

# Navigating Societal Transformation: A Holistic Approach to Lifestyle Balance in a Post-Pandemic World - Lessons from the Virtual Living Lab (VLL)

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## ABSTRACT

*The global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a profound reassessment of societal norms and structures, urging a collective reimagining for regeneration. While diverse governmental responses emerged, existing paradigms proved inadequate for the challenges posed by this new reality. The pursuit of sustainable and resilient growth now stands as an urgent priority across both public and private sectors. However, the pandemic's impact on equality, diversity, economic stability, and political dynamics has reversed positive trends and heightened uncertainties, amplifying long-term mental health concerns.*

*This Research Note explores the shifting priorities of individuals amid these turbulent times by examining pivotal lifestyle narratives within the Virtual Living Lab. Spanning the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic eras, it reveals the limitations of exclusively top-down approaches in fostering societal rejuvenation. Instead, it emphasizes the critical need for bottom-up solutions, empowering individuals to enhance their happiness and well-being. Striking a delicate balance between personal fulfillment and collective aspirations emerges as a pivotal theme for fortifying societal resilience.*

**Keywords:** Interconnectivity, Narratives, Engagement, AI, Big Data, Empowerment, Classification, Utility, Transformation, Timeless, Social Stability. Well-Being

## INTRODUCTION

Our interconnected world amplifies the significance of context, with social networks serving as integral parts of daily life. They offer a wealth of data illuminating human interactions, evolving behaviors, and the formation of social structures based on values and interests. The authenticity inherent in social sharing renders it a more credible means of communication than traditional mass media, reflecting genuine concerns. Yet, effective and empathetic communication in diverse contexts demands adept utilization of communication science methodologies. Despite the wealth of information, individuals often feel less informed due to challenges in discerning trustworthy sources.

Employing online content for behavioral analysis provides a more authentic representation compared to surveys or

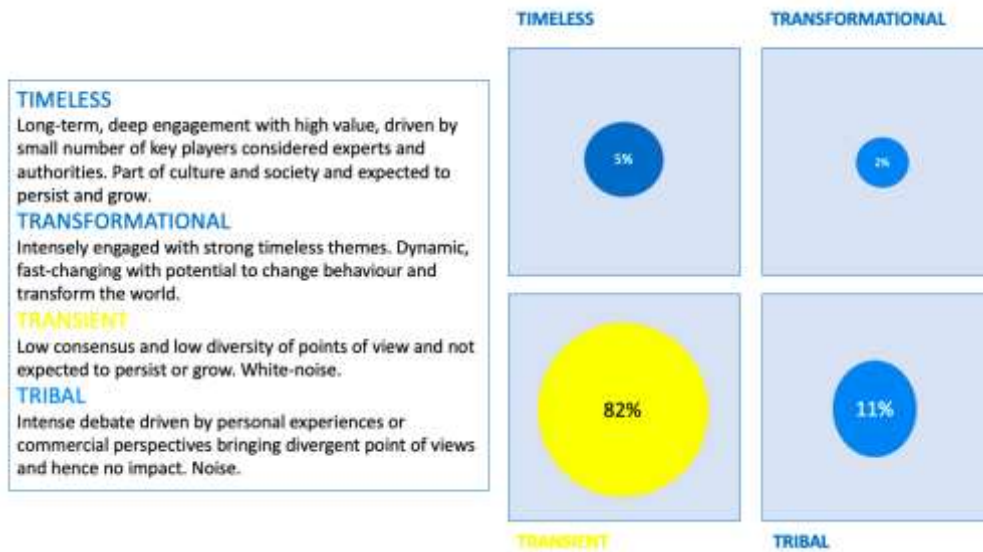
interviews. This approach captures genuine sentiments and opinions, presenting an opportunity to comprehend, influence, and steer behavior by identifying pivotal social and linguistic signals.

