

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unlocking community value: Building sustainable societies through engagement and well-being

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the indiscriminate nature of global interconnectivity, compelling immediate and transformative changes in our daily lives. This crisis has highlighted leadership deficiencies and underscored the broken aspects of our society that were previously taken for granted. As we envision the future, it is crucial to move beyond mere safety and strive for a regenerative society that is fundamentally better. This research paper introduces the concept of the Virtual Living Lab (VLL), a pre-pandemic initiative designed to track and analyze essential lifestyle narratives. Leveraging signal analyses, the VLL identifies and monitors narratives that deeply captivate and engage individuals. By examining these narratives in both the United Kingdom and Japan, we gain valuable insights into the influence of culture and the growing role of ethics in facilitating meaningful transformations. Furthermore, this study recognizes the evolving nature of our network-mediated society, characterized by fluid boundaries between organizations and individuals. Through an exploration of engagement, transformation, and culture, we investigate how these factors shape a thriving society. We also acknowledge the critical role of big data and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in analyzing and understanding these dynamics. During the pandemic, community value emerged as a vital resource for survival. Now, as individuals reevaluate their lives and seek sustainable and meaningful work-life harmony, community value can play an increasingly significant role. This research delves into the intertwined concepts of narratives, engagement, transformation, culture, well-being, communication, and balanced life, shedding light on their collective impact in shaping a thrivable society.

Keywords: narratives; engagement; transformation; thrivable culture; big data; AI society; lifestyle; well-being; communications; balanced life; community

1. Context for change

Sustainable social development has become a paramount priority on the global agenda. In 2015, the United Nations introduced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a means to monitor progress and address the world's most pressing issues. These goals set a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, aiming to improve education, reduce corruption, address inequality, combat hunger, and mitigate the environmental impact of climate change.

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However, the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise, revealing the extent of our interconnectivity and necessitating immediate and unprecedented lifestyle changes. The crisis exposed deficiencies in leadership, while community value emerged as a source of strength and resilience. As we navigate the post-pandemic era, individuals are reassessing their lives and questioning societal norms, seeking a better balance.

For several years, it has been evident that relying solely on GDP as a measure of societal progress is flawed, as it fails to capture what truly matters to people, such as life satisfaction, quality of life (QOL), and happiness. As the significance of healthy lifestyle choices grows, the sharing of innovative ideas and practices through social networks can drive major behavioral shifts and enhance QOL, leading to increased life satisfaction^[1] and happiness^[2,3].

Prominent social epidemiologists like Arabadjieva et al.^[4] have demonstrated that social equality plays a more crucial role in overall well-being than disposable wealth. Others, such as, advocate for a new form of capitalism that prioritizes people and the planet^[5]. Layard and de Neve^[6] emphasize the primacy of well-being in public policy and call for strategic leadership narratives to drive change, acknowledging that our understanding of people's ability to envision the future is limited^[7].

Beyond the direct health impact of the pandemic, we are witnessing material economic and social crises, with increased inequality^[8] and heightened mental health concerns. The rising cost of living disproportionately affects the less affluent. As we reach the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda in 2023, global efforts to meet the SDGs have fallen short of expectations in effecting the necessary changes.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched in 2015 to end poverty and set the world on a path of peace, prosperity and opportunity for all on a healthy planet. To date, global efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have fallen short of delivering the change we need, on almost all of the goals. Now the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis that has pushed millions back into extreme poverty and threatens to reverse decades of progress. A fact that was recognized in 2021, when a new result orientated, funding model was created to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. It was created jointly by UNICEF and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as is known as JIM (Joint Investment Mechanism).

Leadership during the pandemic has been found wanting, partly due to a lack of understanding of what truly matters to people. In more open cultures^[9], social media has heightened the volatility by exposing the lack of authenticity and credibility in leaders. Some argue for a significant change in leadership selection, favoring "credible expert leaders" over generalist managers^[10]. Similarly, for sustainable social development, leaders of social implementation must comprise multi-disciplinary experts capable of engaging with diverse constituencies and agendas.

As we emerge from the pandemic, people are questioning their lifestyles and society, demanding positive and authentic engagement from leaders. Regenerating society requires creating something better, not merely safer. Innovation and transformation are continuous processes, manifesting differently in various economic contexts and in response to disruptive practices or technologies.

Survival and success represent two extremes of the innovation cycle, with stasis reflecting apathy or poor implementation. Achieving sustainability involves embracing transformation and connection, which are inherent to life and society. Through conversations, we share ideas, truths, experiences, and beliefs, experiencing positive transformations, personal growth, and evolution. However, transformation also brings uncertainty and instability. In the digital age, access to vast amounts of information paradoxically leaves people

feeling increasingly uninformed, given the rise of mis-/dis-information, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transformation and connection are the very essence of life and society and, as individuals, we manifest our transformations through changes in our lifestyles and what is important to us. We share ideas and truths, experiences, and beliefs through our conversations. By doing so, we can experience transformation in a positive way, with personal growth and evolution. That said, transformation brings uncertainty and, for many, instability. Innovation has driven growth, but it also leads to greater instability. It is therefore not surprising that people are increasingly more concerned about who to trust.

Despite today's digital lifestyles give ready access to increasingly vast amounts of information people are paradoxically feeling increasingly uninformed, such has been the sense of the recent rise in mis-/dis-information. This was magnified, on an almost daily basis, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have said that COVID-19 disinformation "strayed towards censorship", with the actions of The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport during lockdown^[11]. ChatGPT and AI generated images are a boon to news disinformation^[12].

