

REPORT | 2023

# COVID-19 SOCIAL VALUES AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

How are Canadians faring?

**ENVIRONICS**  
RESEARCH

While pandemic rules may be over, many effects of this extraordinary period remain: social and psychological aftermath of many kinds; lingering economic symptoms; new norms around consumption.

**This report, based on analysis of Environics social values surveys explores the current state of Canadians' values and attitudes, paying particular attention to what this unique psychographic framework can tell us about the effects of COVID-19 on the Canadians' outlooks and behaviours.**

# Environics has uncovered seven **Pandemic-Era Social Trends**

1

## **Malaise**

Grounded in feelings of inefficacy and weakened social connections.

2

## **Work**

Diminishing focus on work and sense of professional fulfillment.

3

## **Financial Stress**

Felt across the population, with potential implications for younger generations.

4

## **Ecological Fatalism**

Feeling that the world's environmental problems cannot be solved.

5

## **Duty**

Personal concern for their own well-being and also that of their families and communities.

6

## **Home**

Increased sense of home as a reflection of personal, family and social experiences.

7

## **Consumption**

Increased emphasis on experiences and time with people rather than the accumulation of stuff.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	5
TREND ONE   MALAISE .....	8
TREND TWO   WORK .....	10
TREND THREE   FINANCIAL STRESS .....	12
TREND FOUR   ECOLOGICAL FATALISM .....	14
TREND FIVE   DUTY .....	16
TREND SIX   HOME .....	18
TREND SEVEN   CONSUMPTION .....	20
CONCLUSION .....	22

# Introduction

## About the Study

Although public health officials continue to remind us that the threat from COVID-19 isn't past, many of the rules and habits that defined earlier stages of the pandemic are gone. Large numbers of Canadians are attending live events, back at work, going maskless in public places and establishing their own "new normal."

The Environics Research Social Values measurement system identifies the structure of social values in society and monitors change in those values over time. To this end, Social values have allowed us to measure the many effects of this extraordinary period on Canadians and gives us insights into a person's mental posture or fundamental world view; and they set the context for reactions to situations, events, opportunities or challenges.

This report, based on analysis of Environics social values surveys explores the current state of Canadians' values and attitudes, paying particular attention to what this unique psychographic framework can tell us about the effects of COVID-19 on Canadians' outlooks and behaviours. Environics Research has been measuring Social Values since 1983. Since then, we have compiled the largest database of Social Values trends in North America. Our annual surveys of more than 10,000 Canadians and Americans allow us to track changes in Social Values over time.



# Introduction

## Emerging Trends

Environics analyses have uncovered seven key social values trends connected to the pandemic : malaise, work, financial stress, ecological fatalism, duty, home, consumption.

It's important to keep in mind that association to the pandemic does not equal causation: some changes we observe may be caused by the COVID-19 experience, while others are simply correlated. Similarly, some effects may be short-term and snap back quickly to earlier levels, while others may endure – or even become permanent.

We see general malaise marked by weakened self-efficacy. These feelings of powerlessness may be connected to diminished engagement at work and increased fatalism about environmental problems. Although inflation is likely a factor, increased financial stress may also suggest Canadians are daunted by getting back to “normal” when it comes to work and spending.

Amid these stresses, Canadians are turning to home as a sanctuary and say they're interested in spending on meaningful experiences with people they care about. On the bright side, the pandemic appears to have led to increased feelings of duty. Although wearied by the pandemic, Canadians were consistently willing to sacrifice pleasure and convenience to protect others.



# TRENDS

# Trend One

## Malaise

Perhaps not surprisingly, many Canadians developed a sense of malaise during the pandemic – expressing feelings of disconnectedness, disengagement and pessimism.

Canadians are feeling less able to navigate complexity and more fatalistic about the future, generally feeling a weaker sense of autonomy and efficacy. Factors that might under other circumstances help people feel empowered and hopeful are inspiring less confidence:

- New technologies that sometimes seem like good ways to solve problems and improve life have lost their lustre for the time being; Canadians (perhaps fatigued by spending so much of their lives online) are expressing low Enthusiasm for Technology.
- Non-technical approaches to solving problems – such as Civic Engagement and Community Involvement – also hold weaker appeal at the moment. Indeed, Civic Engagement has declined across all groups except women in Generations X (born 1965 to 1980) and Y (born 1980 to 1995).

With many Canadians feeling worn down and fatalistic, it's not surprising that values like Propriety and Concern for Appearance have sagged. After trying to stay upbeat through sourdough baking and TikTok dance choreography early in the pandemic, many in Canada and beyond ran out of steam – sliding into sweatpants, breaking open the chips and making “goblin mode” the Oxford English Dictionary’s term of the year for 2022.





# Social Values Malaise



## INCREASED TECH ANXIETY

People strong on this construct are intimidated and threatened by technological changes and express high concern regarding the ethical and moral dimensions towards which science is advancing.



