

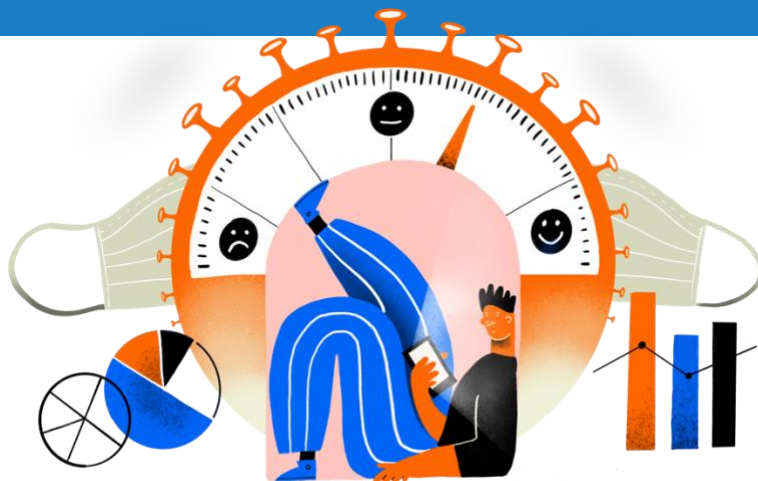
REPORT 11

How to keep motivation high during this summertime? The role of risk perception, fear and obligation.

The Motivation Barometer

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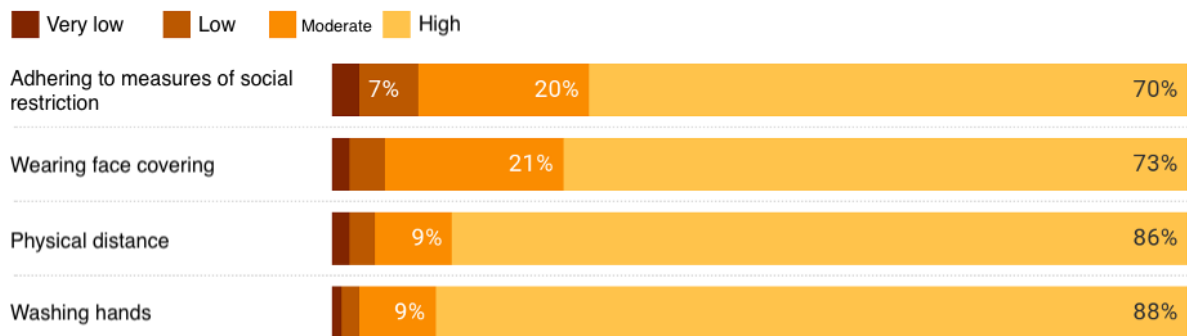
The weekly average number of infections increased again in recent days. Virologists warn that the virus is still in the country and that continued vigilance is required. For some citizens, these figures are a reason to become anxious, while the same figures strengthen others in their commitment to voluntarily adhere to the measures. How can we motivate the population today to engage in preventive health behaviors so that we can avoid or contain a second wave? What is the role of fear and risk perception as motivational drivers? But also: does the mandatory nature of facemasks necessarily constitute an attack on our autonomy? And what is the state of our current motivation for adherence? These are the questions that are central to this eleventh report from the Motivation Barometer study at Ghent University, in which to date 49040 persons have participated (71% women; average age = 50.77 years).

Summer temptations

For the population to continue adhering to the corona measures, at least two conditions must be met. First, it is important that people feel able to adhere to the measures. If the bar is set too high and it becomes more difficult to comply with the measures, people doubt whether they will be able to persevere. The latest survey wave last weekend, conducted in a sample of 3183 participants (69% women; average age = 54 years), probed the extent to which people feel confident that they can follow four core measures (i.e., wash hands, follow social contact rules, wear a face mask, and maintain physical distance). Looking at the percentages, the majority of participants indicated that they felt able to adhere to the measures, with the percentage varying between 70% (adhering to social measures) and 88% (washing hands; see Figure 1). On average, participants felt slightly less able to maintain physical distance and follow social contact rules. In fact, a limited group (i.e., 16%) reported that they had stopped counting the number of persons with whom they have contact. The number of people with whom participants said they had contact during the past week ranged from 0 to 30, with an average of 7.

Especially during a vacation season, when social gatherings are central, the public may find it quite difficult to adhere to these social measures. Even though many citizens intend to maintain the necessary distance, this measure - unlike washing hands or wearing a facemask - requires mutual responsibility. If others do not respect the distance, we are challenged to find an appropriate response. If we are invited to a BBQ with 20 people, our self-control is tested. Rather than leaving it to each citizen to come up with their own answers to these challenges, showing a number of good and playful examples through

Figure 1. Extent to which participants feel competent to follow measures.



