

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a red beanie, a white face mask, a grey coat over a striped shirt, and black leggings, is walking a light-colored dog on a leash. She is holding a black smartphone in her right hand. The background is a blurred park setting with trees and grass. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple and blue gradient.

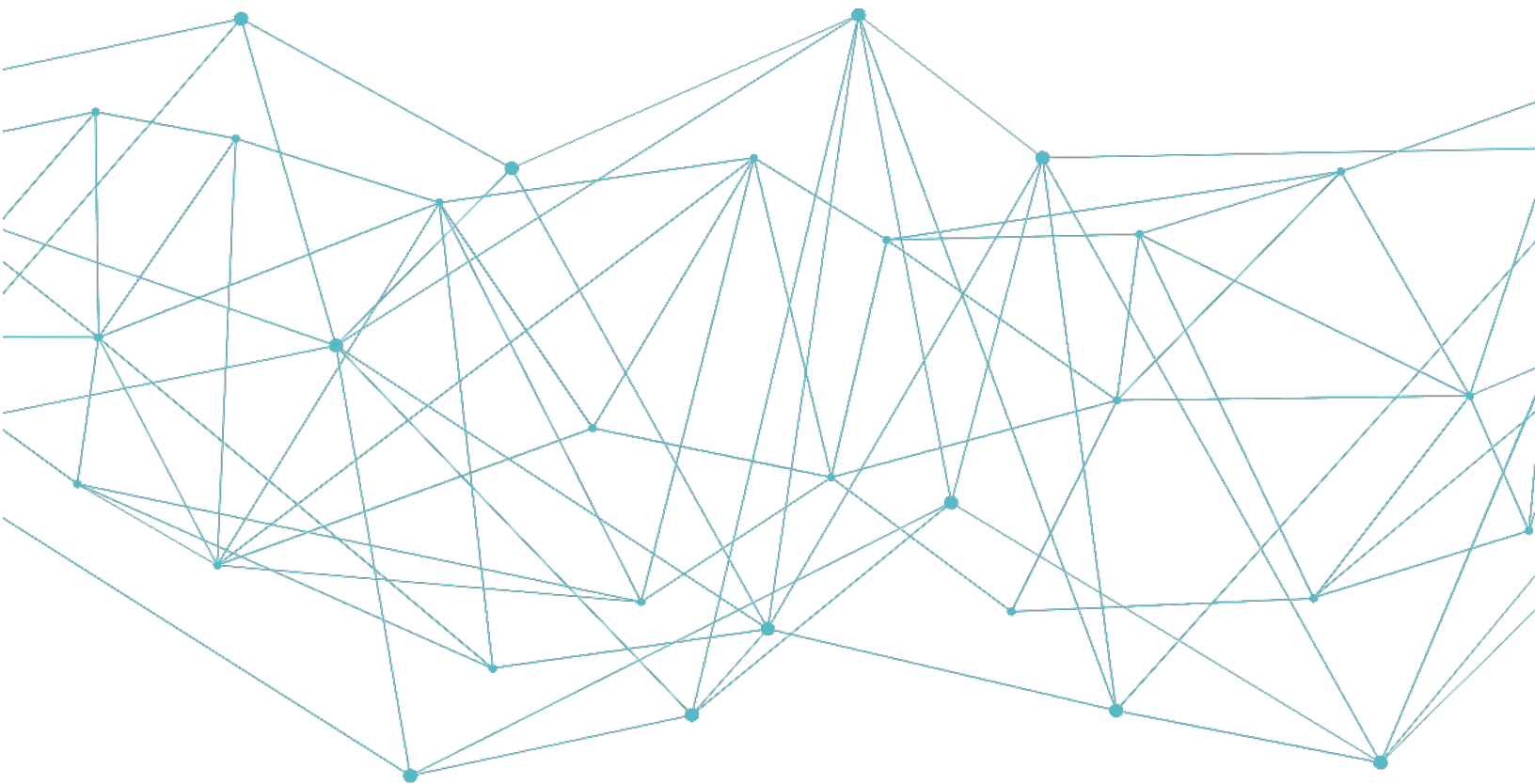
Pandemic Personas: Novel Segments For a Novel Time