Leveraging AI to analyze openly shared online content enables an understanding of its impact on behavior. This methodology unveils the pivotal topics, triggers, and media channels influencing diverse outcomes and their evolution over time. Additionally, it extends beyond sentiment analysis, measuring the emotional impact of content, culminating in the creation of a Virtual Living Lab (VLL) mirroring genuine societal behaviors (Beaumont & Ricketts, 2020). By identifying and describing prevailing narratives, we categorize them as timeless, transformative, or transient based on their utility (Figure 1). Amidst unprecedented change, listening to authentic public concerns, rather

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than enforcing manufactured perspectives, is pivotal. Establishing credible connections

becomes essential, given people's trust in voices within their networks.



**Figure 1.** Narrative Engagement Classification

The pandemic has unveiled common global concerns like health, transparency, and sustainability, crucial for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly affecting marginalized communities. This crisis spotlighted economic disparities and frail social safety nets, intensifying the suffering of vulnerable groups. Moreover, COVID-19 highlighted the indispensability of technological and scientific innovation for crafting sustainable solutions.

### ENGAGING WITH ENGAGEMENT

The internet serves as a hub for human interaction and reactions, reshaping our online world. Stories and social media significantly influence societal values and actions. Embedding ourselves within these narratives enhances the clarity and impact of our messages while allowing us to manage our image effectively. Identifying and characterizing these influential stories across various platforms enables a comprehensive understanding of public sentiment and engagement. Shiller (2019)

underlines the profound effect of self-told stories on behavior and their potential to instigate global change.

The LifeStyle by Design Research Unit at the University of Tokyo initiated the VLL in June 2019 to track health-related narratives. This approach curated diverse yet focused insights, avoiding the noise of ubiquitous narratives (Figure 1). The comparative analysis between Japan and the UK highlighted global and local narrative discrepancies.

Twelve rounds of research spanning pre, during, and post-COVID-19 periods have been conducted until June 2023. These rounds capture the online spread of COVID-19, reflecting shifts in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. By understanding societal sentiments, this research aids policy formulation and evaluation, empowering leaders amid volatile times. Our VLL contextualizes ongoing narratives, facilitating informed engagement for leaders. Focusing on existing robust narratives and user experiences has proven instrumental (Table 1).

**Table 1.** User Experience

Analysis	Rationale
1:Engagement Classification	✓ Assessing opportunities to embrace Timeless and Transformative narratives
2: Affect Orientation	✓ Understanding emotional responses of the narratives
3: Media Power	✓ Identifying and ranking influential media
4: Content Power	✓ Assessing the potency of individual content pieces
5: Emotional Response	✓ Grasping market sentiment / emotional tone of the significant content
6: Relationships	✓ Leveraging interconnectivity of topics and emergent themes for credibility and relevance

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Most existing AI initiatives focus on content devoid of context or emotion. Our methodology entails examining all online sources in Japan and the UK up to the research date, devoid of temporal constraints.

This paper specifically delves into narratives regarding social stability and well-being in the UK and Japan.

**KEY FINDINGS**

In the first wave of the VLL, most of the narratives in both the UK and Japan (Table 2), were timeless (Beaumont & Ricketts, 2020). Only the My Resilience narrative in Japan was transformational (Table 3). The pandemic caused people to question basic societal elements that had long been accepted as givens; timeless societal constructs became transformational.

