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The Impact of COVID-19 on the Unconscious Mind

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

Jessica Kukreti
Managing Director, *Olson Zaltman*

Jason Talwar
Managing Partner, *DeriveOne*

Malcolm Brooks
Insight Associate, *Olson Zaltman*

Hannibal Brooks
Senior Insight Associate, *Olson Zaltman*

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.**

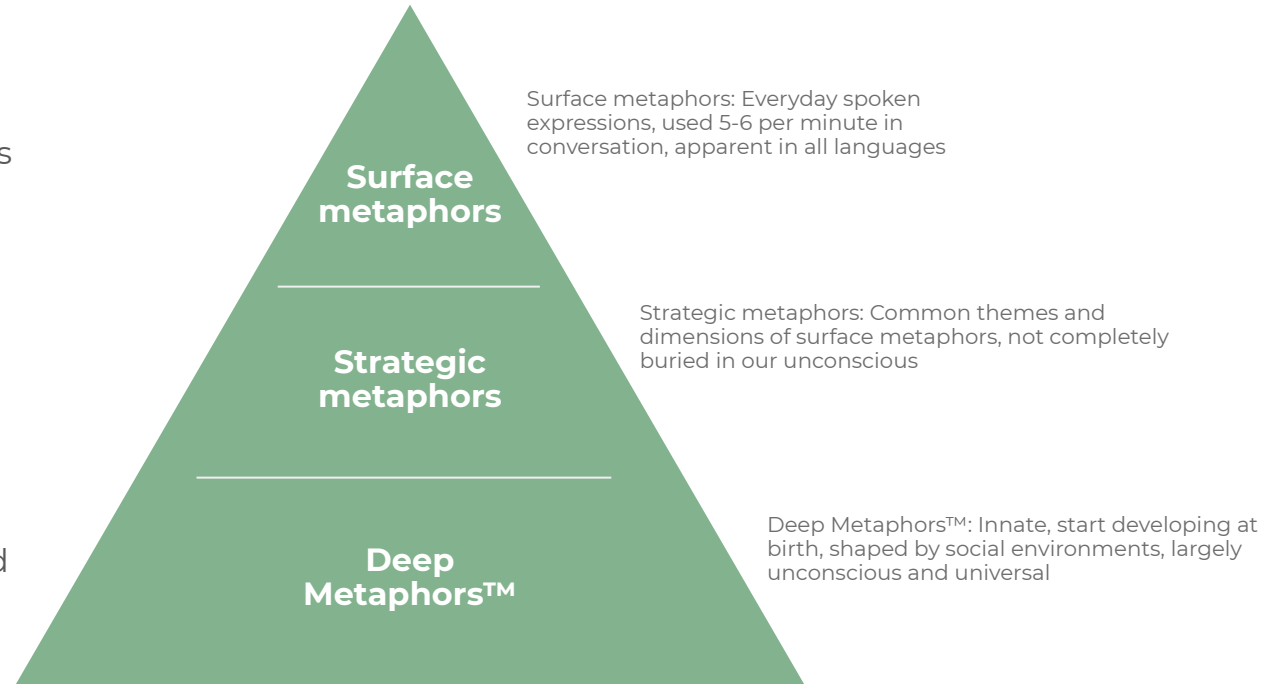The pressing need for this type of understanding prompted us to conduct this study.

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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™

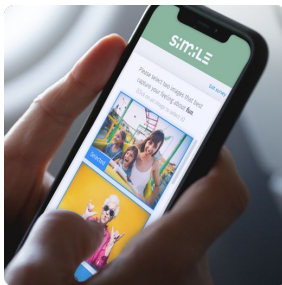associated with Coronavirus/COVID-19 and their degree

Discover segment differences

to understand what is unique for Gen Z, Boomers and Millennials

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=75

Gen Z: n=75

Millennials: n=75

This sample's gender distribution was roughly balanced.

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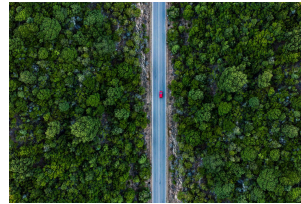# The Impact of Covid-19:
March: A Snapshot Summary

Gen Z & Boomers	Boomers	Gen Z

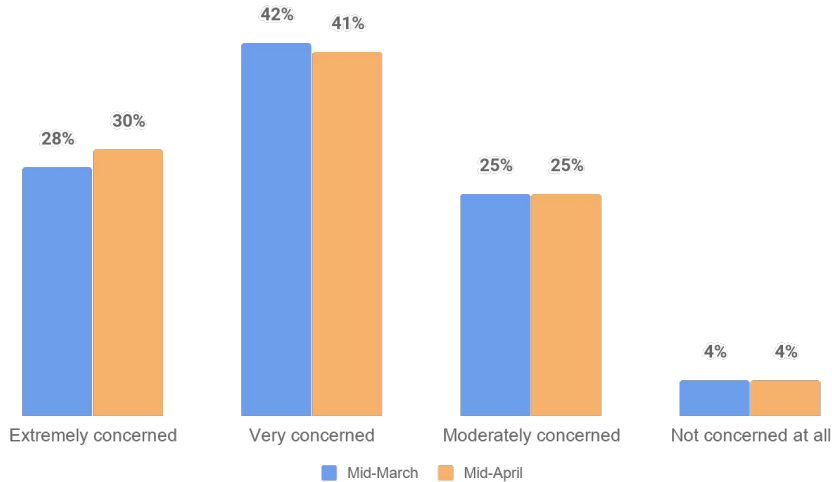**DISCONNECTED**,
lonely and isolated

a **JOURNEY**, with two
optimistic frames
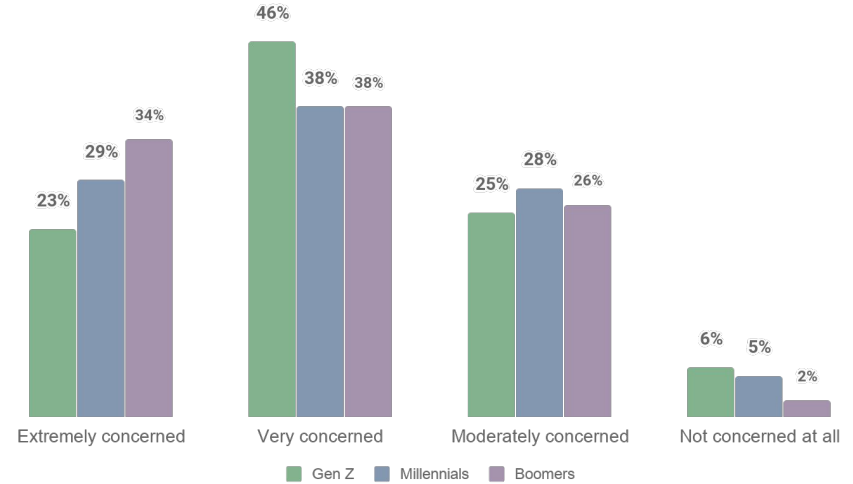
a **FORCE**, with three
conflict frames