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Pandemic Personas

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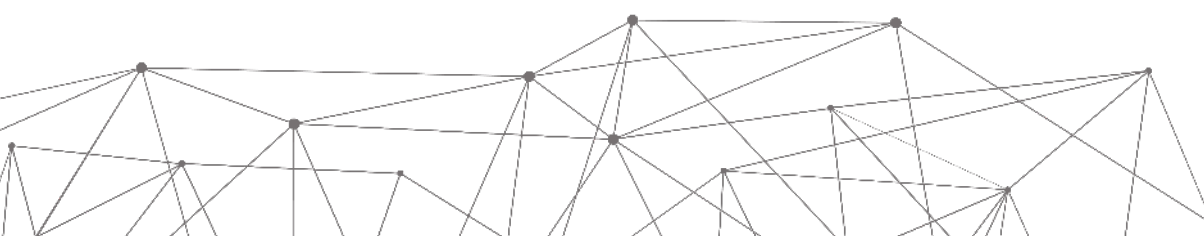
INTRODUCTION

What we believe, and how we feel, have a direct influence on the ways in which we behave. Psychologists have long known that behaviors do not simply appear without an anchoring schema or heuristic. These mental shortcuts are both adaptive and necessary to move through our information-rich world, and within our technology-saturated sensory systems. When something novel arrives in our own personal worlds, our brains attempt to make sense of this new information by drawing upon existing cognitive structures to anchor this new experience.

But when the pandemic hit the United States in early March of 2020, no one actually had an existing mental schema (or shortcut) for this global event, because, in reality, none of us alive today have ever lived through a global pandemic before. It was, and is, truly a brand-new experience. In the absence of such scaffolding, how were we supposed to feel and react? The information around “best practices” changed moment-to-moment, leaving most of us to wonder how we were supposed to follow the ever-shifting safety guidelines.

Initially, many people denied that what we were told to expect would, in fact, occur. Whereas others prepared for the worst and experienced a clear surge of fight or flight. Their sensory systems were flooded with the emotional and physiological fallout of mental “what if” scenarios, alongside primal, brain-stem-sponsored “protect” and “conserve” cues. Indeed, everyone had some sort of feeling about the pandemic. Those feelings ultimately motivated what came next: general protective behavior, conservation of personal resources, stocking up on (or stockpiling of) household and survival necessities.

But what exactly were people feeling? How were their protective behaviors aligning with their emotional responses? What types of resource conservation were people engaging in, and how did any of this implicitly inform what people did and did not purchase in the weeks and months following the initial arrival of Covid-19? These are all questions we aimed to answer.



PANDEMIC PERSONA CREATION

Our primary intention with this research was to discern the cognitive framework that was actively being created during this novel time in all our lives. Leaning upon the repeated finding that attitudes provide a backdrop and springboard for our behaviors, we approached the process of segmentation creation with the hypothesis that one's emotional response to the pandemic would predict their day-to-day protective behavior. Further, we anticipated that the combined force of these two mechanisms would be highly informative of other personal and lifestyle behaviors and actions.

Utilizing our proprietary research and analytics process we created a unique segmentation scheme culminating in four COVID personalities, which we have termed: Pandemic Personas. The four Personas are listed below (see Table 1) along with some defining characteristics of each.