**Table 2.** VLL Timeless Narratives

Timeless Narratives		
Wave	Japan	UK
19-Jun	Well-Being, Leisure Time, Personal Friendship, Personal Happiness, Personal Activities, Personal Satisfaction, Personal Confidence, Personal Confidence, Wellness, Social Stability, My Community	Being Employed, Economic Growth, Leisure Time, Motivation, My Community, My Family, My Free Time, My Resilience, Personal activity, Personal Confidence, Personal Employment, Personal Friendship, Personal Happiness, Personal Life Balance, Personal Relationships, Personal Wealth, Social Stability, Well-Being
19-Dec	My Community, Personal Satisfaction, Wellness, My Family, Personal Activity, Social Stability, Leisure Time, Well-Being, Personal Happiness, Personal Relationships	Motivation, Wellness, My Community, Leisure Time, Personal Relationships, Being Employed, Social Stability, Economic Growth, Well-being, Personal Activity, My Resilience, My Family, Personal Confidence, My Free Time, Personal Happiness
20-Apr	Well-Being, Personal Satisfaction, Leisure Time, Personal Activities, Personal Confidence, Personal Relationships, Wellness, Personal Happiness, Being Employed, Personal Friendship, My Family, Social Stability	Motivation, Wellness, Personal Employment, My Free Time, Leisure Time, Personal Relationships, My Community, My Family, Being Employed, My Resilience, Personal Wealth, Economic Growth, Personal Confidence, Personal Activity, Well-Being, Personal Happiness, Social Stability, Personal Optimism
20-Jun	My Family, Personal Relationships, My Free Time, Wellness, Well-Being, Leisure Time, My Community	Motivation, My Free Time, Wellness, My Resilience, My Community, Leisure Time, Personal Employment, Being Employed, Well-Being, My Family, Economic Growth, Personal Confidence, Personal Happiness, Personal Wealth, Personal Activity, Personal Relationships, Personal Satisfaction
20-Dec	Personal Bonding, My Community, Well-Being, Personal Activity, Personal Relationship, Leisure Time, Personal Satisfaction, Wellness	Motivation, Wellness, My Community, Leisure Time, Being Employed, My Free Time, Personal Relationships, Economic Growth, Personal Activity, Personal Wealth, My Family, Well-Being, Personal Happiness, Personal Confidence, My Resilience, Personal Life Balance
21-Jun	Economic Growth, Well-Being, Personal Satisfaction, Motivation, Health, Leisure Time, My Community, Personal employment	Motivation, My Free Time, Wellness, My Resilience, My Community, Leisure Time, Personal Employment, Being Employed, Well-Being, My Family, Economic Growth, Personal Confidence, Personal Happiness, Personal Wealth, Personal Activity, Personal Relationships, Personal Friendship
21-Aug	Personal Satisfaction, Personal confidence, Personal Wealth, Healthy Food, Leisure Time, Well-Being, Health, Plant Based Food, My Community, Personal Employment, Personal Bonding (& Transient), Personal Happiness, Personal Employment, Animal Based Foods,	Motivation, ESG, My Free Time, Healthy Food, Food Sustainability, Wellness, My Resilience, My Community, Leisure Time, Personal Employment, Being Employed, Well-Being, Plant Based Food, My Family, Economic Growth, Personal Confidence, Personal Happiness, Personal Wealth, Personal Activity, Personal Relationships, Personal Friendship, Personal Optimism
21-Dec	My Community, My Resilience, Well-Being, ESG, Personal Life Balance, Healthy Food, Personal Relationships, Personal Happiness,	Motivation, ESG, My Free Time, Healthy Food, Food Sustainability, Wellness, My Resilience, My Community, Leisure Time, Being Employed, Well-Being, Plant Based Food, My Family, Economic Growth, Personal

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	Personal Satisfaction, My Family, My Free Time, Personal Wealth, Social Stability, Health, Motivation, Leisure Time, Personal Wealth	Confidence, Personal Happiness, Personal Wealth, Personal Activity, Personal Relationships, Personal Friendship
<b>22-Jun</b>	My Community, Personal Satisfaction, ESG, Environmentally Friendly Food, Well-Being, Health, Healthy Food, Motivation, Free Time (& Transient), My Family (& Transient)	Motivation, ESG, My Free Time, Healthy Food, Food Sustainability, Wellness, My Resilience, My Community, Leisure Time, Personal Employment, Being Employed, Well-Being, Plant Based Food, My Family, Economic Growth, Personal Confidence, Personal Happiness, Personal Wealth, Personal Relationships, Carbon Efficient Foods
<b>22-Sep</b>	Personal Happiness, Personal Satisfaction, Free Time, Health, Well-Being, ESG, Plant Based Food, My Community	Motivation, ESG, My Free Time, Healthy Food, Food Sustainability, Wellness, My Resilience, My Community, Leisure Time, Personal Employment, Being Employed, Well-Being, Plant Based Food, My Family, Economic Growth, Personal Activity
<b>22-Dec</b>	ESG, Well-Being, Leisure, Personal Happiness, Personal Satisfaction, Personal Relationships, Health, Motivation, Plant Foods, Social Stability, My Community	Animal based foods, Being Employed, ESG, Food Sustainability, Healthy Food, Leisure Time, Motivation, My Community, My Family, My Free Time, My Resilience, Personal Relationships, Personal Wealth, Plant Based Food, Well-Being, Wellness
<b>23-Jun</b>	Well-Being	Economic Growth, ESG, Food Sustainability, Motivation, My Resilience, Personal Employment, Personal Optimism, Personal Relationships, Personal Wealth, Well-Being, Wellness

