

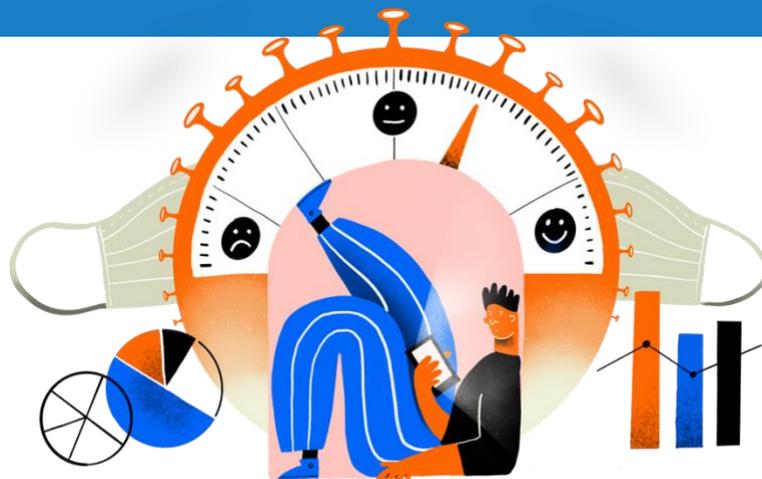
REPORT 2

Is our motivation to adhere to the measures flattening? The importance of clear and logical communication

The Motivation Barometer

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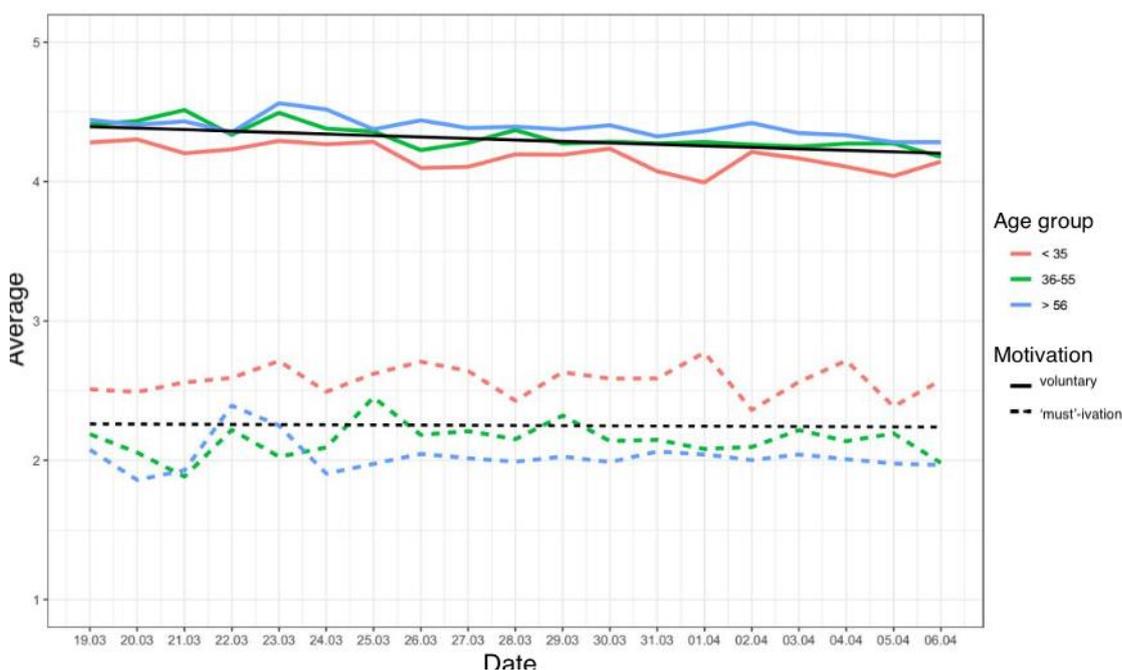


Last weekend, the discussion emerged on the exact interpretation of certain measures, such as who is allowed take a rest on a park bench. Several politicians and scientists expressed their opinions, which evoked some confusion among the population. As the measures are being fine-tuned and eventually will be reduced, it will be critical to provide a clear explanation of what will be expected from the population and why certain efforts will remain necessary. This clear communication, according to the results of the Motivation Barometer by Ghent University, will be crucial to keep the population motivated to strictly adhere to the measures until the end of the lockdown.

