

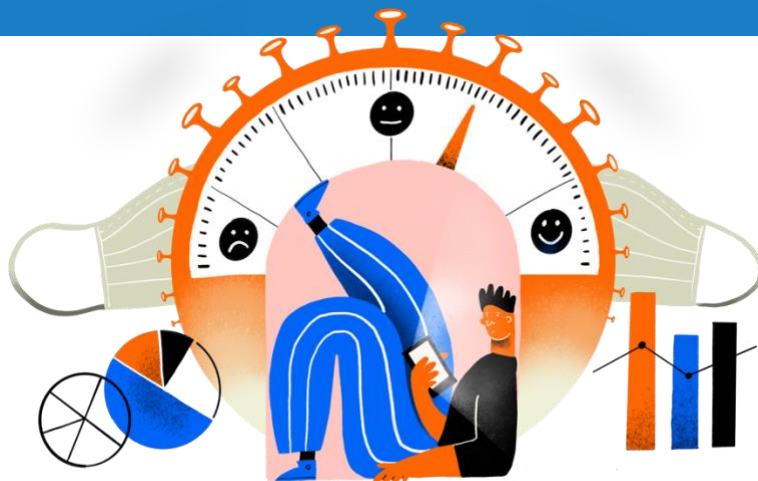
# REPORT 29

## Does the prospect of future relaxations motivate the population?

### The Motivation Barometer

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Reference: Motivation Barometer (April 20, 2021). Does the prospect of future relaxations motivate the population? Ghent University & UCLouvain, Belgium.



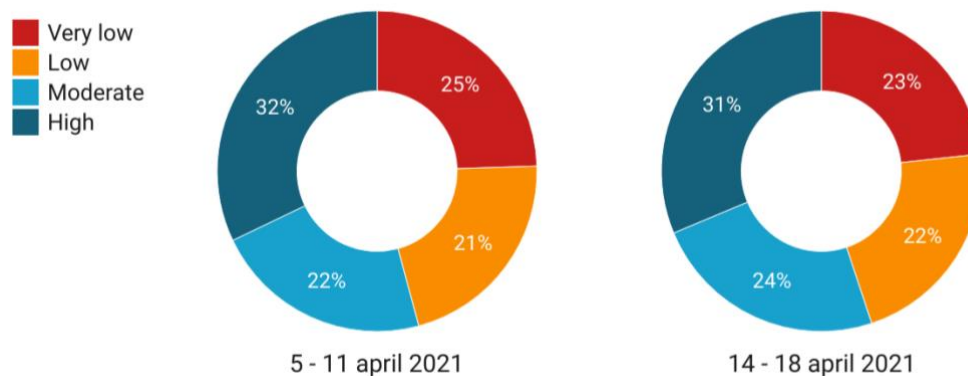
## State of the art

On April 14, the government announced the end of the Easter break and presented the population with a series of relaxations. Some of these, such as the opening of schools and contact professions (e.g., barbers), were implemented unconditionally, while other relaxations will depend on the evolution of the corona infection numbers.

To what extent did the announcement of this exit plan affected the motivation of the population, which has been under pressure for a long time? And do vaccinated individuals still remain motivated to adhere to the measures? In the latest wave of data collection for the Motivation Barometer, 4172 individuals participated (71.2% women; 60.38% Dutch-speaking participants; mean age = 48.16 years; 26% vaccinated<sup>1</sup>). Below, we describe the main motivation and well-being indicators:

- A comparison between the latest results with the results of the second last survey indicates that voluntary motivation in Belgium slightly increased. In percentages, Figure 1 indicates that the percentage of Belgian participants who are motivated or strongly motivated slightly increased. In the second last wave, 32% was very convinced of the necessity of the measures and 22% was partially convinced, whereas this is now 31% and 24%.