**Table 3.** VLL Transformational Narratives

Transformational Narratives		
Wave	Japan	UK
<b>19-Jun</b>	My Resilience	
<b>19-Dec</b>	Personal Friendship	Personal Wealth, Personal Satisfaction
<b>20-Apr</b>	Personal Friendship (&Timeless)	Personal Friendship
<b>20-Jun</b>	Personal Friendship, Personal Bonding	Being Employed (&Timeless)
<b>20-Dec</b>	Personal Confidence, Personal Wealth	Personal Friendship, Personal Bonding, Personal Satisfaction
<b>21-Jun</b>	none	none
<b>21-Aug</b>	none	none
<b>21-Dec</b>	none	none
<b>22-Jun</b>	Personal Bonding, Personal Life Balance	none
<b>22-Sep</b>	Personal Friendship, Personal Bonding, My Family, Personal Confidence, Healthy Food, Personal Pessimism, Personal Activity, Individual Nutritional Balance, Social Stability, Personal Relationships, Personal Wealth (&Tribal)	Personal Satisfaction, Personal Wealth, Personal Employment, Personal Confidence, Personal Happiness, Social Stability, Environmentally Friendly Food, Personal Life Balance, Animal based Food (& Tribal)
<b>22-Dec</b>	Healthy Food, Personal Wealth, Personal Nutritional Balance, Personal Friendships, Personal Activism, Personal Bonding, My Resilience, My Family, Personal Life Balance	Personal Confidence, Personal Employment, Personal Friendship, Personal Happiness, Personal Satisfaction
<b>23-Jun</b>	Leisure, Personal Relationships, Health, My Community, My Family, Personal Employment	Being Employed, Leisure Time, My Community, My Family, My Free Time, Personal Activity, Personal Bonding, Personal Confidence, Personal Friendship, Personal Happiness, Personal Life Balance, Personal Satisfaction, Social Stability

This led to much self-reflection and a search for a new sense of self, but not in a selfish way. Our

earlier research note (Beaumont et al., 2023) highlights this phenomenon.

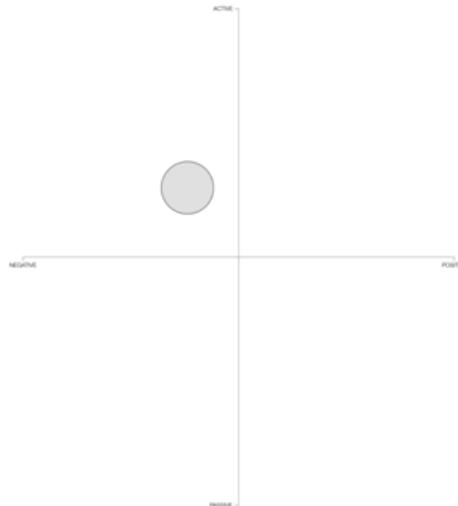
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At the macro level the Social Stability narrative in both the UK and Japan was timeless from June 2019 to April 2020 (Table 2), but by June 2020 such was the impact on daily lives of the pandemic that it was transient, before becoming transformational, in both countries, in September 2022 (Table 3). By the end of 2022, such was the flux in Japan that Social Stability had become transient.

