

# Re-evaluating Personal Confidence, Myself: a preliminary study from the Virtual Living Lab

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**Abstract:** COVID-19 swept the world leading to an unprecedented change in peoples' lives around the world. Response by governments was varied and piecemeal, institutions and long-held practices were found not fit for purpose as daily lives were transformed. At the macro level, public and private institutions are looking to reset and regenerate for sustainable growth. At the personal level, positive trends, prior to the pandemic, associated with equality and diversity was upended and anxiety only heightened long-term mental health worries.

This Research Note explores how Personal Confidence (個人的な自信) is evolving in Japan after COVID-19 restrictions had been removed, through a unique lifestyle Virtual Living Lab. The VLL was established in 2019 before the pandemic. Initial findings show Personal Confidence is in flux and by implications the nature of individuality. To engage with people, leaders need to be able to track what is important to people.

**Key Words:** Narratives, Engagement, AI, Big Data, Empowerment, Tribal, Utility, Individuality

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## 1. Introduction

We stand at a unique point in time as the world begins to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, all aspects of society and contemporary living are being re-evaluated. The fear and anxiety associated with the pandemic calls for leaders who not only make our world safe, but also better! Any changes need to be communicated in a transparent and participative manner if leaders and institutions are going to regain trust of the people. People trust people! Our digital lives are interconnected and always on. Social media are integral parts of our daily lives and the most efficient and comprehensive distribution system. Indeed, contagious narratives can have material economic impact (Shiller, 2019). Thus, they provide a timely lens to understanding (changing) values and behaviour. Consequently, The University of Tokyo's LifeStyle by Design Research Unit began a long-term Virtual Living Lab (VLL), in June 2019, of some narratives that aligned with the Unit's mission to explore a holistic lifestyle design that can contribute to improved personal well-being / life satisfaction (Beaumont & Ricketts, 2020). The original premise was to understand what people wanted and that would enable innovation to magnify on-going trends, through engaging with existing stories. The intent was to benchmark attitudes and behavior, to track the mood of society, in a cultural comparative way by undertaking research both Japan and the UK, simultaneously.

Leveraging state-of-the-art, Big Data /AI communications analytics it is now possible to:

- √ probe narratives to understand their drivers and the dynamics for changing accord and behaviour.
- √ probe what people feel are more important to them and not simply what leaders say should be important.

After two waves of research the pandemic hit so the VLL provides invaluable temporal insights as to what was important to people and how that changed.

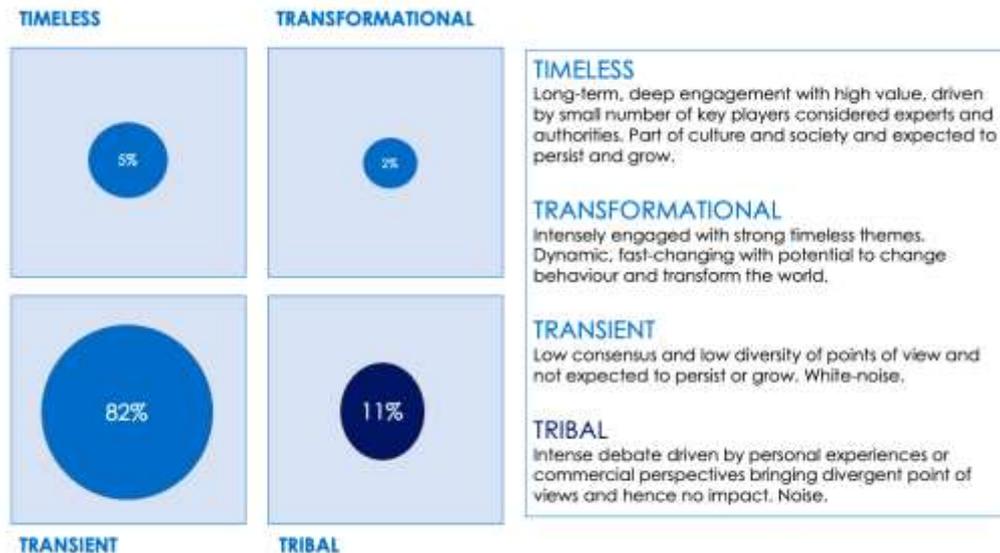


Figure 1. Narrative Engagement Classification ©Significance Systems (used with permission)

Most digital exchanges (Figure1) are white-noise and unless harnessed, are transient (82 percent) having low engagement. These are poor choices for communications. On the other hand, those narratives that present significant opportunities provide transformational (2 percent) and timeless engagement (5percent). Tribal (11percent) narratives are characterised by intense debate, being driven by personal experiences or commercial perspectives, but bring divergent POVs. Thus this debate often has no impact. That said, it is easy to be a participant, but far more difficult to be a significant player or leader in such narratives. The Personal Confidence (個人的な自信) narrative, the focus of this note, in Japan, had interestingly, in December 2022, become a tribal narrative. Prior to the pandemic taking hold it had been a timeless narrative, becoming a transformational narrative in the December 2020 wave, and in subsequent waves in June and September 2022.