Figure 1. Comparison of percentage of motivated participants just before and after exit plan announcement



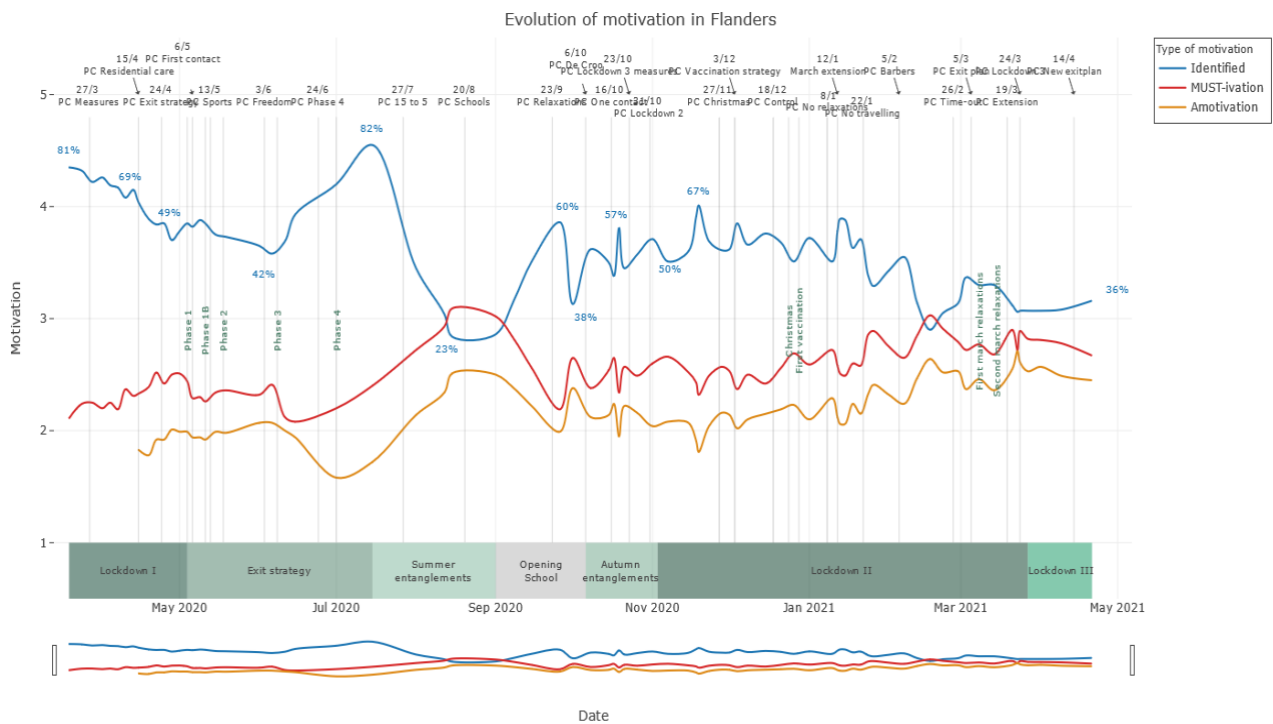
- However, this slight improvement occurs only among Flemish participants. Of the latter, 36% is highly motivated, whereas the French-speaking participants show a decrease in motivation to 24% who is highly motivated<sup>2</sup>. The improvement among the Flemish respondents, however, should be nuanced for three reasons:

<sup>1</sup> To correct for the unrepresentative nature of the data collected, the findings were weighted for gender, region, age, and education level.

<sup>2</sup> Female and older participants are relatively more represented in the collected samples. Because they show higher motivation and are more conscientious in adhering to the measures, the reported figures indicate an underestimation rather than an overestimation of motivational support.

1. The absolute numbers remain rather low. For example, Figure 2 shows that since the contact professions opened in February, the motivation of Flemish participants has been at a lower level for some time. This persistent lower motivation did not occur at any other time during this pandemic.

Figure 2. Evolution of different types of motivation through the pandemic in Flanders



2. From the observation that discouragement did not significantly decrease, corona fatigue is evident. For example, 46% of Belgian participants indicated that the overall strategy to contain COVID-19 was not effective (at all), a percentage similar to the second last wave (see Figure 3).
3. When considering the results for vaccinated and unvaccinated participants separately, vaccinated individuals appear to be more strongly motivated to continue adhering to the measures (45% vs. 28% highly motivated, see Figure 4<sup>3</sup>). This is somewhat surprising, as you might think that personal protection through vaccination could undermine the motivation to adhere to the measures. Notably, there appears to be a selection effect: mostly older individuals and health care workers are currently vaccinated, which are both groups with a higher risk awareness. The finding that vaccinated individuals (compared to non-vaccinated individuals) believe that the general population is at greater risk of infection, supports this explanation.