Affect Orientation (Table 1) gauges the extent to which a narrative elicits an emotional reaction, be it active or passive, positive or negative. While many narratives remain neutral, failing to incite any emotional response, others can stir significant feelings. Take, for instance, the state of “Social Stability” in the UK in June 2019 and June 2023 (Figure 1). Although the stability levels remained consistent, the underlying reasons varied greatly. In June 2019, the narrative was active yet negative, fueled by the

uncertainty surrounding the ongoing Brexit debate. Fast forward to June 2023, the narrative remained active and negative, but this time due to the repercussions of COVID-19, economic volatility, inflation, Brexit aftermath, and political uncertainty. Such narratives, characterized by active, negative engagement, tend to polarize opinions. Despite their potential for growth, their long-term influence can only be maximized if they transition from being destructive and oppositional to becoming positive and creative.

In Japan in June 2019 the affect orientation was also the same as the UK, active and negative. The public sentiment at the time was adversely affected, at the macro level, by international relations with South Korea, and low consumer confidence showing individuals were pessimistic about their futures.



**Figure 1.** *Affect Orientation Social Stability UK (June 2019)*

Drawing upon insights from psychological research (Plutchik, 2002), we depict the emotional reaction to the narrative through an “Emotional Wheel”. This wheel serves as a visual representation of the hierarchical structure of emotional connections (Figure 2). The wheel uses color to differentiate between emotions: positive emotions are denoted in green, negative ones in red. If the emotions expressed have a distinct tone, such as anticipation or anxiety, they are illustrated in purple. The intensity of each emotion is conveyed through the depth of the color, while the width of each arc signifies the extent to which the specific emotion contributes to the overall emotional response. Broad, fundamental emotions like fear and love are positioned closer to the center of

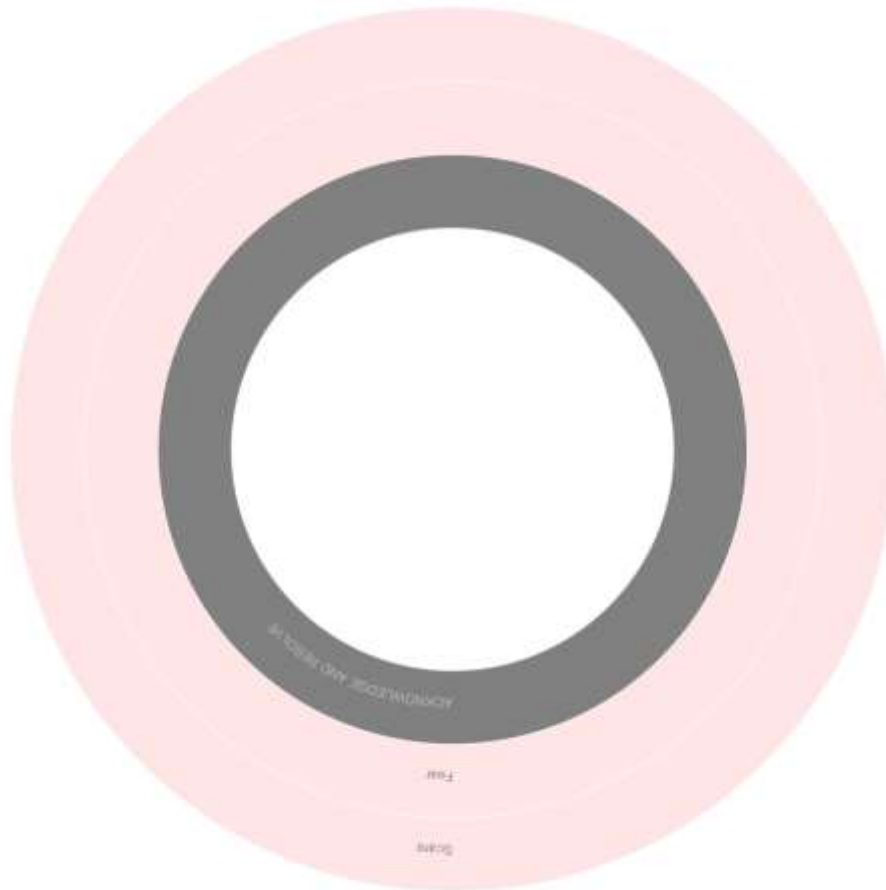
the chart. The more nuanced emotions that feed into these broader feelings are displayed in the outer concentric rings. As you move outward from the center, each ring provides an additional layer of detail. Identifying these primary emotions is particularly crucial during moments of intense emotion, when individuals often react impulsively rather than rationally. This wheel, therefore, serves as a valuable tool for understanding and navigating our emotional responses.