Motivational trends

Since Thursday, March 19, 2020, the Motivation Barometer questionnaire of Ghent University has been conducted. On a daily basis, the survey assesses the motivation of the population to adhere to the measures. Up to April 6, 10643 participants completed the survey. The sample mainly consists of women (76%) with a mean age of 46 years old. Participants indicated whether they adhere to the measures because they recognize the meaning and necessity (voluntary motivation) or if they rather feel obliged to adhere, for example to avoid criticism or to avoid a fine (must-ivation). Since the beginning of the study, voluntary motivation appears to be higher than must-ivation (see Figure 1), which is good news. This holds up for both young and older individuals. As this type of motivation predicts our future degree of adherence to the measures, such peak in voluntary motivation is considered highly important. Conversely, those who experience pressure to adhere to the measures, seem to more easily neglect the measures. In other words, pressure evokes resistance.

Figure 1. Evolution of motivation by age group.



Note 1. Black line refers to total average

Yet, in recent days, voluntary motivation is slightly flattening among both older and younger individuals as compared to the beginning of the study (see Figure 1). The efforts are beginning to feel more demanding, also, a clear perspective on when the measures are going to be reduced is currently lacking. Moreover, at this moment, not all politicians and scientists seem to be on the same page. For instance, the earlier discussion on the usefulness and necessity of wearing face masks in public, or the debate on who is (not) allowed to take a rest on a park bench. The results of our ongoing study indicate that clear communication from the government is essential to keep the population motivated. A lack of consensus seems to affect trust and, in turn, the population's voluntary motivation.

Worryingly, it seems plausible that the government might become more authoritarian and coercive once citizens no longer strictly adhere to certain measures. To illustrate, recently, the decision to prohibit trips to the Belgian coast was communicated in rather harsh ways, with the connotation of '*Just do as we speak*'. We will intensively monitor and if you get caught, you will be heavily fined'. This communication elicited resistance from quite a few people, including other politicians. Interestingly, this phenomenon is also reflected in the results of this study. If individuals experience the communication as coercive and patronizing, they report less voluntary motivation and even more a tendency to resist. Rather than merely reminding the violators of their duties, recognizing the burden that comes along with the measures seems to be a better approach. Mutual understanding leads to more voluntary motivation to persevere.

Motivated reduction of the measures

The current study indicates that providing a logical explanation for the fine-tuning and reduction of the measures is crucial. If the population is convinced that (certain) measures are still necessary, the willingness to comply is more likely to remain high. In this case, it is desirable to give specific information. Why are you not supposed to sit down on a lawn for a while, even if you keep your distance? What are the consequences of relaxing the measures too fast? It remains crucial to constantly verify the willingness of people to adhere to the measures as well as to relax certain measures. Therefore, we better keep an eye on the motivation of the population.