<sup>3</sup> These are unique associations for vaccination controlling for numerous covariates: gender, age, region, co-morbidity, and level of education

Figure 3. Comparison of percentage of participants questioning effectiveness of the global strategy just before and after announcement of exit plan

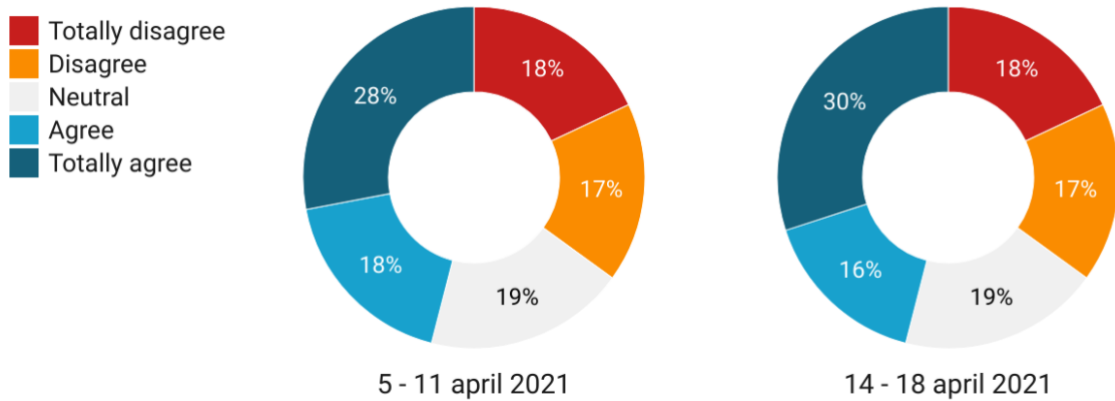
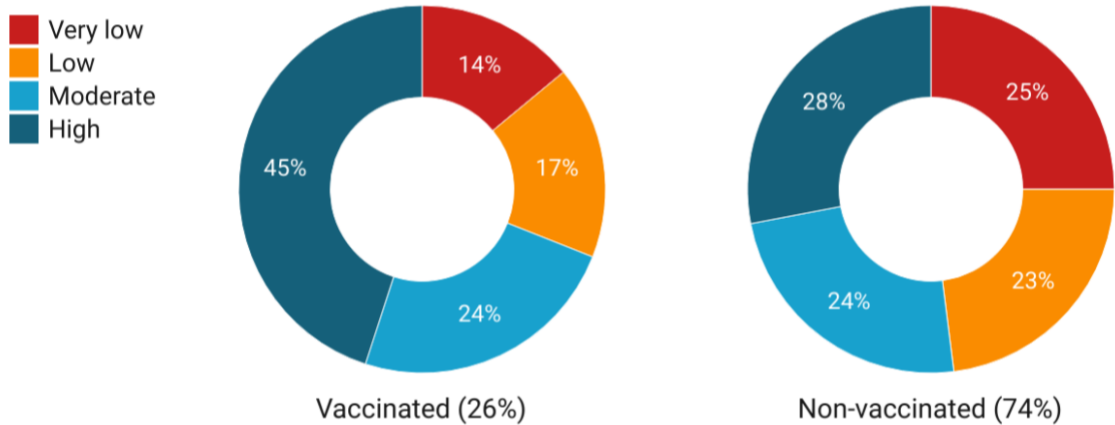
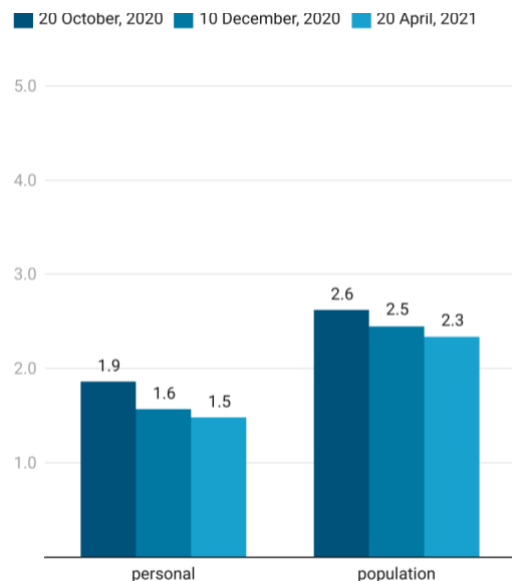


