Data was collected via *Simile*, our proprietary tool for quantitative metaphor elicitation at scale.

Respondents were prompted with a series of questions related to their **thoughts and feelings about how COVID-19 is impacting their lives** and prompted to select images that reflected these sentiments.

This data was then analyzed for metaphor and manually tagged by a team of highly-trained Olson Zaltman analysts.

Sample:

Boomers:
n=137

Gen Z:
n=137

We recruited n=274 respondents in the US, comprising two distinct demographic segments:

The youngest adults, those 18-25, were approximately half of the sample. Their elder peers, those aged 60-72 represented the other.

This sample's gender distribution was roughly balanced.

here's where we are

What the headlines tell us...

Why Don't More Boomers Care About Coronavirus?

A new survey shows that baby boomers, one of the groups of people most likely to experience complications from COVID-19, are also the least likely to worry about contracting it

CONVINCING BOOMER PARENTS TO TAKE THE CORONAVIRUS SERIOUSLY

By Michael Schulman
March 16, 2020

OPINION > EDITORIALS

Gen Z gets an F in grasping coronavirus severity

Gen Z and the coronavirus: 'What, me worry?'

The Coronavirus Inflicts Its Own Kind of Terror

⚡ The New York Times - Steven Erlanger

GLOBAL
The Case Against Waging 'War' on the Coronavirus
Leaders invoking battle terminology to galvanize national action risk achieving the opposite.

YASMEEN SERHAN   MARCH 31, 2020

COVID-19 will spread like a forest fire. We need to control the burn as best we can

WEB ONLY / VIEWS » MARCH 20, 2020
Mike Davis: The Coronavirus Crisis Is a Monster Fueled by Capitalism

Blinded By Disbelief: COVID-19's Devastation Is A Mirror For Climate Change
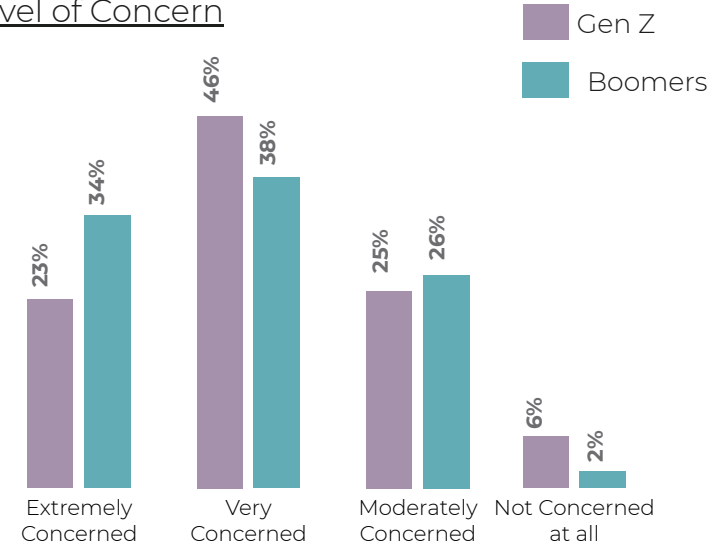
THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS
Fighting COVID-19 Is Like 'Whack-A-Mole,' Says Writer Who Warned Of A Pandemic
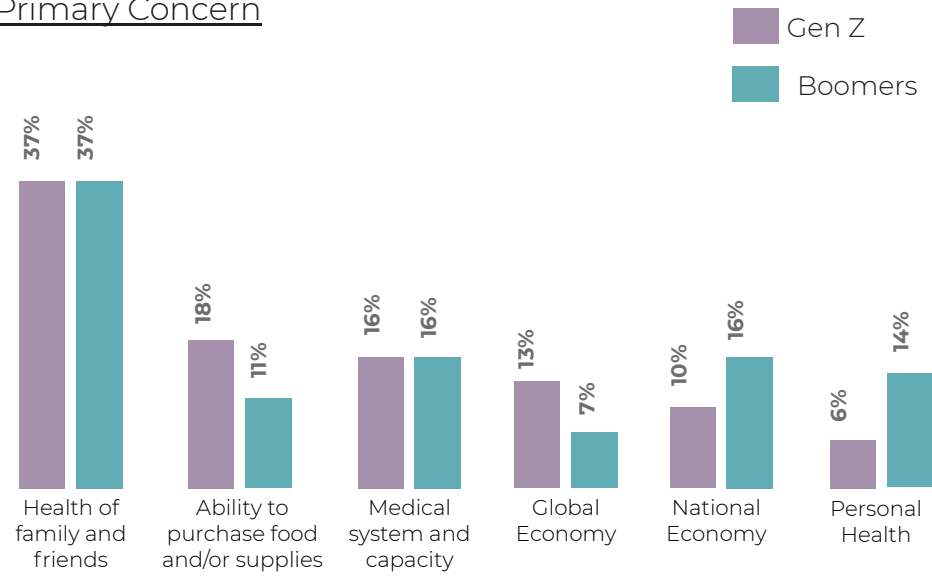
April 1, 2020 · 3:47 PM ET
Heard on Fresh Air

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Concern is evident...