Figure 2. Affect Orientation of Personal Confidence in Japan (December 2022)

## 2. Findings

Since emotion precedes action, it is important to probe this as well as the key content that drives engagement of the narrative. Affect Orientation (Figure 2) 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 this (Personal Confidence), which are driven by active, positive engagement, have momentum. They have enthusiasm and energy, and if harnessed can exhibit growth and adaptation, and drive behaviour.



Figure 3. Emotional Response of Personal Confidence in Japan (December 2022)

Encouragingly the emotions associated with the narrative (Figure 3) are broadly positive especially with self-esteem driving self-pride, and happiness creating joy. Change is apparently good with greater freedom? There is some negativity creating anxiety, despair, and dislike, but this is currently much less important and can be readily obviated by the future expectations, shown by the tonal cues (Figure 3). The key topics within the Personal Confidence narrative that are driving engagement, in Japan, are all positive and convey a holistic reconsideration: a recognition of various constraints; a world view and elements of a 'happy life'. It is something which is personally involving, rather than driven by society. For some, a critical element of being happy is to question what is the basis of talent (What do you think is the difference between smart people and not-so-smart people?), and having broader perspectives that enable people to think for themselves. The most powerful media driving this engagement, is not a simple media volume metric, but one that ranks media voices

according to their power to lead debate and shape perception. note.jp is by far the most powerful media, followed by diamond.jp and toyokeizai.net, then news.yahoo.co.jp .

Social media has enabled society to fragment and for some to feel and be empowered. This has enabled a trend that has seen traditional Japanese groups, associated with obligation, evolving to networks (of friends), with at the same time obligation causing a societal disharmony as the Japanese individual recognises they have to balance the assertive self and the belonging self. Therefore, while it is an heroic assumption to presume the Japanese society to be homogenous, it is critical also to accept that we are not seeing the emergence of individualism in the western style, rather adaptability in different groups. which we refer to as 'soft individualism' (Beaumont,1995). Unfortunately, there remains material concerns of diversity and inequality that the pandemic put some of the positive recent trends back. However, from a personal perspective the seniority system is an outdated operating model when today's flat and interconnected networks, social media are embracing a hierarchy of imagination. To effect transformational change many in charge need to 'learn to forget' or perhaps more critically 'remember how to learn'.

### 3. Discussion

Covid-19 is first a human tragedy, and we are witnessing, through the VLL, universal human values of love, purpose, and connectivity uniting us. Family, friends, and community have come to the fore. Such has been the impact of the pandemic that any previously timeless belief can be questioned and being transformed. Social media empowers the individual, and public and private enterprise leaders alike need to increasingly monitor what people think is important to them or become irrelevant and/or dismissed.

Health and well-being have moved up everyone's agenda along with reflection on happiness and life satisfaction. Concerns about mental health, economic ills as we come out of the pandemic need to be addressed head-on, since we see that everyone is now thinking more about themselves; Myself. Significantly, this is not being selfish but a new view of self-determination, self-discovery, and self-assessment. The pandemic did for some, release some chains, and demanded people find a different balance. Working from home, for example, had a material and immediate impact for many (male) workers being given more flexibility. Paradoxically, it did place additional pressure on women in their CFO (Chief Family Officer) role.

Questioning what is truly important to people includes how they can create a voice, for themselves and like-minded. It can give confidence but also changes the nature of Personal Confidence and the nature of the metric of being self-assured. Hofstede's (2001) seminal work showed significant differences on the individuality dimension especially between Japan (score of 46 on individualism) and the west (cf UK- 89 one of the highest individualist scores).Perhaps for some in Japan, with the pandemic, we are beginning to see the rise of a new sense of positive individuality to help drive necessary change in Japan?

Identifying the on-going narratives with utility readily enables one to 'engage with engagement' being credible and relevant as the narrative evolves. It overcomes one of today's key concerns that data and information (dis-information / mis-information) are increasingly everywhere. Insight is all too rare. for insight goes beyond information to discern underlying truths. The basis for successful innovations lies in activating the invisible latent expectations of people; expectations that are subconscious, vague and perhaps only being experienced embryonically. As the Japanese strive for increasing their quality of life in a super-aging country, where macro economic statistics demonstrate there is significant underconsuming, so one can hypothesise that there is no lack of latent expectations.

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