While the SDGs prioritize innovative pathways for a sustainable future, the concept of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has gained rapid popularity without clear control, becoming a boon for consultants and financial advisors. The proliferation of ESG metrics has created confusion rather than consistency or coherence. The increasing popularity of ESG investing based on corporate policies and metrics raises questions about its strategic benefit and potential polarization. ESG's influence on corporate and investor sentiment in the USA is at the forefront of a political divide^[13].

The European Union's corporate sustainability reporting directive (CSRD) aims to make ESG disclosures mandatory for 50,000 listed companies starting from 2024. However, the draft standards allow companies to decide what to report based on their perception of materiality. ESG should not be perceived as an added cost of doing business, akin to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Instead, ESG should form the core of a winning strategy and sustainable business development. Public and private leaders will recognize the centrality of ESG in collaborative efforts to create shared value for customers, businesses, and society.

Successful sustainable societal development requires intentional design and transparency. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a coherent and consistent approach, with top-down commitment and vision enabling bottom-up initiatives at the individual and local community levels. Social media will play an increasingly critical role in facilitating social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. Leaders must actively and authentically engage with an increasingly knowledgeable constituency that knows what is important to them and poses critical questions^[14].

2. Lifestyle by design virtual living lab

Stories have always played a significant role in bringing people together throughout history. The earliest evidence of storytelling dates back to the Paleolithic period, approximately 40,000 years ago. In those early societies, individuals would gather around campfires to share stories that depicted their lives, beliefs, and fears. These narratives fostered a sense of community and forged a shared identity.

In 2019, Nobel laureate Schiller argued that narratives, driven by emotions, have the potential to be contagious. When dominant, narratives become the primary catalyst for behavior, giving rise to what he termed "Narrative Economics". Social media, in particular, has had a positive impact on storytelling, making it easier for individuals to share their stories with a broader audience and transforming the way narratives are conveyed. Influencers, some of whom are celebrities, have emerged as influential figures, wielding significant power

through their social media presence and influencing attitudes and behaviors^[15]. Additionally, the realm of data storytelling has gained traction, combining data, narrative, and visuals to create powerful and memorable narratives.

This shift has ushered in a more diverse, interactive, and participatory approach to storytelling. Modern communication science offers the means to deliver narratives effectively, efficiently, and, most importantly, empathetically to different audiences. Not every individual has the same capacity to effect change; some play a more influential role than others.

The research presented here utilizes Big Data, analytics, and AI to track the narratives that are shaping our world today (**Table 1**). By leveraging AI and treating the internet as a vast and authentic behavioral test, we can gauge the significance of specific content (topics, triggers, media channels, etc.) in relation to behavior. Unlike traditional social listening, our focus is on identifying what truly drives past and future outcomes, transcending media bubbles. Specifically, we provide near-real-time emotional analysis, delving into the affective aspects that shape future behavior, rather than relying solely on sentiment volumes.

Understanding what matters to people empowers policymakers and educators to engage their audiences in a relevant, evocative, and effective manner. Social media has had a profound impact on storytelling, facilitating the sharing of narratives with a wider audience and transforming the narrative landscape.

Table 1. Lifestyle by design VLL narratives June 2023.

English (UK)	Japanese
Well-being	ウェルビーイング
Wellness	健康
Personal happiness	個人的な幸せ
Personal satisfaction	個人的な満足
Leisure time	余暇
Personal employment	個人雇用
Personal life balance	私生活バランス
Personal friendship	個人的な友情
My family	私の家族
Personal nutrition balance	個人の栄養バランス
Personal activity	個人的な活動
My free time	私の自由な時間
Motivation	動機
My community	私のコミュニティ
Personal bonding	個人的な絆
Being employed	雇用されている
Personal wealth	個人の富
Personal relationships	個人的な関係
My resilience	私の回復力
Personal confidence	個人的な自信
Personal optimism	個人楽観主義
Personal pessimism	個人的な悲観主義
Social stability	社会的安定
Economic growth	経済成長
ESG	ESG
Food sustainability	食のサステナビリティ

A fundamental principle of the University of Tokyo's LifeStyle by Design research initiative is the increasing need to empower individuals to make informed choices about their own healthy lifestyle options. As self-medication and healthy lifestyle choices become increasingly significant, the sharing of new ideas and practices through social channels can quickly become viral^[16,17]. This has the potential to drive substantial shifts in attitudes and behaviors that enhance and sustain "health span", rather than solely focusing on longevity. It is widely acknowledged that approximately sixty percent of mortality and eighty percent of the global disease burden are attributable to just four lifestyle choices: inadequate exercise, poor nutrition, smoking, and excessive alcohol consumption. Adopting a coherent LifeStyle by Design approach will improve both individuals' quality of life and society as a whole.

3. Narratives that can shape our world

Measuring and interpreting social and linguistic signals by accessing openly available online content is inherently more reflective of human behavior than traditional qualitative or quantitative survey methodologies. Moreover, these methods offer a coherent diagnostic foundation to comprehend, exploit, and influence behavior. Significance systems provide a measure of long-term engagement for narratives. Naturally, distinct narratives (**Figure 1**) exhibit discrete behaviors and vary in their value and utility. We should consider them as complex, organic structures with unique characteristics and behaviors.