The Impact of Covid-19:
Concern Level

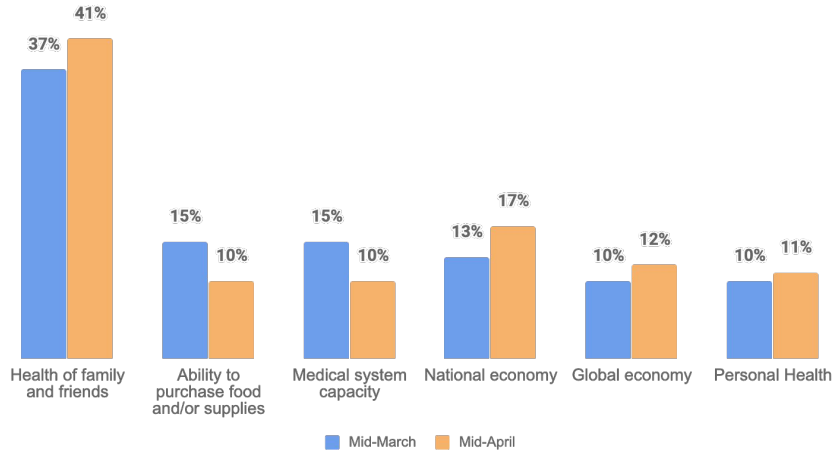### Concern Level - Gen Z and Boomer Trending

Mid-March | Mid-April

- Extremely concerned: 28% / 30%
- Very concerned: 42% / 41%
- Moderately concerned: 25% / 25%
- Not concerned at all: 4% / 4%

Concern Level - Gen Z and Boomer Trending

Gen Z | Millennials | Boomers

- Extremely concerned: 23% / 29% / 34%
- Very concerned: 46% / 38% / 38%
- Moderately concerned: 25% / 28% / 26%
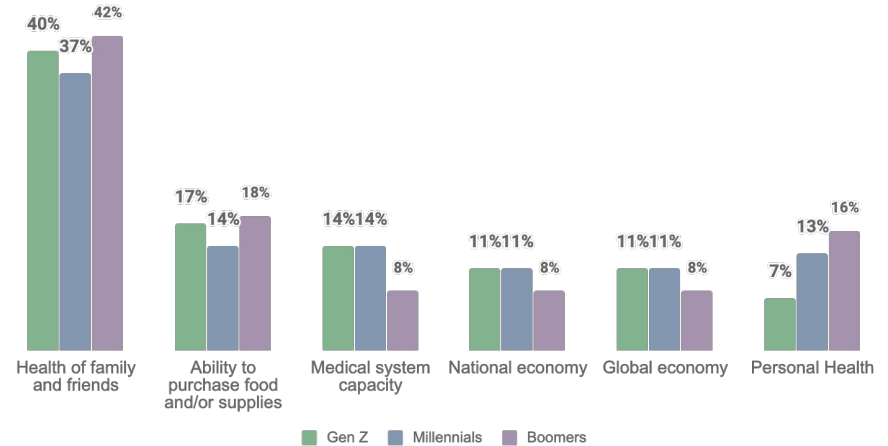- Not concerned at all: 6% / 5% / 2%

Concern levels seem to be stable
Concern levels increase with age

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The Impact of Covid-19:
Concern Area

Concern Area - Gen Z and Boomer Trending

	Mid-March	Mid-April
Health of family and friends	37%	41%
Ability to purchase food and/or supplies	15%	10%
Medical system capacity	15%	10%
National economy	13%	17%
Global economy	10%	12%
Personal Health	10%	11%