...as are the motives

Level of Concern

■ Gen Z
■ Boomers

- Extremely Concerned: Gen Z 23%, Boomers 34%
- Very Concerned: Gen Z 46%, Boomers 38%
- Moderately Concerned: Gen Z 25%, Boomers 26%
- Not Concerned at all: Gen Z 6%, Boomers 2%

Primary Concern

■ Gen Z
■ Boomers

- Health of family and friends: Gen Z 37%, Boomers 37%
- Ability to purchase food and/or supplies: Gen Z 18%, Boomers 11%
- Medical system and capacity: Gen Z 16%, Boomers 16%
- Global Economy: Gen Z 13%, Boomers 7%
- National Economy: Gen Z 10%, Boomers 16%
- Personal Health: Gen Z 6%, Boomers 14%

Almost 70% of the respondents in both generations were "Very" or "Extremely" concerned about COVID-19. The primary targets of concern? The wellbeing of family and friends, supply availability, and the medical system.

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"Why won't Boomers heed warnings despite overwhelming evidence that they are at the highest risk from COVID-19? Why is the youthfulness of Gen Z synonymous with misperceptions of invincibility?"
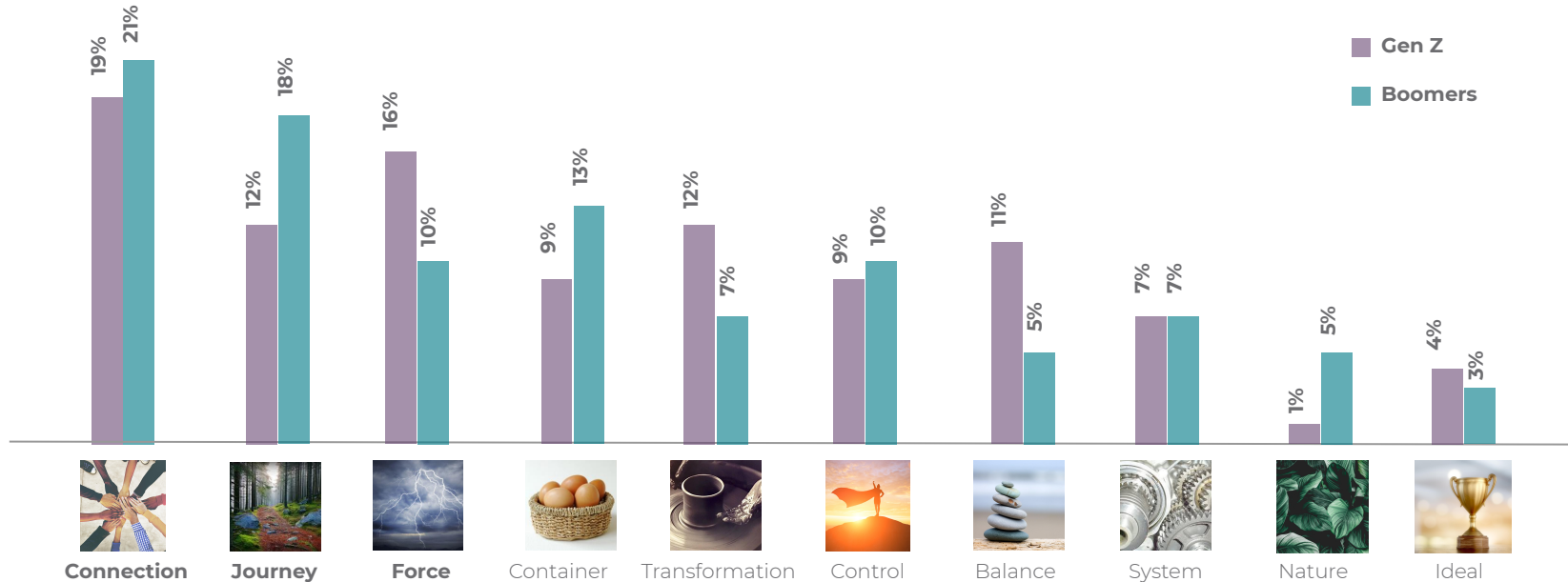
How do Boomers and Gen Z think about COVID-19?
Does their framing encourage irrational behavior?