Figure 4. Comparison of percentage of motivation among vaccinated vs. unvaccinated participants



- Compared to the exact same number of hospitalization rates in the past, the current risk of infection for the population is estimated to be lower. Although the same number of hospitalizations were reported on October 20 (rising numbers in the second wave) and December 10 (falling numbers in the second wave), participants then estimated the risk of infection for the population to be significantly higher than today (see Figure 5). This is problematic because risk perception is an important predictor of voluntary motivation (see report #25). These differences become even more evident when we consider only the unvaccinated people. This may indicate

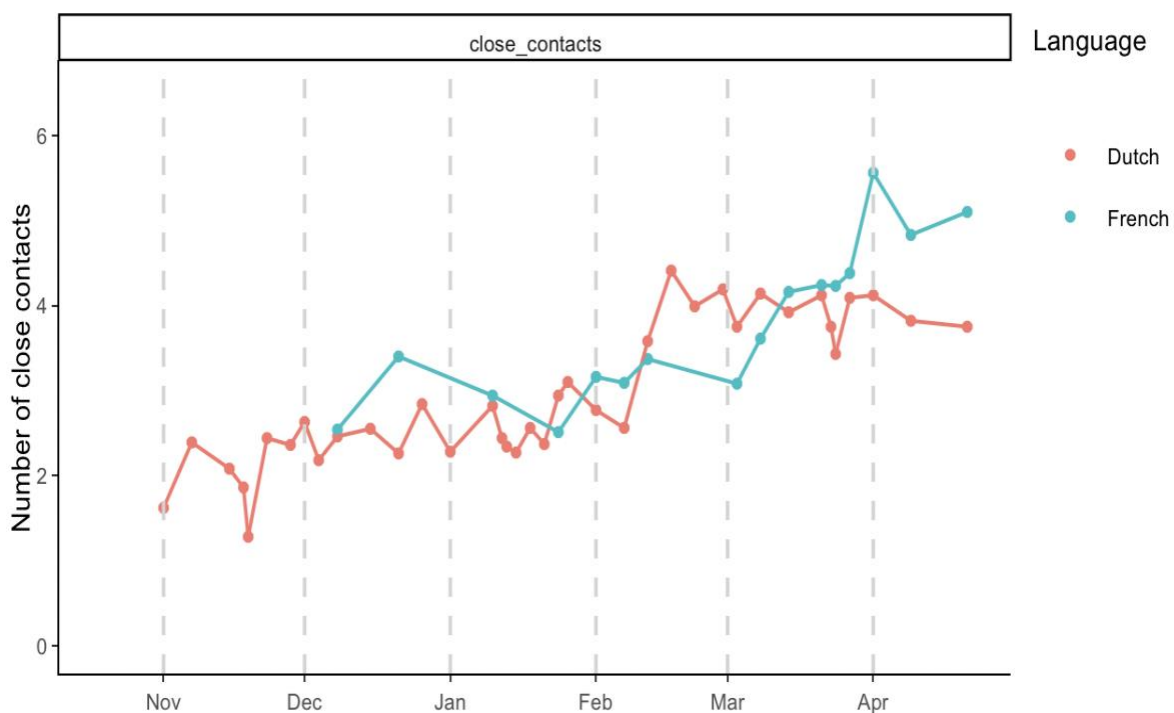
Figure 5. Comparison of current risk awareness with two past benchmarks with the same hospitalization rates



some habituation to risk or that people are increasingly turning away from COVID-19 news. Another explanation is that the increasing number of vaccinated individuals is influencing risk perception by fueling the belief that the situation is safe. It can be expected that this perception of risk will drop even further when contact professions reopen, as was observed in February (see report #24).