Concern Area - Mid-April

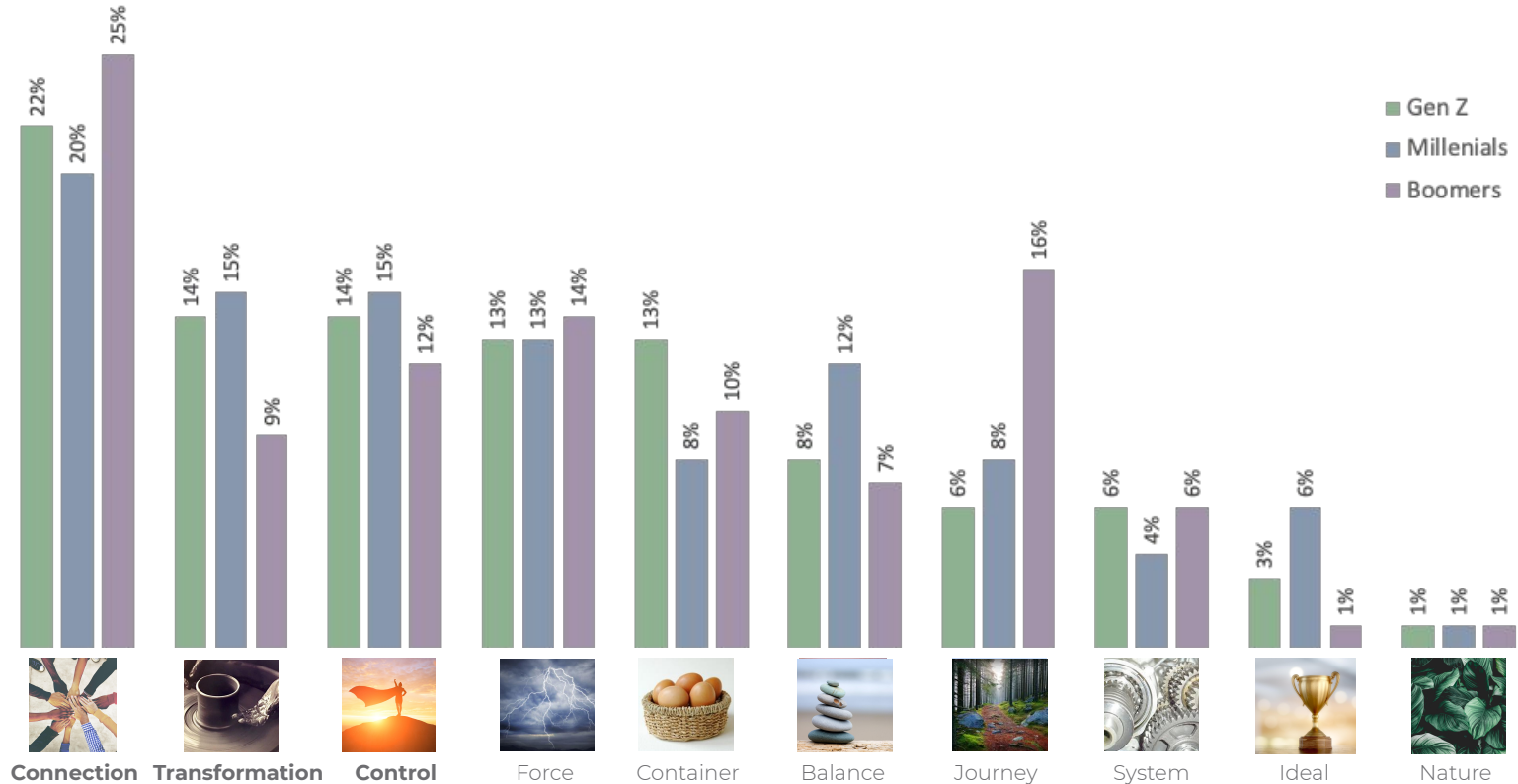|	Gen Z	Millennials	Boomers
Health of family and friends	40%	37%	42%
Ability to purchase food and/or supplies	17%	14%	18%
Medical system capacity	14%	14%	8%
National economy	11%	11%	8%
Global economy	11%	11%	8%
Personal Health	7%	13%	16%

Concern areas are shifting:
- Ability to purchase food has decreased
- Medical system and capacity has decreased
- National economy has increased
- Health of family and friends has increased

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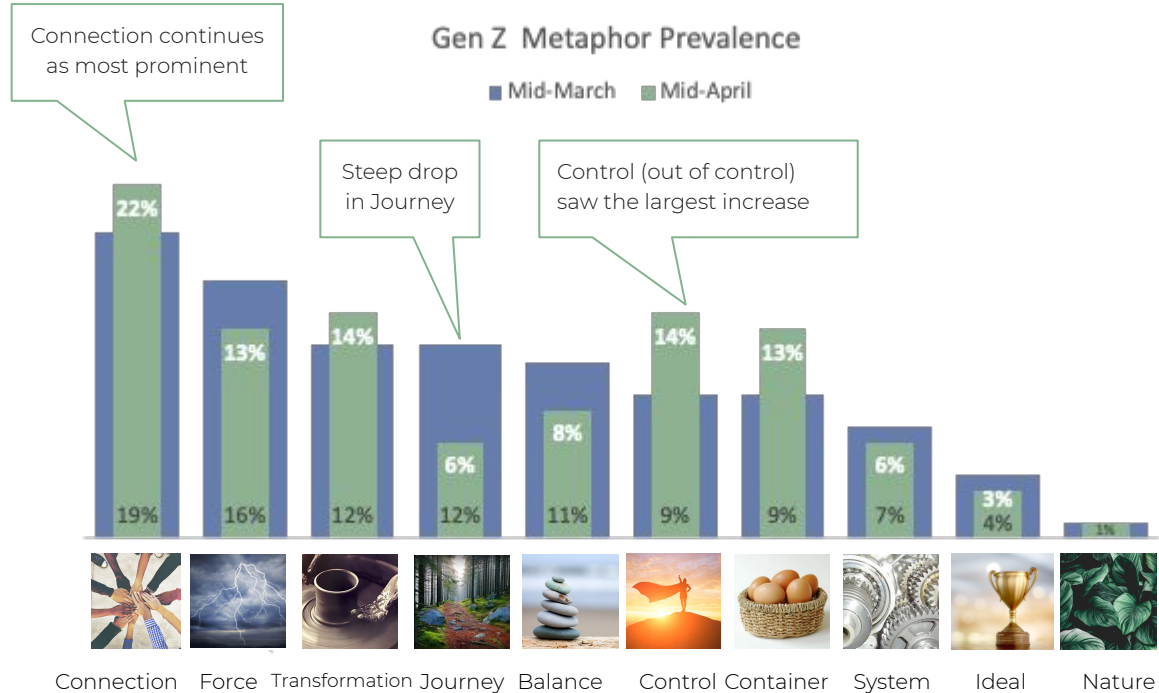# The Impact of Covid-19:
Deep Metaphor™ Measurement

Legend: Gen Z, Millenials, Boomers

Category	Gen Z	Millenials	Boomers
Connection	22%	20%	25%
Transformation	14%	15%	9%
Control	14%	15%	12%
Force	13%	13%	14%
Container	13%	8%	10%
Balance	8%	12%	7%
Journey	6%	8%	16%
System	6%	4%	6%
Ideal	3%	6%	1%
Nature	1%	1%	1%

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Impacts of Covid-19 to Gen Z

Gen Z: What Changed?

Things are getting out of **Control:**
- The situation feels increasingly chaotic as uncertainty extends - a negative **Transformation**
- This "crumbling of the future" may also be reducing the utilization of the **Journey** frame

Prolonged isolation explains the growing sense of **Disconnection** as in-person contact dwindles. Meanwhile stay-at-home orders are leading to a feelings of claustrophobia expressed via a rise in **Container** language.

Force may have fallen because it expressed initial shock. Now Gen Z is adjusting to the grim "aftermath."