here's what we know

The Impact of Covid-19:
Deep Metaphor™ Measurement

Legend:
- Gen Z (purple)
- Boomers (teal)

Metaphor	Gen Z	Boomers
Connection	19%	21%
Journey	12%	18%
Force	16%	10%
Container	9%	13%
Transformation	12%	7%
Control	9%	10%
Balance	11%	5%
System	7%	7%
Nature	1%	5%
Ideal	4%	3%

"A deep metaphor is an underlying metaphor, akin to a factor label in a statistical factor analysis, that people unconsciously use to express their thoughts and feelings. It captures the common theme among a bundle of explicit metaphors. Deep metaphors are few in number and universal though their specific expressions may vary among different populations."

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The Impact of Covid-19: Connection
Boomers and Gen Z are united by missed connections

Gen Z and Boomers share an acute sense of disconnection from others, which manifests in two distinct ways. Being suddenly deprived of socialization creates a feeling of **confinement**, while **loneliness and stress** become definitive emotions in the absence of close contact with loved ones.

Missing Others	Physically Trapped

Gen Z

"I can't be around those I love so **I feel lonely and scared for my family**. I miss spending time without feeling worried about if I will make them sick."

"**I feel trapped like a rat**, doing nothing, not even going to work. I can't visit my family or my friends, I can't party as hard as I used to."

Boomers

"We cannot touch our loved ones. **I miss hugs and kisses from my family and friends**. I miss spending special times together."

"It leads almost to an anxiety about being too close to people. **Separation from people is a consistent stressor**."

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Impacts of Covid-19 to Boomers

"There's another stage-of-life dynamic going on for many boomers — stemming from the unprecedented lengthening of life spans and, with that, the introduction of the period known as "active retirement." Many younger boomers are under the 60-year-old threshold to be considered at higher risk for coronavirus complications, and many over 60 don't look, feel or act old. **They don't connect those warnings for elderly people to themselves**.

Megan Gerhardt
Professor of leadership and management at the Farmer School of Business at Miami University

Journey

Our awareness of time distinguishes us from all other species. Rather than rely exclusively on instinct, we apply past experiences and current circumstances to the future. This past-present-future sensibility grounds journey as a deep metaphor.

how is it expressed?

Images and language that reference choosing a direction, the journey of life, following a path, a road, a climb, broadening your horizons, surpassing obstacles, want to get ahead, move forward, move on, keep going, keep progressing, don't want to get stuck, be in a rut, become stalled.

The Impact of Covid-19: Journey
Boomers have two optimistic frames

Respondent Imagery

Respondent Verbatims

Positively Biding Time
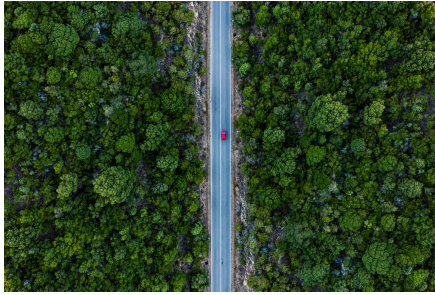
"We have a very **long road to recovery** and we are being kept away from others."

....

"I'm feeling like it will be a **long road back to life** as we all knew before the virus."

....

"It shows that my life is **at a stand still** and nothing is going to be able to make it move forward till **the virus has passed us by**."

....

"Whole life seems put in **hibernation**."

There's Light at the End of the Tunnel

"Looking up and seeing the light gives me **hope at the end of the tunnel**."

....

"There are storm clouds around, but yet there is a normal on one side with the **hope** of our country coming out of this **better and stronger.**"

....

"Times are so so dark, but there is a **light at the end of the tunnel.**"

Impacts of Covid-19 to Gen Z

"On the other end of the age spectrum is Generation Z, members of whom seem to be defying the social distancing rules even more than their grandparents. To some degree, it makes sense: Zoomers are the generation that's **experienced a scandal or crisis in the headlines almost every day of their lives**, leading them to selectively filter out the severe warnings as more "fake news." And for all their internet savvy, there's data showing Gen Z puts a high value on face-to-face contact, which may be fueling this urge to meet up with people regardless of the outrage directed their way."

Megan Gerhardt
Professor of leadership and management at the Farmer School of Business at Miami University

Force

what is it and why does it exist?