## DECREASED COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Measure of the interest in what's happening in one's neighborhood, city, town, or region. Reflected in activities ranging from reading the weekly community newspaper to socio-political involvement in community organizations.



## INCREASED AVERSION TO COMPLEXITY

A desire to keep one's life simple and predictable. People strong on this trend are intimidated and threatened by the changes and complexities in modern life and values. They look for stability and simplicity.



## INCREASED NEED FOR ESCAPE

The desire to regularly escape the stress and responsibilities of everyday life.

# Trend Two

## Work

In the late stages of the pandemic, Canadians are generally less likely to be focused on and finding fulfillment through their work. This is particularly true of Gen Y (born 1980 to 1995) and Gen Z (born 1996-2010), as compared to those who are older and more established in the workforce. This trend is not necessarily driven by the quality of the work experience itself, but by increases in trends such as Anomie and Aimlessness (a feeling of disconnection from society) and Spiritual Quest (an attraction to individualistic inward exploration). In many cases, the pandemic seems to have driven Canadians to look for meaning outside of traditional structures like work and religion and instead to turn to other sources – whether time in nature, intense experiences (from substances to cold water plunges) or deepened commitments to hobbies.

Many seem to be re-evaluating where work fits with their lives in general. This matches recent news on challenges faced by employers struggling to understand and meet employee needs; surprised by the extent of their staffing shortages; and seeking ways to provide greater flexibility while keeping their businesses going. In the face of deep shifts in Canadians' relationship to work – especially in the context of a highly competitive employment market – employers can better attract and motivate employees by understanding and tapping into their deeply held values and attitudes. In particular, employers face much stronger imperatives to make work:

- Meaningful
- Employee-centric
- Collaborative
- Communal



# Social Values Work



## DECREASED FULFILLMENT THROUGH WORK

A need to invest one's professional life with meaning and to find personal fulfillment through one's work. Also, a need to feel that one's work is useful to others and has some social value.



## INCREASED ANOMIE / AIMLESSNESS

The feeling of having no goals in life. Experiencing a void of meaning with respect to life in general. A feeling of alienation from society, having the impression of being cut off from what's happening.



## INCREASED SPIRITUAL QUEST

A desire for an intense spiritual life, contemplating questions of existence and meaning.



## INCREASED ATTRACTION FOR NATURE

How close people want to be to nature, whether to recharge their spiritual batteries or to enjoy a simpler, healthier or more authentic way of life.