Gen Z Metaphor Prevalence

■ Mid-March ■ Mid-April

Connection continues as most prominent

Steep drop in Journey

Control (out of control) saw the largest increase

Metaphor	Mid-March	Mid-April
Connection	19%	22%
Force	16%	13%
Transformation	12%	14%
Journey	12%	6%
Balance	11%	8%
Control	9%	14%
Container	9%	13%
System	7%	6%
Ideal	4%	3%
Nature	1%	—

Connection Force Transformation Journey Balance Control Container System Ideal Nature

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The Impact of Covid-19:
A Snapshot of Gen Z Key Themes

1

Disconnected and
Distracted

2

Calm Outside, Chaos
Within

3

Big
Break

The Impact of Covid-19: Gen Z

Deep Metaphor: *Connection* - Strategic Expression: *Distant Disconnection*
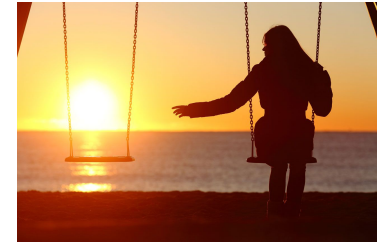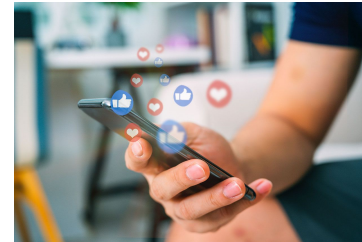
Gen Z: Distanced by Technology

"I feel that **my whole contact with the outside world is through zoom** and I can't see anyone or be seen by anyone"

" It has affected my mental health by not being able to go outside and by being **inundated with online school rather than face to face connections.**"
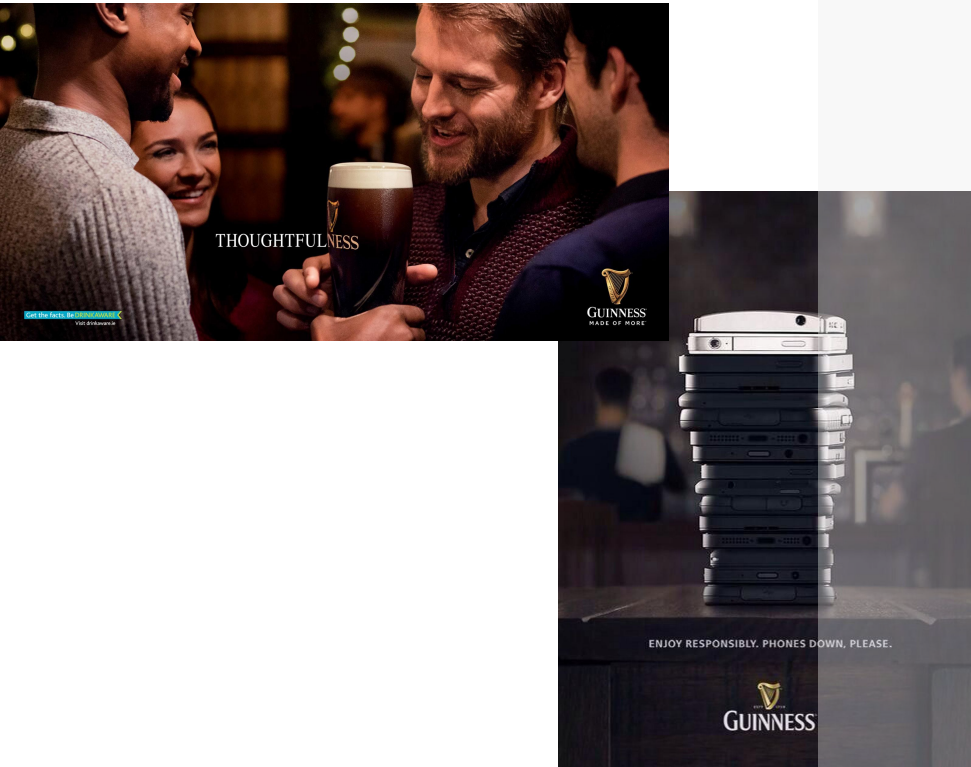
"I feel that **we have gone completely virtual in our lives** and have much less human interaction"

How is to disconnection expressed by Gen Z?

Gen Z fear a disconnection from social life, depriving them of relationships and social milestones. They voice that rather than alleviating the problem, contact through technology is contributing the total virtualization of their lives.

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THOUGHTFULNESS

Get the facts. Be DRINKAWARE
Visit drinkaware.ie

GUINNESS
MADE OF MORE

ENJOY RESPONSIBLY. PHONES DOWN, PLEASE.

GUINNESS

Theme

Gen Z places outsize value on tangible, direct interactions

Framing

Emphasize hope for the emergence of a new order, rich in non-digital connections, and focus on ways to make digital connections feel more human and customized.

Elements

Visuals: Physical touch replacing digital, relaxed groups of friends, acts of kindness

Tone: Sincere, warm, inspirational

The Impact of Covid-19: Gen Z

Deep Metaphor: *Control* - Strategic Expression: *Chaotic, out of control*

Gen Z:
Calm on the outside, chaos within

"**She's done everything to keep her mind busy. Yet she still feels like her world is spinning out of control**. No job, living with my parents"

"It is literally a mix of emotions. At the same time that **I try to keep myself sane, the subconscious is going crazy**."

"**trying to stay calm and positive for your family** and the frustration of losing your job and not being able to find food or household necessities"

How is to control
expressed by Gen Z?

Gen Zers describe themselves as attmping to maintain a brave facade despite a multiplying emotional turmoil. Their sense of control is slipping away.