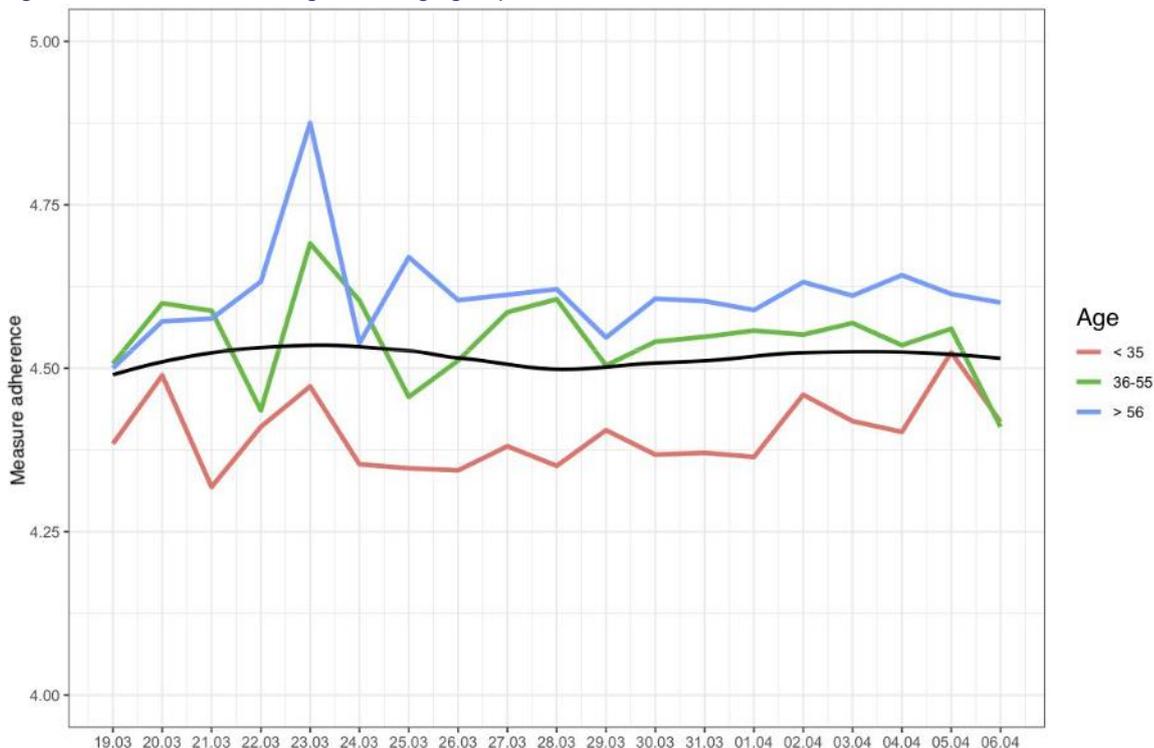
Especially if the timing for the relaxations will differ for diverse segments of the population. Such differentiation with regard to demographic groups holds risks for our motivation. If, for example, the elder population is asked to stick to certain lockdown measures for a longer period of time, then, clarification of the significance of this decision will be essential. In this regard, reminding people of the solidarity, helpfulness, and connection within the community is a good motivational strategy. These values are considered important to almost everyone, especially elderly, and provide a solid foundation for long-term motivation. Without explicit understanding of the measures, certain demographic groups might feel targeted, which undermines their voluntary motivation to adhere to the measures.

Perhaps the older generation (+55 years) can continue to lead the way. From the start of our study, their motivation appears to be higher than the middle-aged (35-45) population or younger adults (-35) (see Figure 1). Similarly, this age effect is reflected in the adherence to the measures as well (see Figure 2): older adults seem to adhere more conscientiously. What if the younger generation would explicitly ask their grandparents about their personal motivation and *commitment* to the current measures? Maybe this could foster the younger generation's courage to persevere.

The rebound effect of forbidden fruits

One risk of reducing the measures is the occurrence of a rebound effect. Because our need for autonomy is highly threatened by the current measures, a backlash might emerge once the measures start to relax. To make up for our long-time neglected freedom, we might feel the need to go 'all the way'. For example, the enormous crowd of Chinese citizens when visiting nature parks, or the Flemish population which massively headed to the container parks. Forbidden fruits exert a certain attraction, especially if they have been denied to us for a long time. In psychology, this is known as the phenomenon of *psychological reactance*. Therefore, it might be a good idea to first reintroduce the population to the least attractive virtues. Because, once all limitations fade away, it will be extremely difficult to get everyone back in line. Thus, to avoid resurgence of the virus, sustained self-discipline is needed. This is where voluntary motivation contributes.

Figure 2. Evolution in tracking across age groups.



Note 2. Black line refers to total average

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