In June 2019, the UK (Figure 2) was dominated by negative emotions related to Social Stability, with distress and anxiety taking center stage. The ongoing Brexit debate, which transcended party lines and divided communities, cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future. This









**Figure 6.** *Emotional Response Social Stability UK (June 2023)*

On a more individual level, the narrative of well-being remained consistent (Table 1) throughout the entire period in both countries, although the content driving the narrative was dynamic. At the onset of the VLL in June 2019 and again in June 2023, the affect orientation in both the UK and Japan contrasted with that of Social Stability. Despite being active, they were positive, thus conveying a sense of delight. However, there was a stark contrast in the evolution of emotional engagement with the well-being narrative when comparing the UK (Figures 7 & 8) and Japan (Figures 9 & 10). In 2019, the emotional response in the UK was predominantly positive, with happiness eliciting joy, and for some, a sense of carefreeness and satisfaction also contributed to this joy. The negative emotions were less pronounced. In Japan, during the same period, the emotional response was largely positive, with happiness

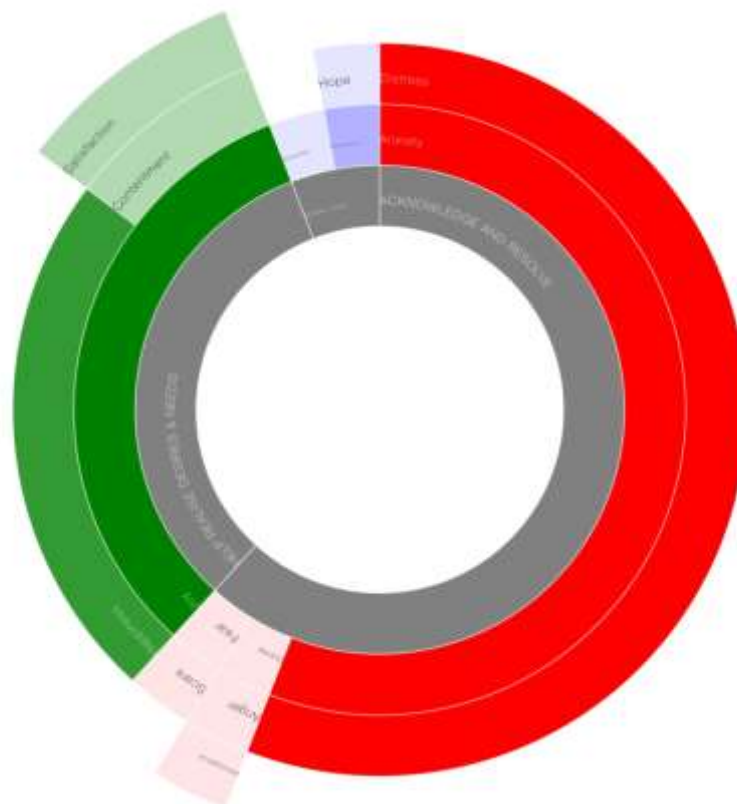
also inducing joy. However, it was also evident that the positive emotions were more diverse, encompassing a greater sense of personal pride and love. By June 2023, the emotional response in the UK had shifted to being strongly negative, with distress causing anxiety. This overshadowed the positive emotions associated with the narrative, where some happiness still created joy. In contrast, in Japan, the emotions were significantly more positive. Beyond happiness and joy, there was a sense of fulfillment and contentment, as well as a greater hope for the future. The key topics driving emotional engagement with well-being in the UK in June 2023 were life, research, and nature. In Japan, during the same period, there was a much more positive sentiment, with the emotional engagement of well-being driven by health and happiness.