Insight to Action
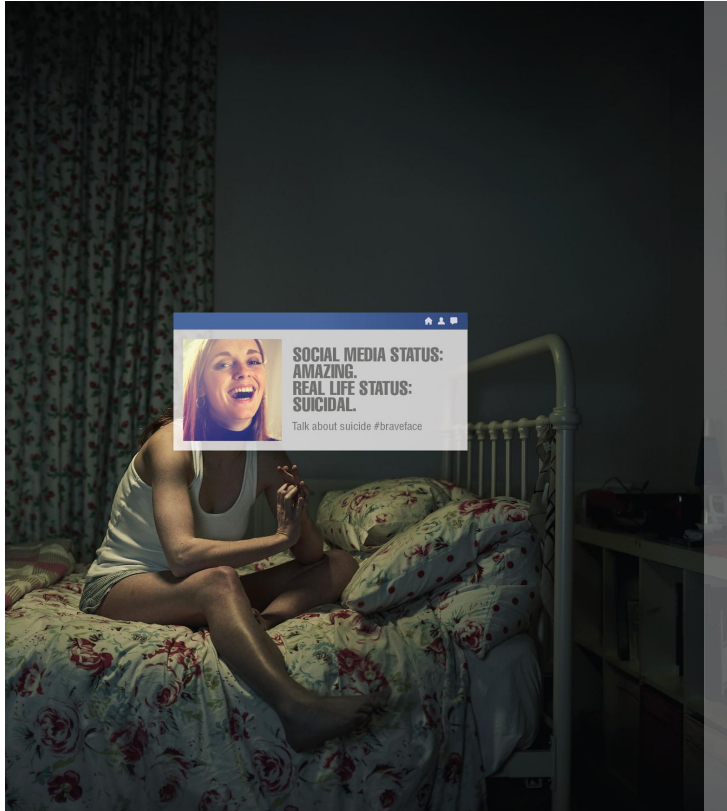
Theme
Acceptance - you don't have to maintain a perfect image

| Framing |
|---|
| Acknowledge the pressure this group feels by featuring the less-sunny moments. Extend support by demonstrating how your offerings can help keep them strong on the outside, or soothes some internal conflict. |

Elements
Visuals: contrasts - inside outside, light/dark; duality and dual identity, physical pressure, isolated figures Tone: Realistic, somber, comforting, hopeful

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The Impact of Covid-19: Gen Z

Deep Metaphor: *Transformation* - Strategic Expression: *Negative, Mental*

Gen Z:
The world is falling apart
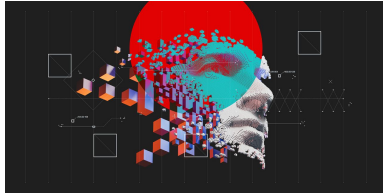
"**Right now everything is falling apart.** No one knows anything and people are dying**. People are also lying to everyone, the economy is dying, and everything is falling down into pieces.**"

"**A rope about to snap**. I feel as though I am constantly on edge…COVID-19 has really put a strain on my mental health."

"**The face in the image is slowly falling apart like all of me….** I know I am losing my mind."

How is to control
expressed by Gen Z?

Gen Z perceives the COVID situation as apocalyptic, as institutions and their expectations for the future crumble into uncertainty. The toll this exacts on them mentally is reflected in images that portray collapse and decay.

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Theme
The end is an opportunity for a new beginning. Some good things never change

Framing
Frame the transition as an opportunity to reshape things, and highlight the good that can come out of bad. Offering optimism about negative-seeming events.

Elements
Visuals: creation (process), evolution, rebirth, "silver lining" situations Tone: Ironic, optimistic

Gen Z:
IMPLICATIONS

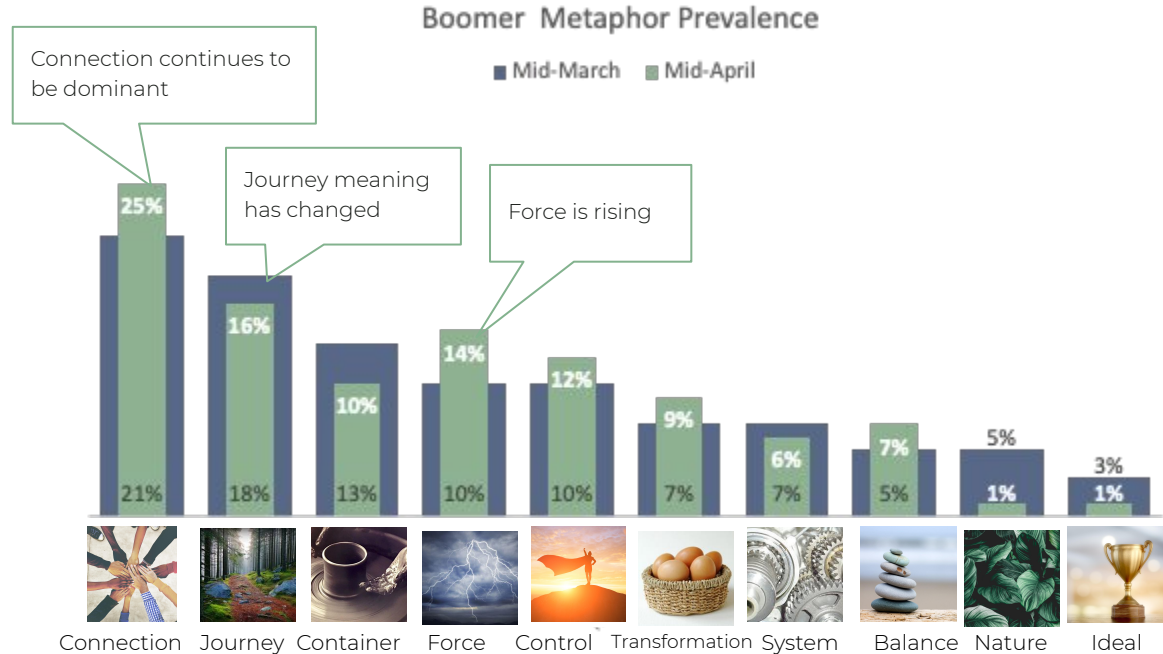| Social policy and behavioral change implications	How brand communications can support this
• Gen Z feels isolated by digital-only interaction, and robbed of social milestones • Feel pressure to maintain a brave face while struggling emotionally • View the world order as collapsing, triggering a similar internal strain	• Focus on social post-COVID messaging and offer ways to make digital interactions tangible • Offer acceptance of their conflicted state of being, and support to help them maintain the image they want • Reframe the destruction as a chance to build something new, while seeking solace in cherished favorites

Impacts of Covid-19 to Boomers

Boomers: What Changed?

The drawn out separation from loved ones manifests as **increased disconnection**

As the impact of the COVID crisis is felt more dramatically, the **force** metaphor surged for Boomers.