Most narratives are Transient (82%). These narratives fade away without significant investment and are poor choices for communication since they are not expected to persist or grow as issues. Although it is often easy to "own" such narratives strategically, they must be driven or connected to greater relevance and differentiation to have long-term value. Tribal (11%) narratives are characterized by intense debate driven by personal experiences or commercial perspectives, resulting in divergent points of view. However, most of this debate has no significant impact. While it is easy to be a participant, being a player or leader in such narratives is much more challenging.

The narratives with the greatest potential utility are Transformational and Timeless. Transformational (2%) narratives involve intense, engaging experiences with strong, timeless themes. These narratives are fast-changing but can lead to lasting transformation of the world. Timeless (5%) narratives are expected to persist or grow and are characterized by long-term, deep engagement. These narratives are ideal choices for communication activities. When considering the narratives of the top 100 brands/companies, one can observe that their effective communication strategies focus on Timeless engagement, representing at least 90 percent of the narratives.

Timeless and Transformational narratives have the power to effect change, implement policy, and create sustainable value. Importantly, this approach allows us to identify what is important to people at any given time, enabling us to participate readily in relevant and credible conversations and "engage with engagement". It is more effective and efficient to be part of the ongoing story rather than attempting to intrude from the outside, which has been the traditional norm in mass communication^[18]. By analyzing the trust people have in other people, this type of analysis empowers us to engage with engagement and be part of the ongoing story, breaking away from traditional consumer research methodologies and providing more relevant, timely, and actionable insights.

In tracking narratives that can shape our world^[19], we explicitly recognize the following:

- 1) Popular stories influence individual and community behavior.
- 2) Improved decision-making comes from understanding and addressing what people themselves deem important.

- 3) Relevant and timely communications, within the appropriate context, can stimulate changes in perception and behavior.
- 4) Emotion precedes action, so both content and tone are important.

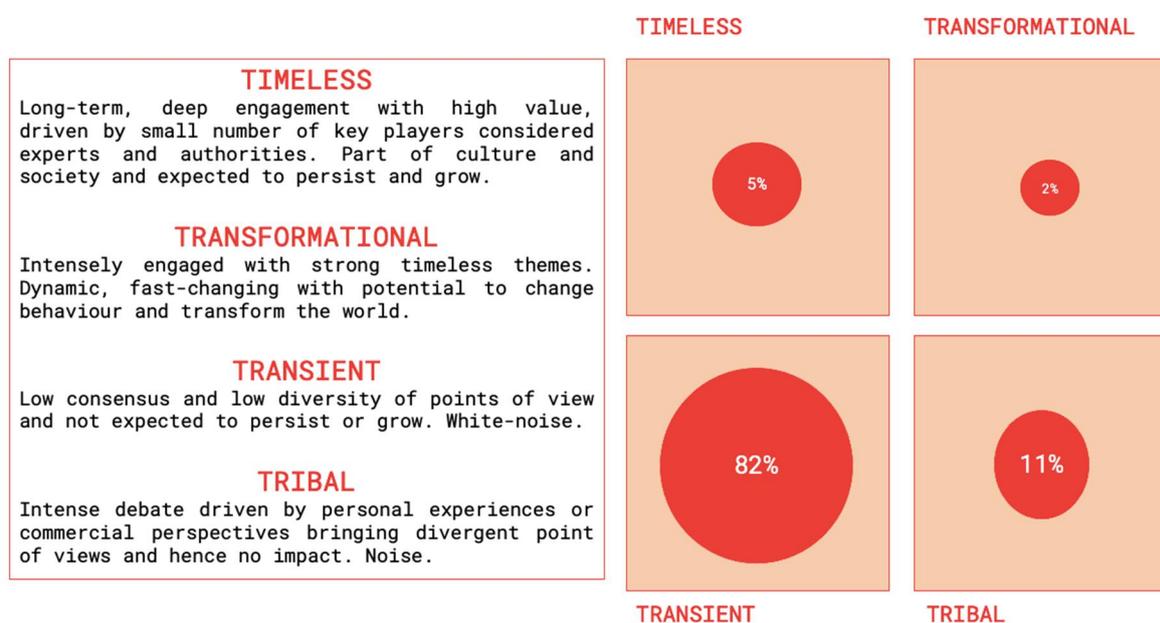


Figure 1. Narrative classification.

Since the inception of the VLL four years ago, the world has undergone unprecedented changes in a short period, particularly due to COVID-19 in early 2020. Previously perceived as fixed and timeless pillars of society were challenged and often became transformational^[20] as the world sought solutions for a safer and better society. To gain a comprehensive perspective on creating a thriving society, it is essential to consider both a personal, bottom-up viewpoint and a top-down, institutional or macro perspective. Therefore, in this paper, we will delve into the well-being and My Community narratives, as well as the social stability and ESG narratives in greater detail.

The fluidity of the narratives tracked in the UK (**Figure 2**) indicates that most are currently transformational. Multiple dimensions of modern living are being reassessed. In June 2019, there were no transformational narratives in the VLL; most being timeless. The same is true in Japan (**Figure 3**), but to a lesser extent as more of the narratives are viewed as in complete flux and have become extremely transient. Only ESG is now viewed as wholly timeless, with well-being (ウェルビーイング), historically always timeless now also becoming transformational (**Figure 3**).

In contrast, in the UK, well-being remains timeless (**Figure 2**). That said, in both countries, currently the emotional core of the well-being narrative is active and positive creating a sense of delight (**Figure 4**). The affect orientation is a measure of the degree to which the narrative stimulates an emotional response: active or passive, positive or negative. Most narratives are simply neutral, and do not provoke any emotional response. Narratives such as well-being, which are driven by active, positive engagement (**Figure 4**), have momentum. They will thrive and prosper. Powered by enthusiasm and energy, they exhibit growth and adaptation, and drive behaviour.