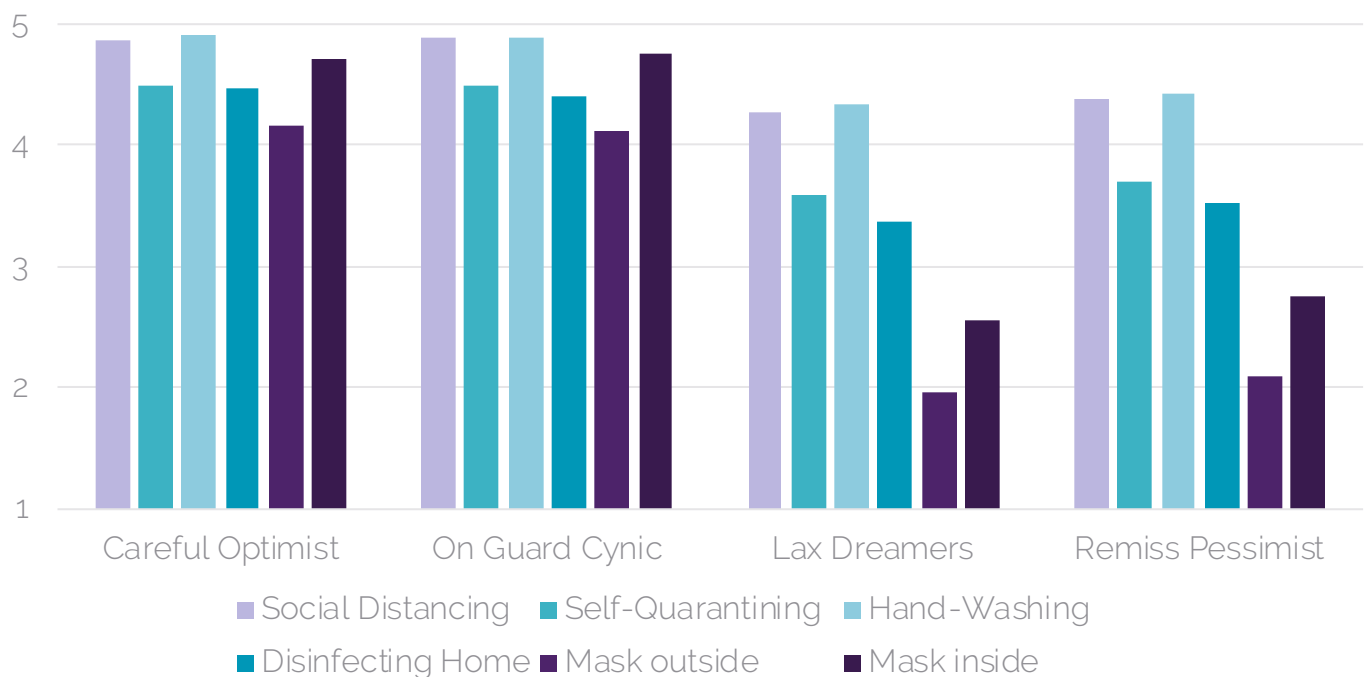
TABLE 1 : Pandemic Personas

	% Pop.	Gender (F / M)	Avg. Age	Politics (D / R)	Emotional Response	Protective Behavior
Careful Optimists	22%	67% / 33%	69	65% / 19%	Positive	High
On-Guard Cynics	28%	73% / 36%	47	75% / 8%	Negative	High
Lax Dreamers	28%	34% / 65%	61	14% / 60%	Positive	Low
Remiss Pessimists	22%	18% / 82%	44	23% / 38%	Negative	Low

SAFETY & PROTECTIVE PROFILE

Graph 2 provides details on the pattern of protective behavior for each of the Pandemic Personas. We can immediately see that social distancing and hand washing are the top safety behaviors that all segments report engaging in with consistency. The distinction between Personas emerges when assessing Home Disinfecting and Mask Wearing (both inside and outside). Lax Dreamers and Remiss Pessimists are significantly less likely to report engaging in these behaviors on a regular basis relative to their more cautious counterparts.

GRAPH 2 : Safety Precautions



Graph 2: Survey respondents were asked to rate the frequency with which they've been following the recommended safety guidelines for each behavior showed above. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1=never, 5=always). Values along the y-axis represent the average frequency by Pandemic Persona.

COPING BEHAVIOR

Given the monumentally stressful and anxiety provoking time we are collectively in, having outlets to process and work through those difficult emotions is paramount. Graph 3 outlines the coping behaviors reported by each persona segment .

Approaching this data, we hypothesized that those with the most negative emotions would report utilizing coping behaviors more often than those with positive emotions, but the data below only partially support our expectations.