Journey has risen, but the subtype has changed, from long to unknown a confidence in the future stumbled slightly

Boomer Metaphor Prevalence

■ Mid-March ■ Mid-April

Connection continues to be dominant

Journey meaning has changed

Force is rising

Metaphor	Mid-March	Mid-April
Connection	21%	25%
Journey	18%	16%
Container	13%	10%
Force	10%	14%
Control	10%	12%
Transformation	7%	9%
System	7%	6%
Balance	5%	7%
Nature	1%	5%
Ideal	1%	3%

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The Impact of Covid-19:
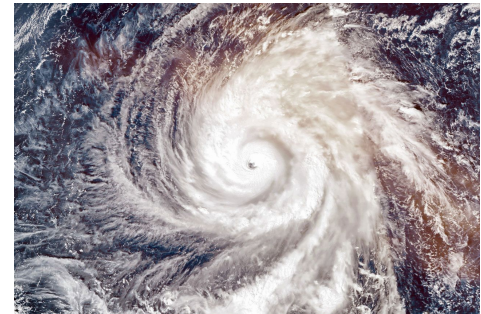## A Snapshot of Boomer Key Themes

1

Very Distant
Relatives

2

Facing A Fork
In The Road

3

Weathering the
Storm

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21

The Impact of Covid-19: Boomers

Deep Metaphor: *Connection* - Strategic Expression: *Isolation*

Boomers:
Very Distant Relatives

"No children [or] parent to see and especially no grandkids to see. **I feel kind of deserted.** We were once so connected, but now we are left so distanced that we may never recover."

"**I'm imagining what an astronaut feels, isolated**, being busy but really watching each day slowly."

"**The world seems dark and lonesome** with all this sickness and isolation… it is hard not being able to go out… I do not get to visit or see anyone."

How is Disconnection Expressed by Boomers?

Boomers experience disconnection as a form of physical and emotional separation, using imagery featuring themselves literally detached from their surroundings, while they verbal grapple with the loss of routine interactions with loved ones.

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Theme
Reuniting is worthwhile, no matter the distance.

| Framing |
| --- |
| **Closing the distance** that seems to exists between them and loved ones is possible. Helping achieve this, through any means, is a worthwhile emotional experience that will make them feel less alone and untethered. |

Elements
Visuals: Physical presence, literal distance, traditions, multiple generations

Tone: Sentimental, heartwarming, moving, sweet, nostalgic |

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The Impact of Covid-19: Boomers

Deep Metaphor: *Connection* - Strategic Expression: *Communing with Higher Power*

Boomers:
Seeking solace in something greater
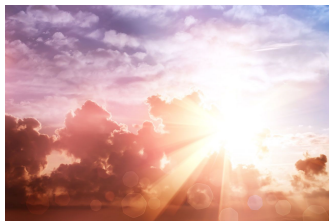
"**Feeling of need for prayer** and taking care of myself, a feeling of aloneness"

"Trying to take it one day at a time with **the help of the Lord who is in control**"

"It has made me **focus more on the power of God**"

"Praying for an end to this situation. **God heal our country**"

How is Disconnection Expressed by Boomers?

In these unprecedented and isolating times, Boomers seek consolation in the ritual of prayer - seeking comfort from a higher power. Images choices were brightly lit and show comforting self-touch.

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Courage is beautiful

Amanda
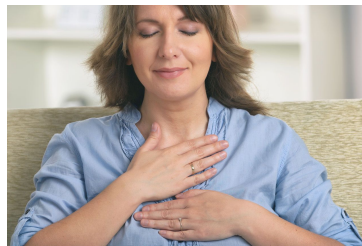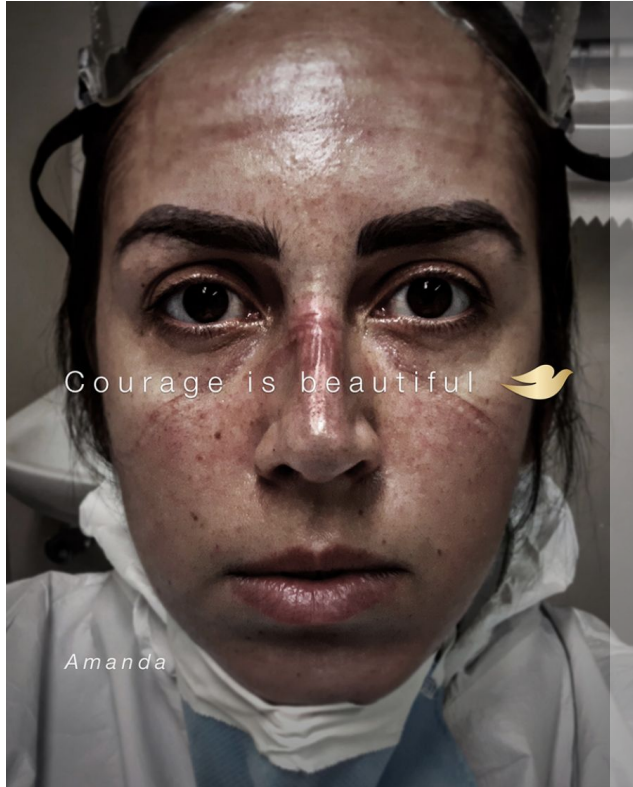
Theme

Looking for comfort in forces that are bigger than I am

Framing

Leverage qualities that are representative of religious organizations (i.e. love, tolerance, helping others, etc.) Give them a strong and powerful force of good to look up to in these dark times.

Elements

Visuals: people, selfless acts, humanitarianism

Tone: Kind, reverent

The Impact of Covid-19: Boomers

Deep Metaphor: *Journey* - Strategic Expression: *Facing a Fork in the Road*

Respondent Imagery

Respondent Verbatims

Boomers:
The Light at the End of the Tunnel

"There is **light at the end of the tunnel**. It will eventually end. That's it."

"We hope to see **the light at the end of the tunnel**. And go back to normal. We will come out of the darkness into the light. We have to make it to the end."

"Keep on the **straight and narrow road**."

Mid-March → Mid-April

Boomers:
An unclear, endless path

"We are on a **long lonely road with no end to the road in sight.**"

"My path forward toward goals I had before the pandemic struck are no longer clear…and **no one knows for how long**."