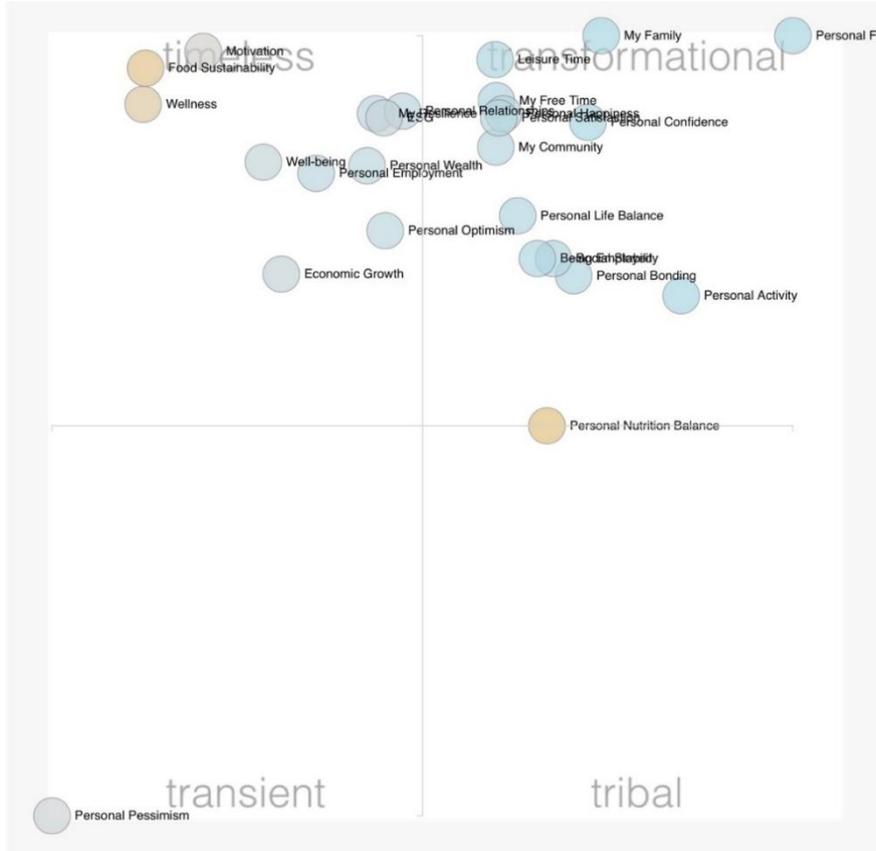


Figure 2. Lifestyle by design VLL narrative landscape, in the UK, June 2023.

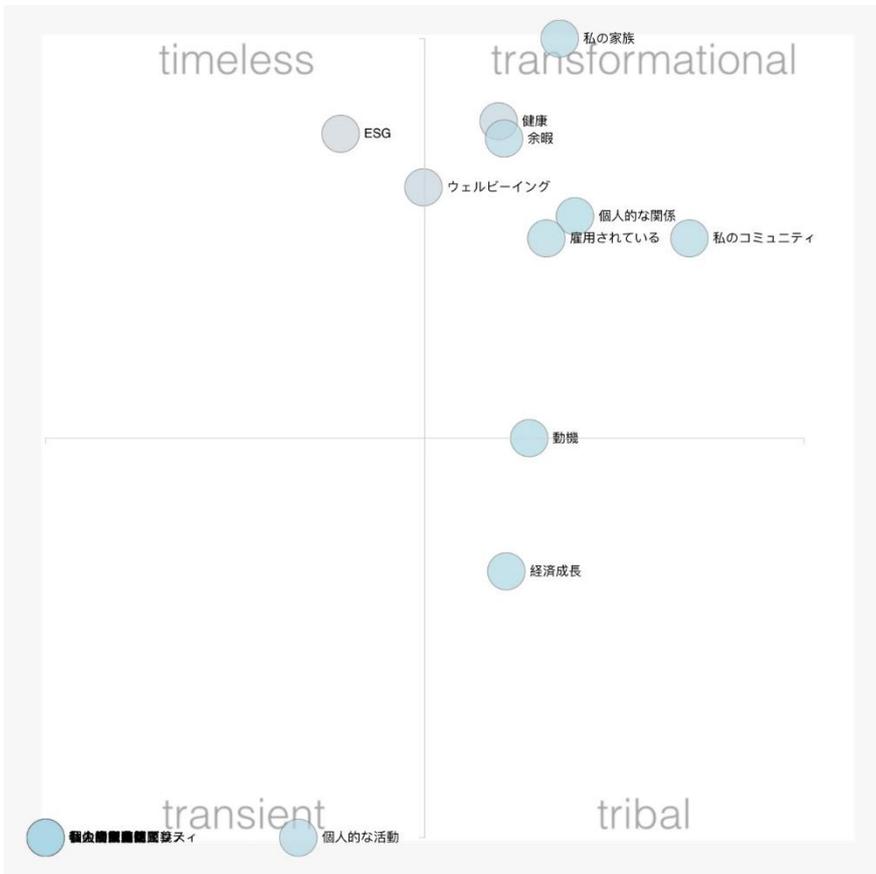


Figure 3. Lifestyle by Design VLL narrative landscape, in Japan, June 2023.