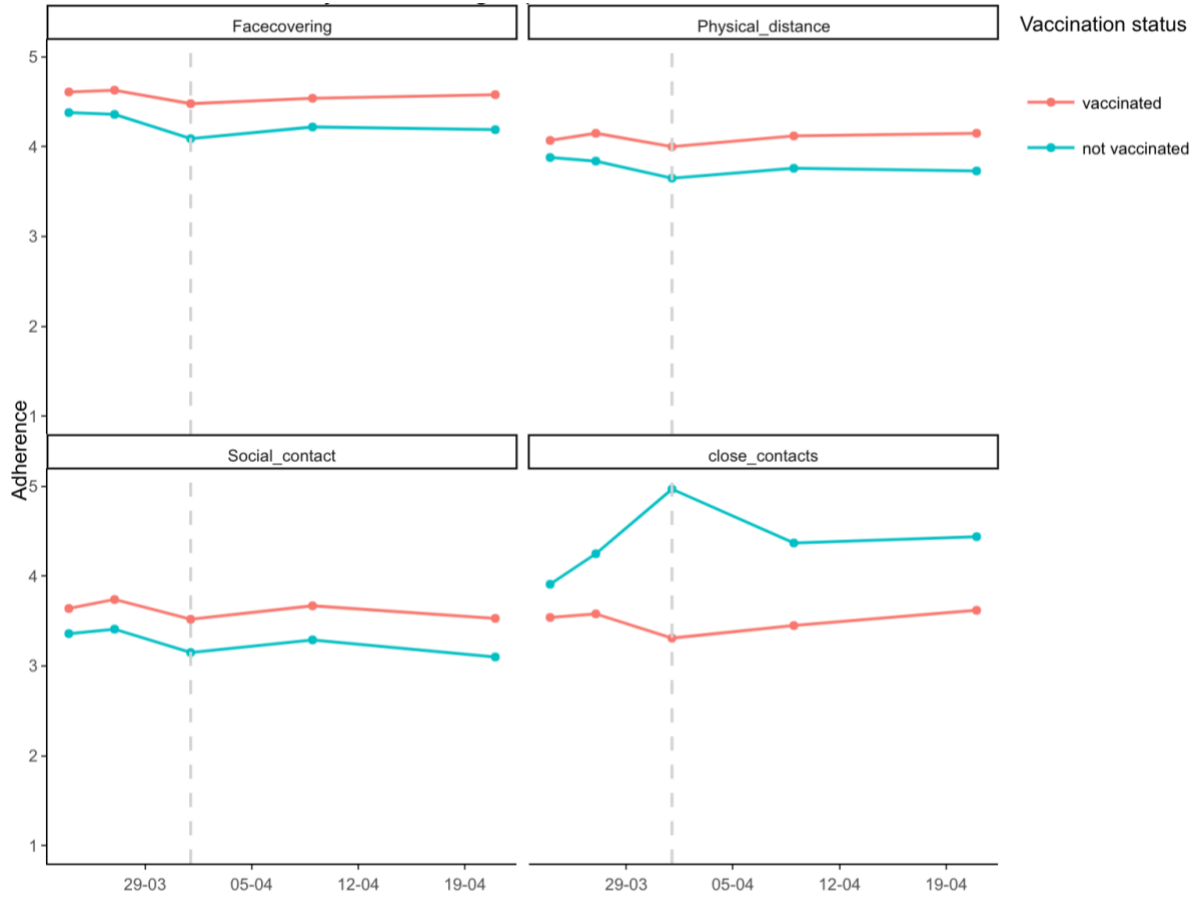
- Regarding the behavioral rules, especially the social measures (i.e., limiting close contacts, keeping physical distance) are less complied with. The mean number of self-reported close contacts remains clearly above the recommended threshold (i.e., 3.7 in the Dutch-speaking region, 5.1 in the French-speaking region; see Figure 6) and did not decrease after the announcement of the relaxations. Again, vaccinated individuals report more favorable behavioral patterns: they say they follow the measures more faithfully and have fewer hug-buddies (see Figure 7). Their higher risk perception and higher voluntary motivation may explain this effect.