Emerging very early in our lives, force manifests itself as power, source of energy or a physical impact. The force construct, philosophy and physics is one of "causation" or causality - and it is a fundamental frame. Today we use force metaphors to express our social interactions, arguments and moral deliberations.

how is it expressed?

Images and language that reference a powerful presence, getting slammed or hit, shocked, on fire, banging your head against a wall, attack.

The Impact of Covid-19: Force
Gen Z have three conflict frames

Feel physically threatened

"I feel like the virus is **taking my life and flipping it upside down**. The added stress to my job field is too much. I am not sick but it is hurting me mentally."

"This virus has **affected my life as much as if someone ran up to me and stabbed me**, practically changing it forever due to how much it changes in my life and how it has changed my perception of others as well."

It feels like war

"Life has been greatly disrupted because of the virus. Lots of panic, which appears to be pretty **similar to what takes place during a war.** A lot of people feel like this pandemic is the form of war."

"I feel like the worst is yet to come, especially if national response continues being this slow. **The worse has not hit us yet and when it does, it will be outright chaos.**"

This storm threatens us all

"**The world is going down the drain** and coronavirus is taking us all with it. **We are like a tornado because the more of us that catch corona, the more of the world that's being destroyed**."

"My life feels like it isn't real, often how we feel when there is a **huge storm that impacts our lives**. **Storms destroy and end people's lives** which is exactly what COVID-19 is doing to our world at this time."

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what we can do with this for the future

GEN Z:
IMPLICATIONS

Social policy and behavioral change implications	How brand communications can support this
• Challenge apathy by reverse engineering the force paradigm - fighting back against the threat	• Portray COVID as an enemy that can be successfully challenged and defeated
• Leverage the the need to connect by making the right cause a rallying point	• Use content featuring moments of connection to inspire confidence
• Acknowledging the present stress and showing the progress in spite of it builds trust and preserves optimism	• Feature moments of calm in the storm, acknowledging reality without anxiety

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Examples for Gen Z

Theme	Empowered to fight back	Barrier-defying connection	Calm in the storm
Frame	Harness **force** to counter feelings of helplessness. "Arm" them to fight back against threats, with information and helpful acts portrayed as their arsenal. Deliver empowering messages showing "victory" over the virus can be achieved to overcome apathy.	Feelings of **disconnection** arise from enforced isolation. Inspiring communication can leverage language and imagery that emphasizes connection overcoming barriers. Common causes unite us against all odds.	Restore a sense of **balance** by focusing on the positive moments born *within* the chaos, rather than ignoring the challenging context. Offer centered and uplifting tidbits that directly tackle anxiety. Create chances for them to give these moments to others.
Elements	- Visuals: battle, armor, weapons, victory, strength - Tone: confident, daring; clearly indicate actions to be taken and their impact	- Visuals: broken walls, physical touch, colorful vs dull contrast, links, communication devices - Tone: confident, enthusiastic, defiant	- Visuals: meditation, disaster, dichotomy, spiritual - Tone: tranquil, relaxed, gently humorous

BOOMERS:
IMPLICATIONS

Social policy and behavioral change implications	How brand communications can support this
• Turn them from passenger into driver - discourage passivity by using an *active* journey frame	• Campaigns featuring consequential decisions can break the passive journey frame
• Value placed on connection to others can be a motivator to weigh consequences of undesired behaviors	• Showcase how their actions connect them with others through the results
• Capitalize on perception of monotony by positioning doing good as a source of rewarding milestones	• Celebrate small wins to ground their ordeal in time, and make it more bearable

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Examples for Boomers

Theme	The journey is not passive	Your journey is connected to others	Celebrate small wins
Frame	Underscore that taking an active role in navigating the current situation seriously affects the outcome - and that a happy resolution can't be taken for granted.	Demonstrate that responsible actions have a direct positive effect on others, even when you can't directly witness the impact. This strategy can add an incentivising degree of connection to the primary message.	Incorporating storytelling that turns each day into a micro-journey with a happy ending can help break up the monotony of quarantine, and make the path to progress tangible.
Elements	- Visuals: journeys, roads, decisions, consequences - Tone: Thought provoking, action-oriented, serious	- Visuals: physical touch, relationships, groups of people - Tone: Sentimental, hopeful, sad, active; following the ripple effect of a positive deed, or the consequences of a negative one	- Visuals: journeys, roads, decisions, consequences - Tone: Cheery, fun, inspiring

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With our strong academic roots, Olson Zaltman and Derive One have partnered together to improve research by infusing the latest learning in behavioral science. We have built Simile to reflect how the mind actually works: through metaphors and images. To experience the research and learn more, please visit projectsimile.com