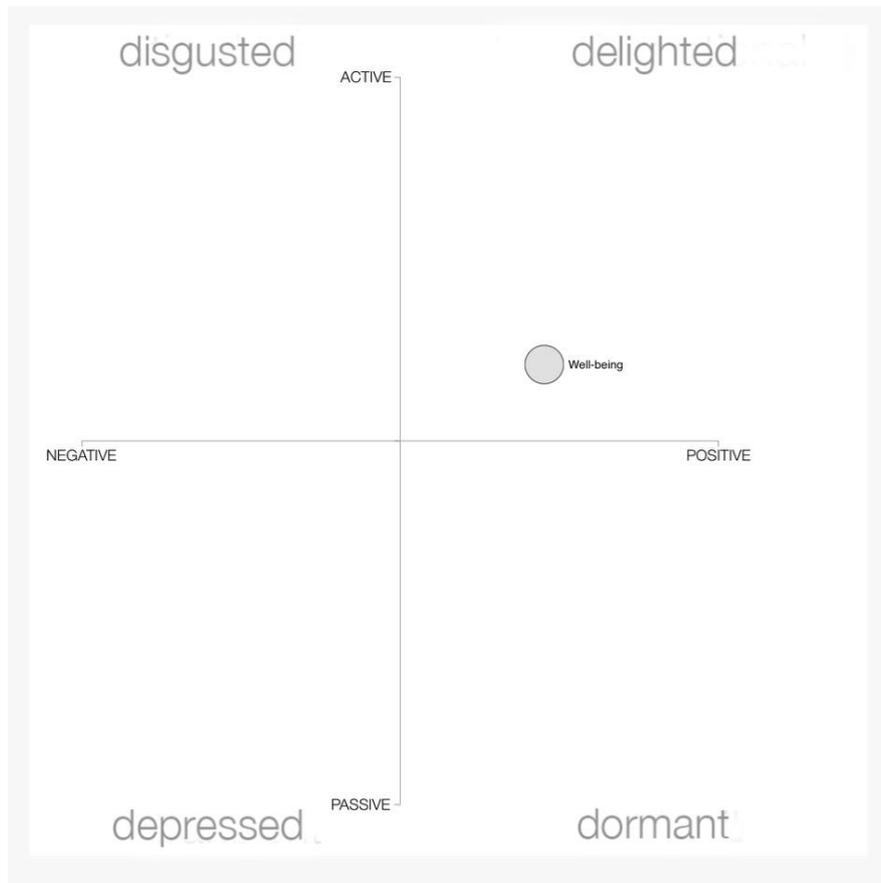


Figure 4. Affect orientation of well-being narrative, in the UK, June 2023.

The emotional tone of significant content in the narrative is measured by its affect (**Figure 4**). Understanding the emotional drivers empowers you to better comprehend and appropriately respond to the emotional impact of the narrative. In **Figure 5**, which reflects Plutchik’s ‘wheel of emotion’, positive emotions are highlighted in green, while negative emotions are represented in red^[21]. Clear tonalities, such as expectation or apprehension, are depicted in purple. The intensity of the colors indicates the strength of each emotion. For the well-being narrative in the UK (**Figure 5**), happiness drives a sense of joy, which is far more powerful than the negative emotions. Apprehension creates fear, while distress stimulates anxiety. The width of each arc illustrates the contribution of each named emotion to the overall emotional response. Typically, broad emotions like fear and love are located closer to the center of the chart, while the more subtle emotions that contribute to these broad emotions are shown in the concentric rings further out. Moving outward from the center, each ring offers a deeper level of detail. For instance, in the case of well-being, fulfillment leads to satisfaction, which, in turn, provides a sense of contentment, and for some individuals, even joy (**Figure 5**).

The influential media driving the well-being narrative in the UK encompasses several dimensions. Our index ranks media voices based on their power to lead debates, shape perceptions, and drive market performance in terms of preference and desirability. It’s important to note that this ranking is not solely based on popularity. Often, the most popular media outlets do not have the strongest impact on topical or social engagement. The top-ranked media sources include get.rethinked.com, healthy-every-day-ro.blogspot.com, takeactionlac.com, bestbrainsmckinney.com, dynamicfamilymed.com, and investorhub.emyria.com (in ranked order). The most powerful content driving the well-being narrative is characterized by questioning, research-oriented, and multidimensional perspectives on life and nature, as illustrated in **Figure 6**. Content Power serves as a measure of individual content pieces’ intrinsic power, independent of the number of people

viewing or sharing it. The content presented in **Figure 6** has been selected for its ability to drive market performance in terms of preference and desirability.

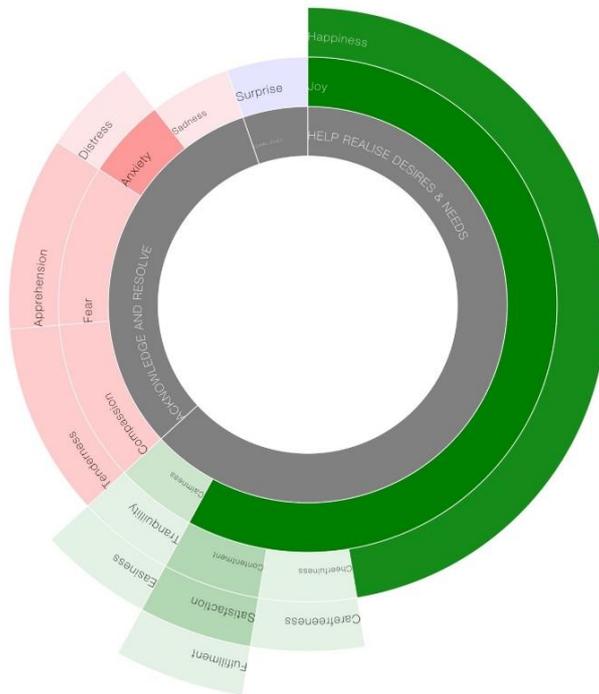


Figure 5. Emotional response to well-being narrative, in the UK, June 2023.