Figure 6. Number of close contacts by region



In conclusion, neither the population's motivation nor its behavior has improved since the announcement of the relaxations, even though most of them are not yet in effect. A general feeling of discouragement remains present in a significant part of the population, with an insufficiently realistic assessment of the risks of infection. This trend is more pronounced among French-speaking participants. Worryingly, these negative motivational trends are more pronounced among non-vaccinated individuals, who are precisely the ones who have the most to gain from faithfully adhering to the measures.

Figure 7. Differences between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals in adherence to measures



# Recommendations

Can this ongoing corona fatigue still be reversed? Indeed, this is much needed because our contact behavior is clearly correlated with the corona infection numbers. We formulate four recommendations:

## 1. Specify intermediate goals

The relaxations on April 26 and May 8 were not subject to strict conditions, whereas the relaxations in early June were.

- Specify these conditions and provide an **intermediate goal that acts as a motivational lever**. Intermediate goals can only motivate if they are concrete and not vague, as is the case today.
- Formulating all relaxations conditionally makes for a more **coherent policy**, which may be understood more by sectors whose opening is conditional.
- The collective achievement of a predetermined intermediate goal stimulates the **collective confidence** to work together toward the next goal. Today, the psychological distance from the goal to be achieved (i.e., 500 patients in intensive care) is particularly long, which may cause the population to doubt the feasibility of this goal.

### *Why intermediate goals?*

Years of research teach us that a goal-oriented perspective is more motivating than a time-based perspective. This is because such a perspective (1) better emphasizes the contingent and fragile nature of the situation (thereby promoting risk awareness and adherence), (2) better emphasizes the causal role of our behavior in making progress (thereby promoting confidence), (3) allows for greater predictability (thereby reducing uncertainty about the situation), and (4) avoids having to disappoint the public by breaking its promises (thereby avoiding discouragement). For all these reasons, it is undoubtedly important to use (intermediate) goals to motivate people.

## 2. Coach the population

In order for the population to be motivated to pursue the predetermined (intermediate) goals, they need to be systematically coached.

- Provide an **estimated time frame** up to the first intermediate goal. In this way, the population will also have a time-bound perspective.
- Indicate through **if-then scenarios** how the (delayed) achievement of this goal depends on how faithfully we adhere to the measures (e.g., "If we all limit ourselves to one close contact, then the expectation is that ..."; "If we all have three close contacts, then the expectation is that ..."). Emphasize that the population is in control of its own destiny.
- Always communicate **the conditions** for relaxations **first** and only then the estimated timing. If not, the population only remembers the timing.
- Give the population a **weekly update** around our collective progression, with the goals playing a social mobilizing role.
- Specify how increasing vaccination rates will allow us to reach this goal more quickly.
- Celebrate the achievement of predetermined goals as a **psychological milestone**.
- Provide more **visual communication**.

## 3. Create realistic risk awareness

- Using **talking video clips**, concretize people's risk awareness.
  - For example, what does it mean specifically that variant X or Y is 50% more contagious?
  - What is the risk of infection outside if we (e.g. in a group of 10) do not keep enough distance and do not wear a mouth mask?
  - What is the additional risk if we all have two close contacts?
- Don't just point out risks, but at the same time give **safe, positive alternatives**.



#### 4. Evolve to a fine-grained approach.

Gradually move to a more fine-grained approach, where measures are no longer applied at the sectoral level, but on a case-by-case basis according to a recognizable logic. A sectoral ban on organizing corona proof activities may be perceived as disproportionate and demotivating (e.g., tennis clubs with a large, well-ventilated hall may perceive a general ban as disproportionate). By making the gradual reopening of activities conditional on the correct application of preventive measures, reopening can be framed as a fair deal and activates stakeholders' sense of responsibility and autonomy. As a set of prescribed preventive measures are better applied, stakeholders are given more freedom to return to normal life (e.g., a poorly ventilated restaurant/theater cannot reopen as quickly as a well-ventilated one). Use self- and rapid testing as a complementary strategy to promote risk awareness and encourage greater engagement and responsibility.

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