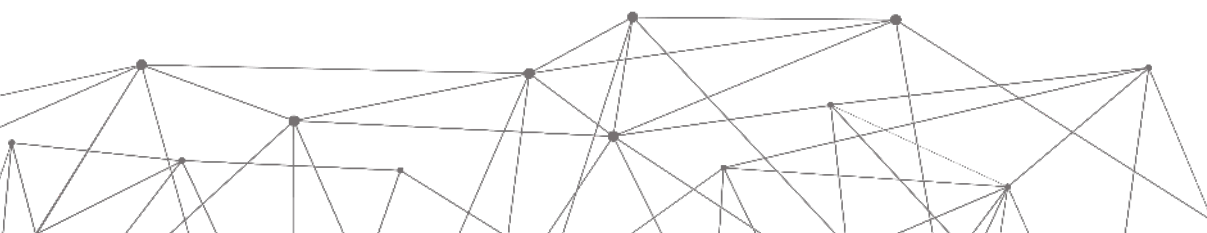
First, the Creative or Fun coping behaviors are the preferred coping outlet by all segments, followed by the Self-Soothing category, then Physical, and finally the Self-Reflective. Second, although we expected coping frequency to primarily be driven by negative emotionality the data does not support this assertion. Instead, what we find is that coping behavior is motivated primarily by protective behavior inclination. For each category, the two high protective groups (Careful Optimists & On Guard Cynics) are accessing each coping category with the greatest frequency, relative to the low protective personas. A data trend suggesting that coping strategies are serving as a form of

protective behavior for more safety-minded people.

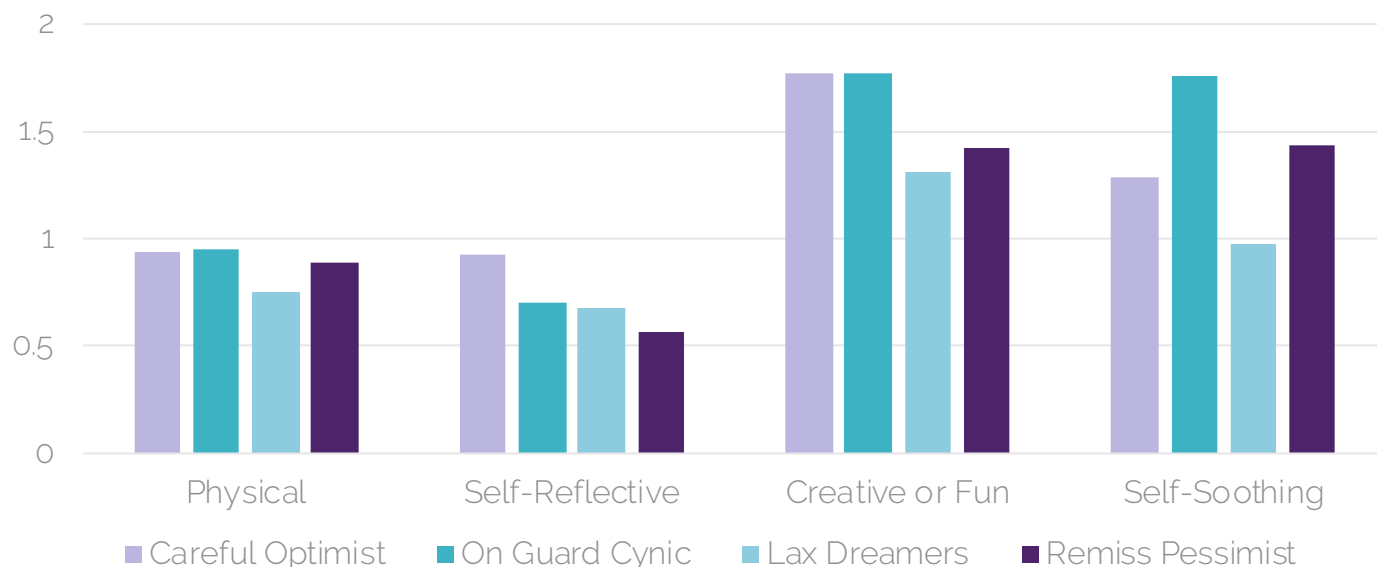
Most interesting of all the coping categories is the Self-Soothing set of behaviors. It is here that we can see where negative emotionality begins stand out, because this is where our two negative emotion groups (On Guard Cynics & Remiss Pessimists) surge forward in frequency over their positive emotional counterparts. This trend suggests that momentary escapism is a preferred outlet when finding oneself in a negative emotional space.

Coping Behaviors included in each Coping Category are listed below.

- Physical: walking outside, exercising via in-home equipment or streaming classes, yoga,
- Self-Reflective: meditating, journaling, therapy, prayer, religion or spirituality,
- Creativity or Fun: reading, writing, painting, crafts, listening to and playing music,
- Self-Soothing: drinking alcohol, cleaning, eating.