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**Figure 7.** Emotional Response Well-Being UK (June 2019)



**Figure 8.** Emotional Response Well-Being UK (June 2023)



## **IMPLICATIONS**

The global shift in priorities toward health, well-being, and redefining personal values has surged despite mounting inequality, mental health concerns, and economic strains. Numerous texts, rooted in scientific principles, offer practical guidance for individuals to craft a balanced life. "Build the Life You Want" (Winfrey & Brooks, 2023) by Arthur C. Brooks stands out, emphasizing pillars like family, friendships, work, and faith for achieving happiness. It amalgamates academic rigor with everyday lifestyle suggestions, resonating with Oprah Winfrey's podcast, reflecting a shared aim to enhance lives.

Similar texts align with this focus, offering accessible daily guidelines without institutional support. For instance, Rubin's (2020) year-long happiness experiment, Peale's (2020) classic on cultivating positivity, Ruiz and Mills' (2020) wisdom from the Toltec people, Achor's (2020) research on positive psychology, and Brown's (2020) guide to embracing authenticity all contribute to this narrative. Unlike seminal scientific treatises on concepts like 'ikigai' (Miralles & Garcia, 2016) and 'positive health,' (Huber, 2016) these texts deliver tangible, relatable insights into well-being and happiness (Clark et al., 2018; Helliwell et al., 2023).

Of these texts, "The 5L's" (LaGreca & Mannix, 2022) stands out for its practical framework, offering daily questions that facilitate balanced living. The pursuit of balance can become habitual, significantly improving one's quality of life and potentially employing gamification principles to positively influence behavior.

However, in the contemporary landscape, social media's potential to amplify distrust is noteworthy, particularly amid political populism. A lack of decisive leadership and short-term thinking during uncertain times exacerbates societal challenges. The pandemic has spurred a yearning for well-being, mental health support, and a search for new ways of life, all while highlighting the importance of genuine care and personalized engagement.

As technology reshapes work environments, the divide between in-demand jobs and obsolete roles widens, elevating secondary jobs or "side hustles" from experiences to economic necessities. Sadly, progress on diversity seems to regress, with resistance to the financial implications of the UN's Sustainable

Development Goals observed in many developed countries.

Support rendered during these upheavals often falls short, intensifying feelings of isolation, particularly in the age of omnipresent social media. This neglect is deemed unacceptable; personalized care and connection are easily accessible. Engaging with like-minded communities can enhance credibility and influence behaviors significantly. It's crucial to monitor and prioritize what individuals value the most.

Strategic leadership narratives that bridge large-scale initiatives with grassroots efforts are pivotal. Addressing negative emotional states through economic and political means remains challenging but essential. Here are thoughtful strategies to consider.

### **Mitigation Strategies**

- ✓ **Mental Health Funding:** Allocate public funding for mental health services and programs.
- ✓ **Healthcare Reform:** Implement policies ensuring better access to mental health care.
- ✓ **Mental Health Parity Laws:** Enact laws treating mental health services equally with physical health services.
- ✓ **Workplace Mental Health Initiatives:** Encourage workplaces to adopt mental health programs.
- ✓ **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Support campaigns to reduce stigma and promote mental health education.
- ✓ **Poverty Alleviation:** Implement economic policies to reduce poverty and income inequality.
- ✓ **Social Services:** Fund services supporting vulnerable populations struggling with various issues.

### **Adaptation Strategies**

- ✓ **Resilience and Coping Training:** Develop programs teaching resilience and coping skills.
- ✓ **Crisis Response Services:** Invest in emergency response services for emotional distress.
- ✓ **Community Support:** Create networks providing resources to those in need.
- ✓ **Counseling Services in Schools:** Ensure schools have mental health professionals available.

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- ✓ **Public-Private Partnerships:** Encourage collaborations to address mental health challenges.
- ✓ **Mental Health Legislation:** Develop laws that protect individuals' rights and dignity.
- ✓ **Data-Driven Approaches:** Use data to inform policies and interventions.

Combining economic and political strategies, supported by evidence-based practices, can foster a healthier society. Reducing stigma associated with mental health issues is integral to these efforts.

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