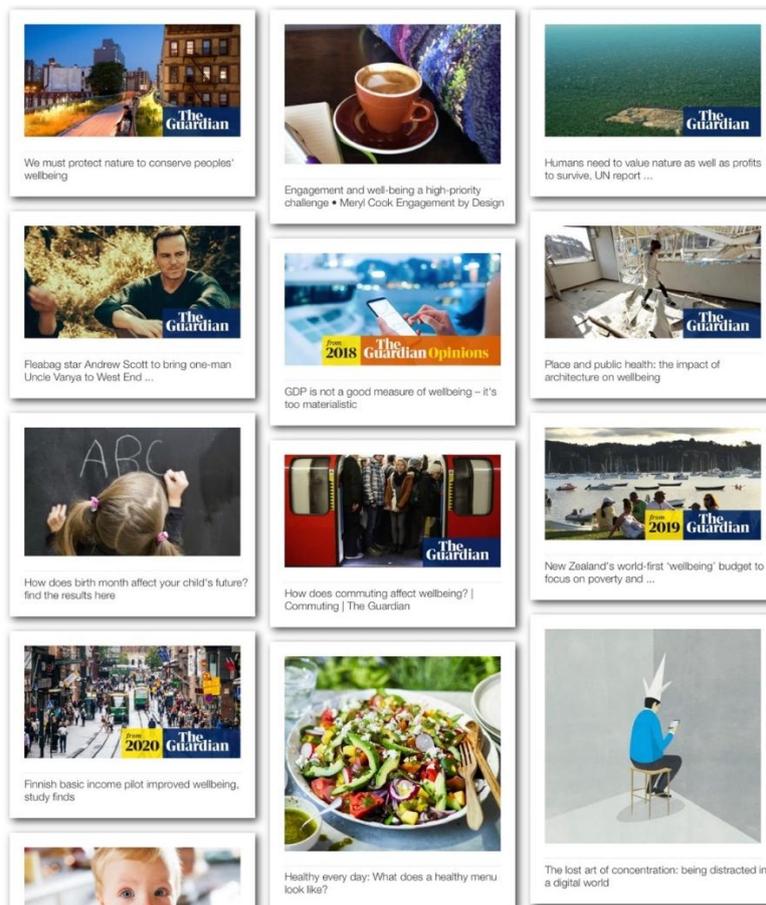


Figure 6. Well-being content exploration, in the UK, June 2023.

In Japan, the positivity associated with the well-being narrative (**Figure 7**) is much stronger compared to the UK (**Figure 5**). The media outlets uchubiz.com, ameblo.jp, and note.com are driving the narrative. The most influential content explicitly focuses on well-being, adopting a holistic individual perspective that goes beyond health (nikkeibp.co.jp), while also considering ESG. Positive and interconnected themes revolving around health, happiness, and well-being are prevalent.

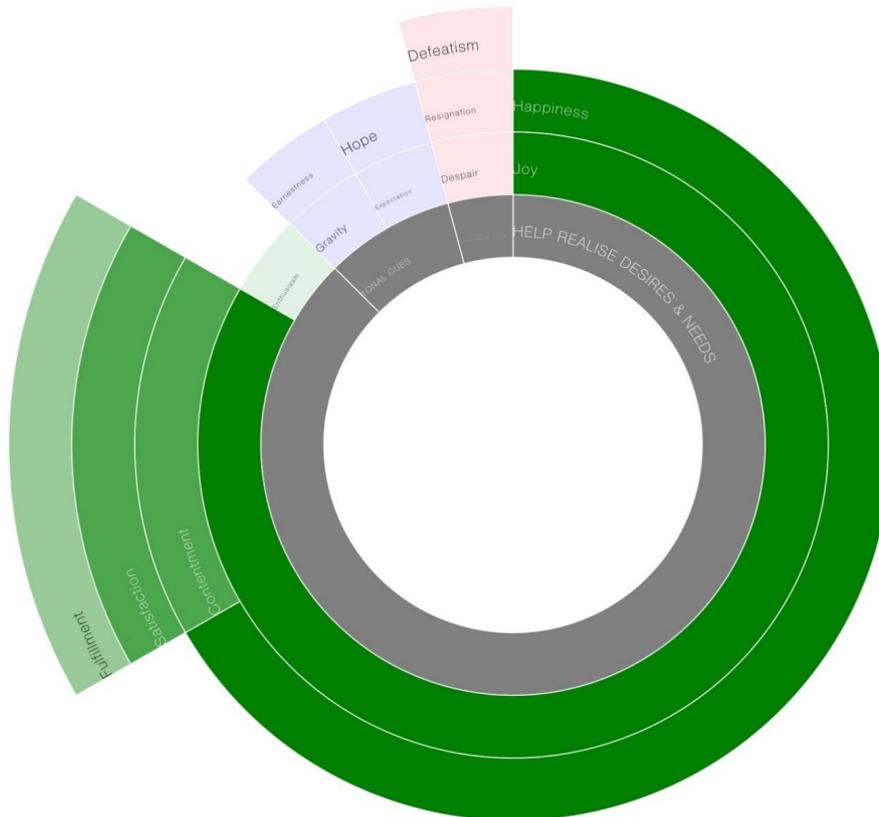


Figure 7. Emotional response to well-being narrative, in Japan, June 2023.