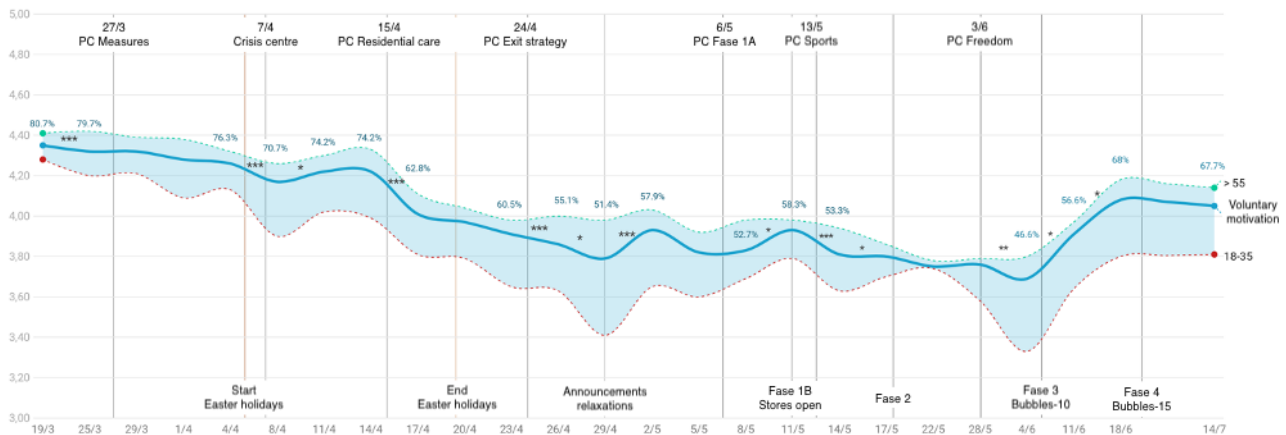
a campaign or the media would be desirable. If the population can mirror these good examples, they can more easily comply. We don't have to put any energy into it, but can fall back on a 'pre-chewed' script: a corona greeting, a witty response to indicate that your social bubble has already been filled, a playful way of asking others to put on his/her facemask. This removes the timidity of adhering to the measures.

Voluntary motivation stabilizes again

In addition to the perceived ability to comply with the measures, voluntary motivation also plays an important role. To what extent do we comply with the measures because we see the necessity of them, and we can fully support them? Or does following the measures feel more like a difficult job, something we have to do? 'Must'-ivation, unlike voluntary motivation, has no lasting effect on sustaining the measures, let alone on developing new habits.

Voluntary motivation has evolved since the beginning of the lockdown. At the beginning of the lockdown, 80.7% of the participants fully supported the measures. This voluntary motivation decreased throughout the lockdown period, with a fluctuating pattern as a function of relaxations and the (de)motivating communication style of the government (see Figure 2). At its lowest point in early June, motivational support was 46.4%. The gradual relaxations of the measures were accompanied by a meandering pattern, whereby voluntary motivation flared up temporarily after an easing and then dropped slightly again. From early to mid-June, voluntary motivation continued to rise to 68%, to stabilize at that level since mid-June. Because this sample consists proportionally of more female and older participants, who are more voluntarily compliant, 67.7% (last weekend's rate) is more than likely an overestimate of real voluntary motivation.

Figure 2. Evolution in voluntary motivation during the corona crisis.



This increase in voluntary motivation can be partly attributed to the relaxations of measures. When social bubbles were widened and the horeca opened, we were able to partially return to our old lives. These relaxations made the measures more feasible. And when the measures made it less difficult for us, the willingness to respect them increased. The ability to meet friends and family, go out to restaurants, and live more freely again further supported our basic psychological needs for relatedness and autonomy. This need satisfaction provides motivational oxygen to sustain the effort required. As with previous relaxations, however, it is striking that motivational support is no longer increasing at this time. If certain hoped-for relaxations (e.g. in the events sector) are not implemented or if the current measures are made more stringent, then it is to be feared that the motivational support will decrease.

If a facemask requirement becomes a choice

One issue that has caused quite a stir in recent weeks is whether it is compulsory to wear a facemask in stores. In the end, the government decided to impose the wearing of such masks not only in stores, but also in various public spaces (e.g. cinemas). The participants in this study felt that this decision should have been made earlier. When asked whether 'the government has waited too long to introduce this obligation', 82% indicated that the government was procrastinating (see Figure 3). At the same time, 68.3% felt that making facemasks mandatory was a positive signal to the population. Furthermore, 79.7% indicated that they understood this obligation and 57.9% thought that there was popular support for this obligation. Just as younger generations show less voluntary motivation and more 'must'-ivation, they are also less supportive of this obligation.