GRAPH 3 : Coping Behavior



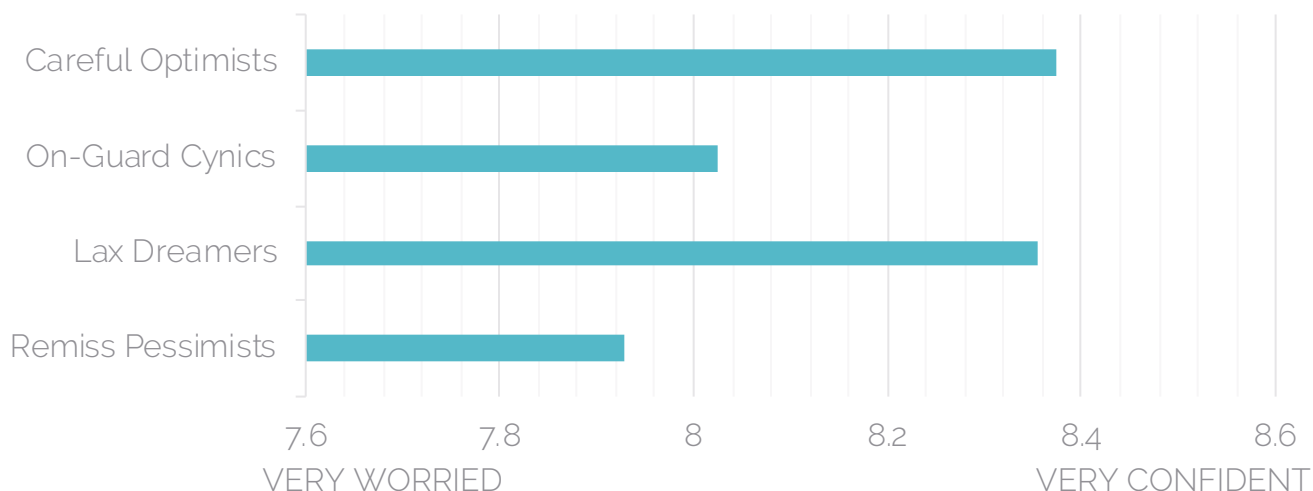
Graph 3: Survey respondents were asked to rate the frequency with which they have engaged in a series of coping behaviors. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1=never, 5=daily). Coping behaviors (listed below) were then grouped into the four categories shown in the graph above. The y-axis represents the average frequency of each behavior category by Pandemic Persona.

FINANCIAL WELLBEING

When we turn toward Financial Wellbeing from within the Pandemic Personas framework, we begin to see another interesting effect. The highest confidence scores appear to be driven by the two positive emotion groups - the Careful Optimists and Lax Dreamers. Leaving the most financially concerned to be comprised of the two negative emotion groups - the On Guard Cynics and Remiss Pessimists (see Graph 4).

Even more curious, is that when probed deeper, it is the On Guard Cynics and Remiss Pessimists who have the highest overall wealth (at 34% and 17% above the national average, respectively) compared to the Careful Optimists and Lax Dreamers (at 10% and 36% below the national average, respectively). These data suggest that despite one's actual financial stability, an overarching negative emotional mindset drives the perception of financial instability; and a positive emotional outlook reflects back a sense of confidence in your financial future even in the face of less financial resources, comparatively.