The narrative of “My Community” (私のコミュニテイ) has consistently remained timeless in both Japan and the UK since the VLL was initiated in June 2019. Its significance came to the forefront during the pandemic, but its nature has continuously evolved and remains fluid, becoming transformative in both countries. Similar to well-being, the affect orientation of the “My Community” narrative is active and positive. This optimism, coupled with hope that sets expectations for the future, along with a sense of calmness, can be observed in the emotional response to the “My Community” narrative in Japan (**Figure 8**). The media outlet note.com dominates this narrative, with community and personal life becoming more closely intertwined.

In contrast, in the UK, the sense of “My Community” connotes more negative emotions (**Figure 9**). Horror drives fear, distress creates anxiety, and there is a general sense of resignation, despair, sorrow, and sadness. The media outlet “My Community” website, described as “for people and organizations who are passionate about their communities” (mycommunity.org.uk), dominates the narrative. Concerns about personal finances have reached a level where the relationship between business and the community is positive, but the negativity reflects personal economic worries related to loans.



Figure 8. Emotional response to My Community narrative, in Japan, June 2023.



Figure 9. Emotional response to My Community narrative, in the UK, June 2023.

At the macro level in the UK, the social stability narrative is transformative, but its affect orientation is active and negative, leading to polarized opinions. To have a sustainable influence, this narrative must transform from being destructive and oppositional to being more positive and creative. The emotional response reflects people’s fear and general uncertainty about the future. Influential content includes the recognition of the need to acquire new skills as a means to overcome stagnation and create a more sustainable future with wealth generation. However, engagement around social stability going forward lacks clear patterns of topics or themes.

In contrast, the social stability narrative in Japan is currently in a state of fluidity and transience. This is not surprising given the highly transformative nature of the “My Family” (私の家族), “Wellness” (健康), and “Leisure Time” (余暇) narratives indicated in the narrative landscape (Figure 3).

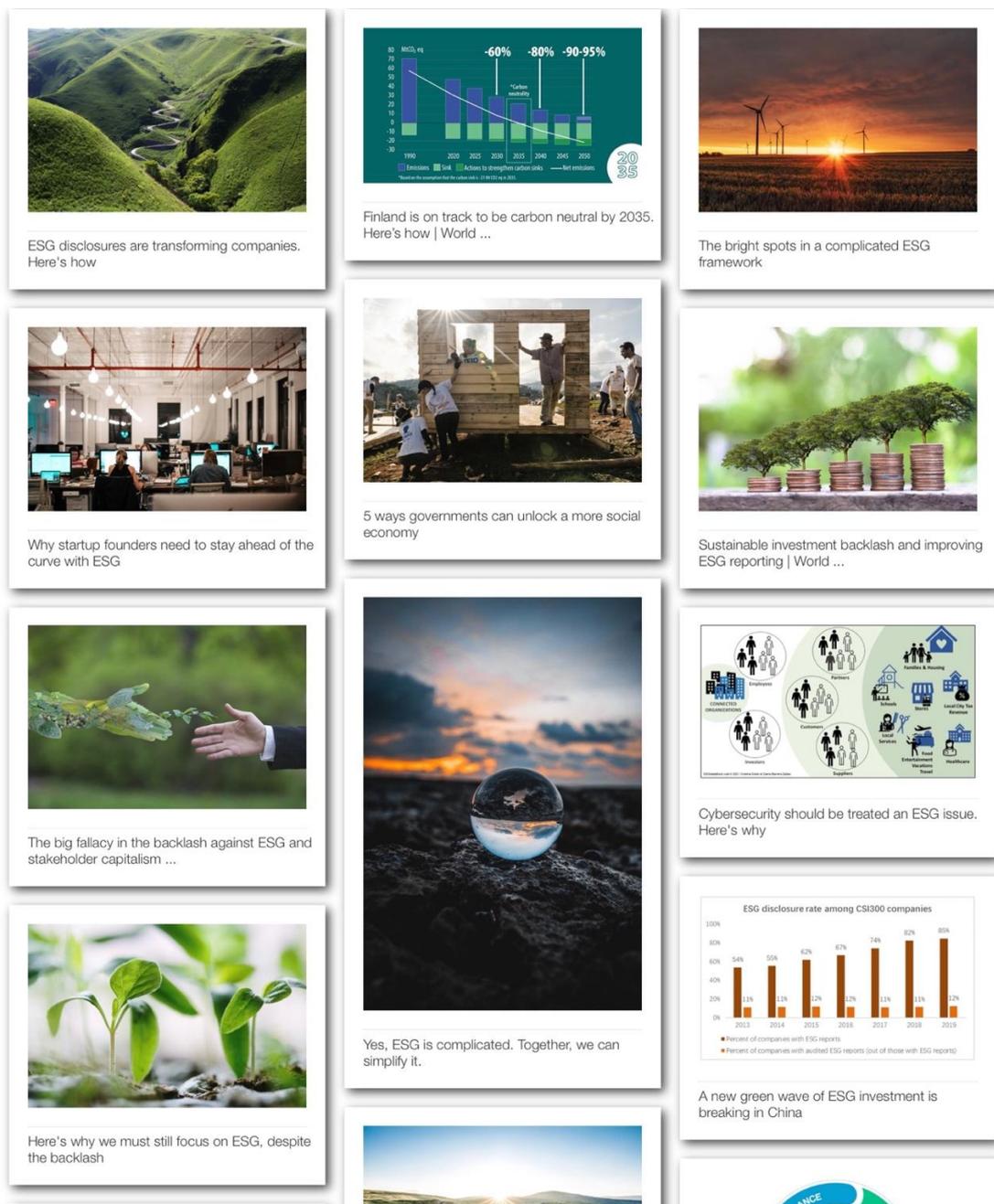


Figure 10. ESG content exploration, in the UK, June 2023.