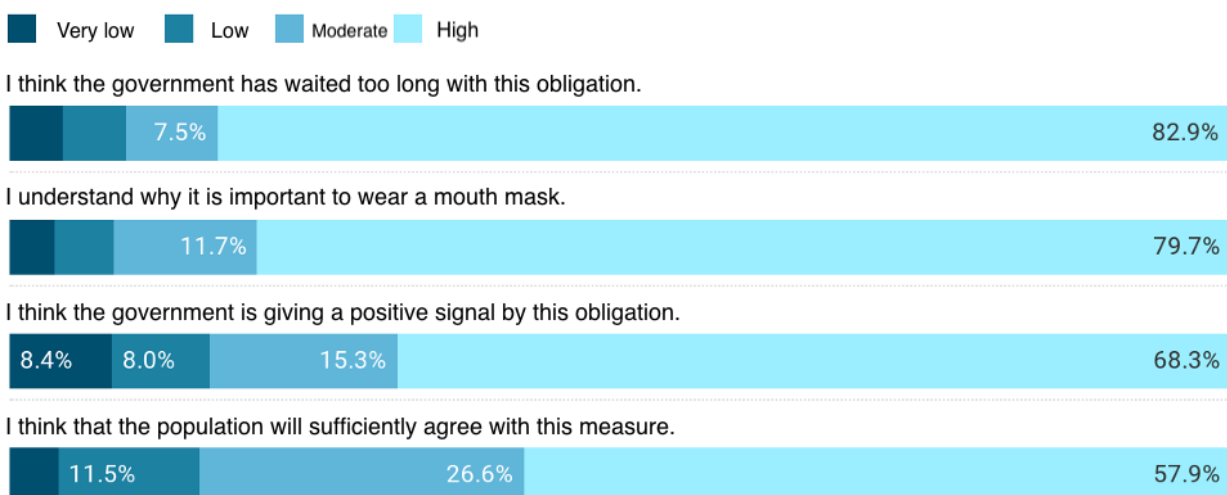
This obligation does not necessarily feel like a straitjacket. Wearing a facemask is a necessary inconvenience that citizens are willing to endure. Because the preventive value of the facemasks was well explained by experts, citizens experience the obligation as

legitimate. This issue exposes a false paradox: if there is support for mandatory but necessary measures, then the population is willing to comply voluntarily. While the measure may be legally imposed, subjectively the measure does not feel like an obligation. This is a good thing, because 'must'-ivation to wear facemasks goes along with more resistance. A binding measure also has the advantage of clarity. Moreover, facemasks perform an important signaling function in public life. They keep our corona awareness high.

Risk perception and corona awareness

For citizens to perceive the facemask requirement not as an obligation but as a choice, two conditions must be met. First, citizens must realize that wearing a facemask is an effective strategy. It protects them from contamination. Second, they should also have the perception that the risk of a flare-up or second wave is real. The research shows that the more participants think of themselves as being likely to become (seriously) infected, the more voluntarily motivated they are. This is even truer if they have the impression that not so much, they, but the population as a whole, is at a real risk of becoming infected. Thus, voluntary adherence is not merely fueled by self-interest, indeed quite the contrary. The more citizens recognize that the virus still haunts the population; the more convinced they are of the importance of the measures. This conviction fuels their sense of responsibility and spurs them to action.

Figure 3. Opinion regarding the mandatory nature of face masks.



Making the population aware of the ongoing risk is not the same as inducing fear. By threatening that infections will be overwhelming or making the population confronted with touching testimonies of corona patients, this fear is nurtured. However, this fear does not appear to be a good predictor of either voluntary motivation or sustained adherence. Fear is only associated with more 'must'-ivation to action and reduced well-being. The bottom line is to continue to communicate daily infections, hospitalizations and

death rates in an informative rather than threatening manner, and in doing so, to show confidence that following the measures will properly help mitigate the risk.

In this regard, the expert group 'Psychology & Corona' has long been advocating the introduction of a flashing light system. This color-coded system is now used for travel advice and in specific life domains (e.g. education), but its broad rollout across various life domains would allow the population to monitor the effects of its own behavior. Here it is crucial to indicate the parameters (e.g. number of infections, number of hospitalizations,...) on which one is based to switch from one color to another. A corona footprint or a list of risky activities helps citizens to better assess the risks they are taking. This insight encourages reflection and the voluntary taking of responsibility for the health of oneself and others.

Decisive government

For several weeks now, from within the 'Psychology & Corona' expert group, we have been insisting on the same thing. The results of the latest survey of the Motivation Barometer support the advice already offered. What we need today is a decisive government that makes every effort to keep corona awareness high among the population. This can be done by:

- Share striking and playful 'good practices' in the population so that people feel competent to resist the temptation to violate the measures.
- Continue to explain at length the importance and necessity of specific measures without fear induction, especially when a disruption is imminent.
- Elaborate a national and local color-coded flashing light system as soon as possible, with transparency on the parameters relied upon to switch between colors.
- Mobilize the necessary resources to develop a corona footprint so that people can be aware of the risks they take with particular activities

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