"There is a lot of uncertainty… **Everything is a journey into the unknown**."

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Theme

Focus on the light at the end of the tunnel - the eventual return to normal.

Framing

A return to normal is imminent, but requires patience and making responsible choices. Pair firm, confident guidance with the reassurance of familiar comforts.
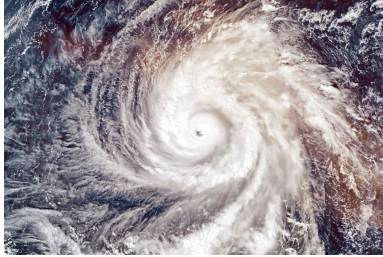
Elements

Visuals: light at the end of tunnel, pathways, utopia, travel, remote vantage points

Tone: confident, hopeful, warm, authoritative

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The Impact of Covid-19: Boomers

Deep Metaphor: *Force* - Strategic Expression: *Weathering the Storm*

Boomers: Weathering the Storm

"**Dark horizon with a storm coming** but knowing that it will pass at some time and the sky will be clear with the sun shining."

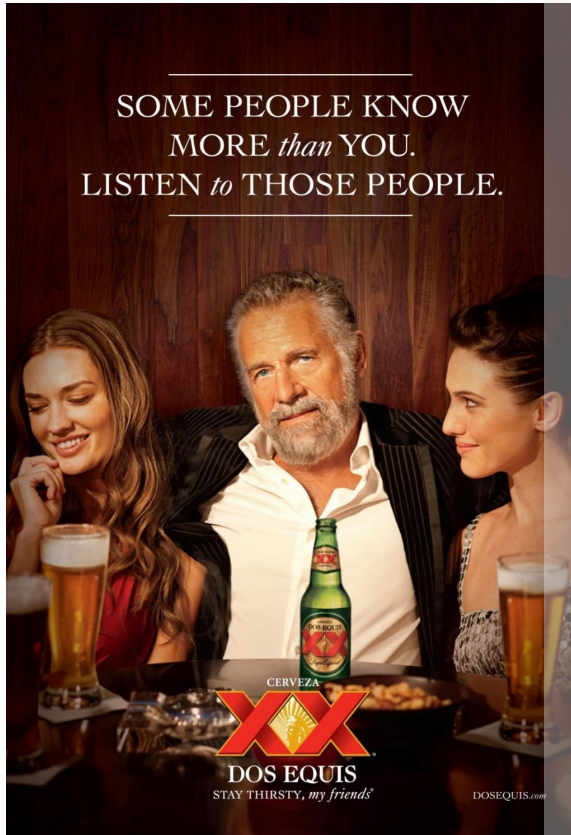"This situation, like stormy weather, is disastrous. The future does not look bright."

"It is a big storm in my life, I just have to wait it out. **I will get through this storm**"

How is Force expressed by Boomers?

Boomers have shifted from their initially less concerned impression of the crisis, and now liken the personal and societal destructive effects a natural disaster they must endure. Though more confident they will exit unharmed, the gravity of the situation seems more ominous.

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Insight to Action

SOME PEOPLE KNOW
MORE *than* YOU.
LISTEN *to* THOSE PEOPLE.

CERVEZA
XX
DOS EQUIS®
STAY THIRSTY, *my friends*®

DOSEQUIS.com

Theme

You can be the calm in the storm

Framing

You *will* endure the storm, and others can turn to you for your confidence. Cast them as the seasoned warriors- appealing to their pride in enduring past hard times.

Elements

Visuals: Strong individuals, triumph over adversity

Tone: self-assured, suave, knowing

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Boomers:
OVERALL IMPLICATIONS

Social policy and behavioral change implications	How brand communications can support this
• Feel increasingly distant and isolated from loved ones	• Focus communications on "closing the distance" between loved ones, represented physically when possible
• Losing confidence in the idea that the long journey of COVID-19 has a definite end	• Double down on existing "light at the end of the tunnel" frame. Note concrete steps to get there
• Starting to perceive COVID as a powerful storm they must brace themselves endure	• Place emphasis on the reassurance their inner strength and experience provides to others going

Impacts of Covid-19 to Millennials

The Impact of Covid-19:
A Snapshot of Millennial Key Themes

1

Bonding and Self
Discovery

2

My Fate is not my
Own

3

Life is Chaotic and I
am Frozen

The Impact of Covid-19: Millennials

Deep Metaphor: *Connection* - Strategic Expression: *Connection to Others*
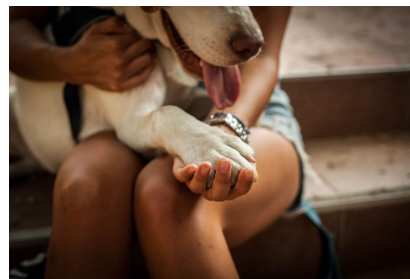
Millennials: Feeling Closer to Family

"COVID 19 has **taught us to appreciate family** take time for the small stuff, **spend time together**, and not to go overboard."

"We have **more time as a family** and to enjoy the time we have with one another **rather than all having to leave every day.**"

"Spending some **good quality time with my family and kids**. they grow up fast this was a good timing to be with them"

How is connection to others expressed by Millennials?

Millennials selected images and used language that referenced connecting to other people - specifically their immediate family including children and pets. References to loving, appreciating, and enjoying this time were made.

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TOGETHER, WE EAT

Food brings people together and helps to create a better everyday life at home. Find inspiration and see how we at IKEA support life in and around the kitchen, be it growing, cooking, serving or storing. Let's create a place to eat, laugh, love and enjoy being together.

Theme
Bonding with family; sharing quality time

Framing
Emphasize ways that you can appreciate and bond with family at home without directly calling out COVID as the reason. Genuinely promote the opportunity for reconnection.

Elements
Visuals: Kids, families, group time, the "little things," pets

Tone: Lighthearted, loving, warm |

The Impact of Covid-19: Millennials

Deep Metaphor: *Connection* - Strategic Expression: *Connection to Self*

Millennials: Opportunity has Risen

"COVID has **rid me of many distractions and has allowed me to make space for creativity.** Much like ceramics, I am allowed to have the focus and space and craft to create something of function within my life"

"Now **I have more time to do things that I like to do** instead of spending endless hours at work and gym."