Encouragingly, from a sustainable development perspective, ESG remains a timeless narrative in both the UK (**Figure 2**) and Japan (**Figure 3**). However, while the affect orientation is active in both countries, Japan exhibits some negativity, contrasting with the positive engagement observed in the UK. In the UK, with such an orientation, one would expect the narrative to thrive and drive behavior. In Japan, opinions on ESG appear polarized, with fear and anxiety being dominant emotions. Futurist Igor Beuker (igorbeuker.com), described on social media as “Burning Man meets Ted,” is currently leading the ESG debate and shaping perception. The negativity reflects the country’s Japan’s listed companies and government, despite substantial PR activity surrounding the ESG narrative.

In the UK, there is a clear tonality in the emotions expressed around the ESG narrative. Wonder, astonishment, and surprise are prominent. Once again, the dominant voice leading the debate is Igor Beuker, along with the World Economic Forum. The most powerful content has a practical orientation that goes beyond ESG investing, reflecting an accepted complexity within the existing ESG framework and focusing on implementation (**Figure 10**). Some individuals also see a need to explicitly include cybersecurity as an ESG issue

4. Implications

The advent of social media and interconnectivity has revolutionized the dissemination of ideas, allowing stories to be magnified and spread rapidly, leading to coordinated societal development in ways previously unknown in today’s digital era^[22]. Social media platforms provide a powerful mechanism for amplifying the sharing of new ideas^[23], making them more relevant and authentic in the eyes of the audience^[24]. This amplified engagement presents unique opportunities for organizations to connect with their target audience and achieve their goals more efficiently and effectively^[25]. In contrast to traditional media, which often relies on intrusive advertising methods, social media allows for a more organic and engaging approach, ensuring a stronger connection between brands and their consumers^[26]. As a result, organizations can move beyond conventional media planning considerations and focus on crafting and delivering compelling narratives that resonate with their target audience^[27].

However, it is important to recognize that not all aspects of the Open Society concept, proposed by Popper^[28], and the democratization of access facilitated by social media are universally beneficial. While social media empowers individuals and enables the free flow of information, it also exposes us to misinformation and the spread of harmful narratives^[29]. Sometimes, mass media and social media platforms can provide distorted and biased views that can hinder decision-making. When there is too much disinformation, misinformation, and poorly organized information, it can cause confusion and pessimism. Unfortunately, entropy and disinformation are increasing at a time when clarity, optimism, and conviction are needed. Therefore, it is critical to have a positive and empowering attitude^[30].

It is crucial to challenge and change narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misconceptions, such as the false belief that poverty is solely a result of laziness^[31]. Embracing unconstrained thinking, rather than being limited by frameworks like Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), is essential for promoting thriving and fostering innovative solutions to societal challenges^[32]. Moreover, the open access to AI development has the potential to foster innovation and improve commercial transparency and governance practices^[33].

The crisis of the pandemic has emphasized the need to build a more resilient and equitable society, where well-being takes center stage as a central pillar of sustainability^[34]. Policymakers and leaders must prioritize well-being^[35] as a primary objective, ensuring that policies and initiatives are designed to enhance the quality of life for all individuals^[2]. Technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) enable more intelligent interactions

and present opportunities for simplifying complexity, making it a duty of leadership to embrace and leverage these advancements^[36].

In the realm of marketing, there is a noticeable shift from channel-specific to context-specific experiences. Organizations must adapt to this changing landscape by rapidly creating highly personalized content that caters to individuals' specific situations^[37]. This requires drawing insights from a single source of truth, integrating data-driven strategies, and harnessing the power of AI and Big Data analytics^[38]. As narratives become more complex and capable of engaging with different constituencies, organizations must be prepared to navigate this expanding landscape and embrace the growing intricacies of content^[39].

Understanding the importance of what individuals find significant and how it influences their behavior is paramount. Organizations must leverage ongoing stories and engage with their audiences in an authentic and relevant manner^[40]. This requires actively listening to the needs and desires of the audience and aligning the organization's narrative accordingly^[41]. By embracing authenticity and relevance in communication, organizations can foster stronger connections and ensure that their messages are embraced and shared by the audience^[42].

Regardless of their size, organizations have the potential to leverage AI and Big Data to enhance society and facilitate the implementation of new ideas on a societal scale^[43]. The narratives shaping our increasingly digital lives have the power to inspire new lifestyle behaviors that enhance people's quality of life^[44]. Particularly during times of change, it is vital for organizations to maintain the relevance of their story, both in terms of content and emotion, to resonate with their audience and ensure widespread acceptance of their message^[45]. With such an approach new lifestyle behaviour that enhances an individual's' QOL are achievable, and society can be on a trajectory to thrive.

Author contributions

Methodology, DB and JR; software, DB; writing—original draft preparation, CDB; writing—review and editing, CDB and JR. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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