GRAPH 4 : Financial Wellbeing

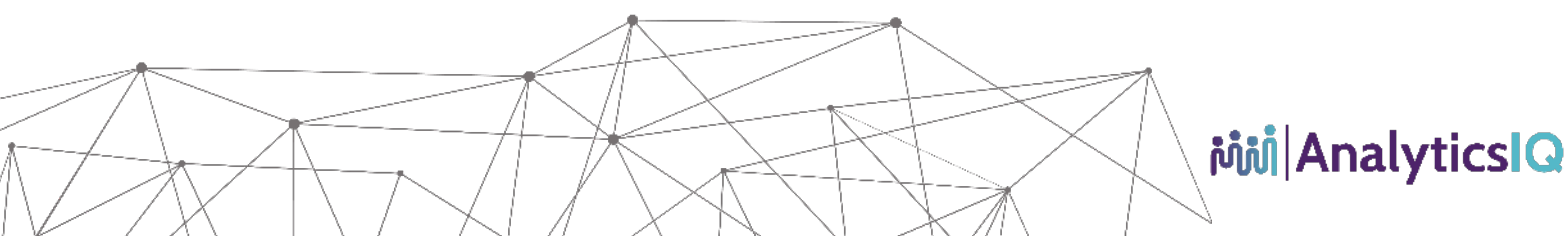


Graph 4: Survey respondents were asked to subjectively rate their confidence and concern for their current and future financial wellbeing. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not at all confident/concerned, 5=extremely confident/concerned). The x-axis represents a composite score for the financial assessment items by Pandemic Persona.

The demonstration that emotion profile seems to contribute to one's financial outlook (and perception of the abundance or scarcity of your personal resources) is also informing real-time, big ticket purchases, as well as charitable contributions. Follow-up analyses reveal that having a positive emotional mindset significantly increases the likelihood of making a charitable donation, as well as the donation amount (more positive emotions lead to higher donations). Whereas a negative emotional mindset is more predictive of expensive, impulse purchases, such as vehicles.

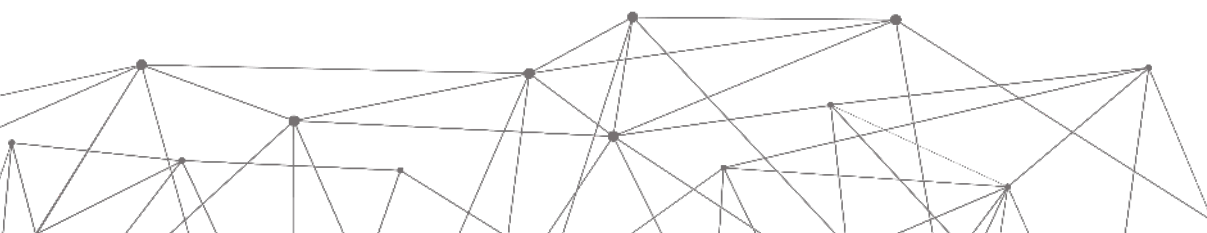
CONCLUSION

At this remarkably uncertain time in our lives, and in our collective history, we approached the current research hoping to gain an understanding of how people were subjectively experiencing and restructuring their individual lives as a result of these completely novel circumstances. By assessing emotional responsiveness, adherence to safety guidelines, alongside a series of other lifestyle behaviors, we created a replicable set of consumer segments that distinguish the anxious from the hopeful; the planful from the lackadaisical; and the steady from the haphazard. See below for a summary of each unique profile within our Pandemic Persona segmentation.



SEGMENTATION SUMMARY

- The Careful Optimists have structured a new mental scaffolding framed upon both caution and hope. We see caution exercised in both their emotional outlook, as well as their financial forecasting and recent expenditures. They have seemingly anchored themselves into faith and trust and are coping with difficult moments accordingly.
- The On Guard Cynics have structured a new mental scaffolding framed in trepidation and protectiveness. There is an overall sense of fear which is culminating in the stockpiling of physical and financial resources to create a safety net or bubble of protection.
- The Lax Dreamers have structured a new mental scaffolding framed in large part by the old scaffolding. For these folks, there appears to be a sense that everything will be fine and that all they need to do is to proceed, business as usual, with the least cumbersome modifications to one's lifestyle. They are the least likely to have the need to self-soothe which is consistent with their overall emotion profile.
- The Remiss Pessimists do not appear to have really or fully formed a new scaffolding at all. In fact, the framework from which they are functioning within is the loosest and least-boundaried of all the segments we studied. They fail to find themselves tethered to a sense of deep personal wellbeing, religious faith or trust, or any other measurable anchor point. This segment appears to throw caution to the wind, functioning on emotional whims, and the brief satisfaction of moment-to-moment needs and desires.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah Cavrak, PhD is a Psychologist, and the Director of the Cognitive Sciences Department at AnalyticsIQ, Inc. She has spent 20 years studying the psychological underpinnings of human behavior and is primarily interested in understanding the intersection between motivational dynamics and decision outcomes.