"Just has given me **a lot of time to contemplate the past present and future**.

How is connection to self expressed by Millennials?

Millennials selected images and used language that referenced connecting to themselves. COVID has provided a space for self reflection, an opportunity to let creativity bloom, and the ability to pursue passions.

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Theme

Introspection and Creative Passion

Framing

Leverage creativity in advertisement space. Capture the idea that "I can accomplish anything in the world". There is a breath in life right now that can be capitalized on to promote good for the self.

Elements

Visuals: Meditation, art, organization, intelligence
Tone: Encouraging, positive, inspiring

The Impact of Covid-19: Millennials

Deep Metaphor: *Control* - Strategic Expression: *General & Out of Body Control*
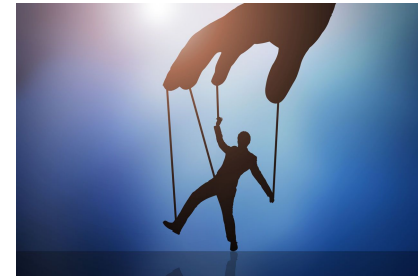
Millennials:
My fate is not my Own

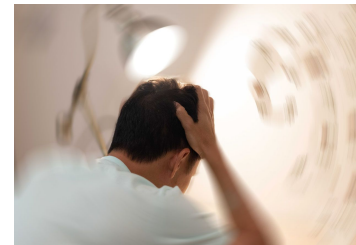**"They tell me the parachutes we're wearing are going to save us.** I've pulled the tab to deploy said parachute. **I'm still waiting for it to deploy**...."

"I feel like I**'m barely hanging on by a string and about to be fed to sharks.** Like it's never gonna end **this is it the end for the world** "

"I feel like the severity of covid-19 being highly over exaggerated and we as a nation are being **treated like puppets on a string.** I feel like a marionette because **the government just keeps making their agenda part of my life** "

How is out of control expressed
by Millennials?

Control is expressed by millennials through imagery and language that convey vulnerability and a feeling of being powerless and overwhelmed. There is also skepticism about the powers in charge. They are at the mercy of something bigger than they are. They are succumbing to forces that are beyond their grasp.

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Insight to Action

CHRONIC MIGRAINE DOESN'T HAVE TO TRAMPLE ME

Discover treatment options and ways to manage your Chronic Migraine. If you're getting hit by migraines with 15 or more headache days a month, each lasting 4 hours or more, talk to a headache specialist and learn how you can fight back. Visit us online.

MYCHRONICMIGRAINE.COM

ALLERGAN

Theme

Someone else is in control of their lives; The desire to take back control

Framing

Finding a common enemy (COVID) and giving it a face or personifying it somehow could take away some of the unknown power the faceless virus has. Emotionally equip consumers to fight this rather than government or each other.

Elements

Visuals: Overcoming a foe, taking a stand
Tone: Powerful, strong, confident

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The Impact of Covid-19: Millennials

Deep Metaphor: *Transformation* - Strategic Expression: *Negative, Mental*

Millennials:
Life is Chaotic and I am Frozen

"Headaches all the time. **Can't focus on important things right now** Can't focus and pay my bills on time. I don't know. This virus scares me and makes me worry a lot "

"The woman's emotion in the picture. **Feeling of breaking down at any given moment**, even if it's just "spilling" tomato sauce. Being under so much stress, that **anything can trigger a mental breakdown.**"

"The way it seems to depict **a mind full of so many thoughts and questions that they get jumbled up and make my head spin.**"

How is negative mental transformation expressed by Millennials?

Language like "my mind is chaos", "my head is spinning" , and "my mind is racing" were common. Images representing a tangled or frayed sense of mental health. They are evolving to a negative mental state of mind. It takes everything just to hold themselves together.
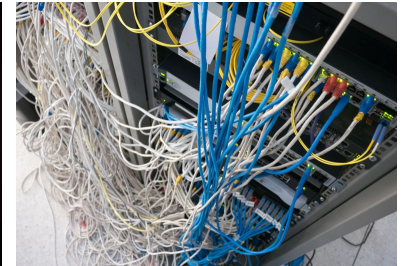
Insight to Action
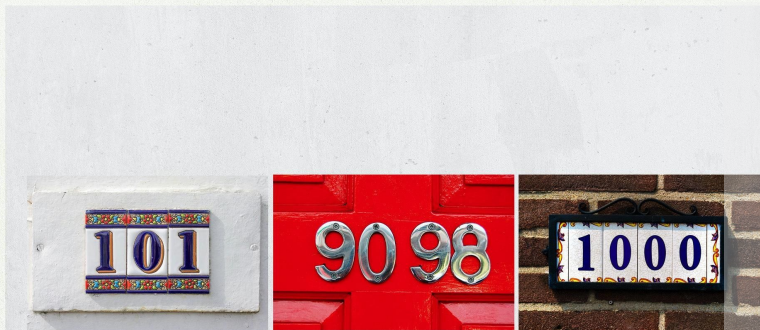
"Not all days are going to be good, but there will always be something good in each day"

Trying to hold it together

Framing

Capitalize on the importance and helpfulness of the actions that consumers are taking to make them feel more in control. The mental stress needs to be balanced out with mental relief. Give them back control by honoring what they are doing.

Elements

Visuals: Normal life with ups and downs, self care

Tone: Respect and honor

Millennials:
OVERALL IMPLICATIONS

Social policy and behavioral change implications	How brand communications can support this
• Extra time at home has meant extra family bonding as well as internal self-exploration	• Offer up creative opportunities or ideas in line with self-reflection & change
• The current situation places them at the mercy of higher forces who may not be trustworthy	• Providing hope in an uncontrollable and seemingly hopeless situation
• Validate their feelings of isolation, hopelessness, difficulty focusing, or stress, don't diminish them	• Campaigns should feel honest, genuine, and non judgemental; sympathize rather than trying to fix

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For questions or inquiries, please contact:

Lindsay Zaltman
CEO & Partner, Olson Zaltman
lzaltman@olsonzaltman.com

Jessica Kukreti
Managing Director, Olson Zaltman
jessica@olsonzaltman.com

Samir Saluja
Founding Partner, Derive One
sks@deriveone.com

Jason Talwar
Founding Partner, Derive One
jst@deriveone.com

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