# Trend Three

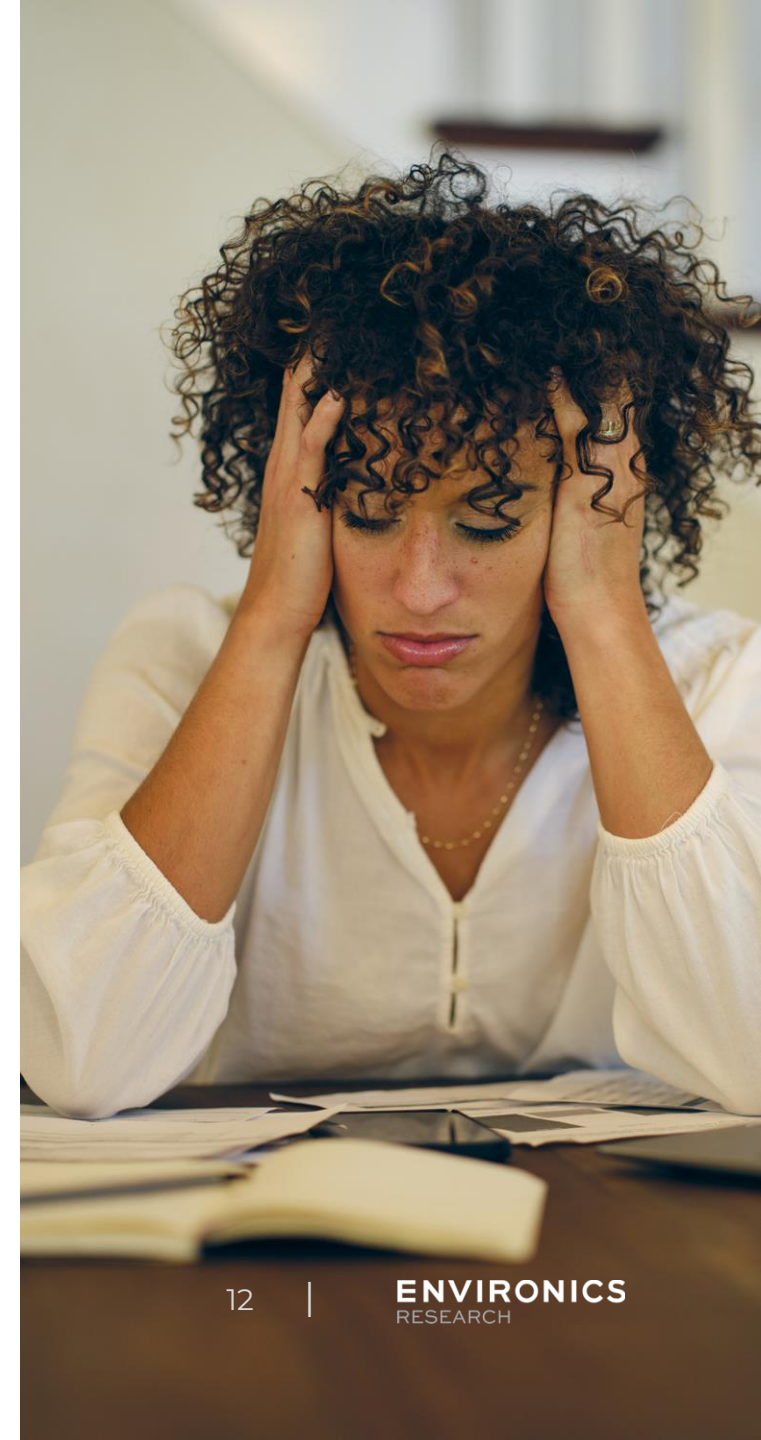
## Financial Stress

Growing Financial Security, a trend that was evident in the years leading up to 2020, reversed sharply during the pandemic. The inverse trend, Financial Concern, increased, attesting to considerable financial anxiety among Canadians as they contemplate the future. Another key financial trend, Saving on Principle, also declined during the pandemic after several years of growth.

What began as a health crisis quickly became a financial crisis for many Canadians as quarantines disrupted the livelihoods of millions of individuals and thousands of businesses. Early remedies like CERB and business subsidies helped, but by 2021/2022, it was clear that some jobs and businesses were not coming back. This upheaval created one of the most widespread shifts in financial concern to date, despite low overall unemployment and high savings rates. For those already feeling financially strained, rising home prices and rents made matters much worse – including in previously affordable areas where “work from anywhere” professionals were snapping up housing.

While values connected to financial stress first began growing during early-2020 lockdowns and associated downturns in many industries, they have persisted even as society has reopened – and are now being exacerbated by inflation and recession fears. Our most recent measurements show that the effects of rising inflation and interest rates have amplified these trends.

Optimism will likely return over the medium term, but outlooks are currently gloomy.



# Social Values

## Financial Stress



### DECREASED FINANCIAL SECURITY

A feeling of security and optimism about one's financial future. A sense of being personally responsible for and in control of one's financial situation.



### INCREASED FINANCIAL CONCERN

The feeling of insecurity about one's financial future, particularly in old age, and of being personally responsible in this area.



### DECREASED SAVING ON PRINCIPLE

The tendency to save and accumulate money, motivated by a moral impulse for future security. A preference for frugality and denial to self of "luxuries". Displaying tendencies towards inhibition.

# Trend Four

## Ecological Fatalism

A sense of Ecological Fatalism has been growing – a feeling of pessimism about our ability to solve environmental problems. This trend is stronger among younger Canadians; it's most notable for members of Generation Z (born 1996-2010), followed by Gen Y (born 1980-1995) and Gen X (born 1966-1979).

A few factors are likely driving this trend. First, economic anxiety is typically associated with a decline in environmental focus as the day-to-day concerns of making ends meet displace bigger-picture priorities. Second, many people feel a lack of efficacy in the face of pervasive suggestions that environmental responsibility rests with individuals (who are told to do everything from recycling to eating less meat to foregoing air travel). Third, there is a generalized Aversion to Complexity among Canadians – with many feeling overwhelmed instead of energized by complex challenges. And finally, the fact that Enthusiasm for Technology is at a fairly low ebb may suggest that fewer Canadians believe that human ingenuity can get us out of the climate crisis.

Perhaps paradoxically, even as Canadians feel more fatalistic over the state of the environment, they are simultaneously expressing a stronger Attraction to Nature and a diminished Attraction for Crowds. Many Canadians reconnected with the outdoors as other forms of recreation became unavailable during the pandemic; could this result in a greater willingness to protect places that gave us solace during a stressful time?



# Social Values

## Ecological Fatalism



### INCREASED ECOLOGICAL FATALISM

People highest on this trend believe that some amount of pollution is unavoidable in industrial societies and accept it as a part of life. They feel that there is little they can do to change this fact.



### DECREASED ENTHUSIASM FOR TECHNOLOGY

Favourable bias toward technology. Tendency to be fascinated with the possibilities offered by modern technology; to believe that technology is the best tool for facing today's world, one that helps us adapt and respond to the demands of daily life.



### INCREASED AVERSION TO COMPLEXITY

A desire to keep one's life simple and predictable. People strong on this trend are intimidated and threatened by the changes and complexities in modern life and values. They look for stability and simplicity.



### INCREASED ATTRACTION FOR NATURE

How close people want to be to nature, whether to recharge their spiritual batteries or to enjoy a simpler, healthier or more authentic way of life.



### DECREASED ATTRACTION FOR CROWDS

Enjoyment of being in large crowds as a means of deindividuation and connection-seeking.

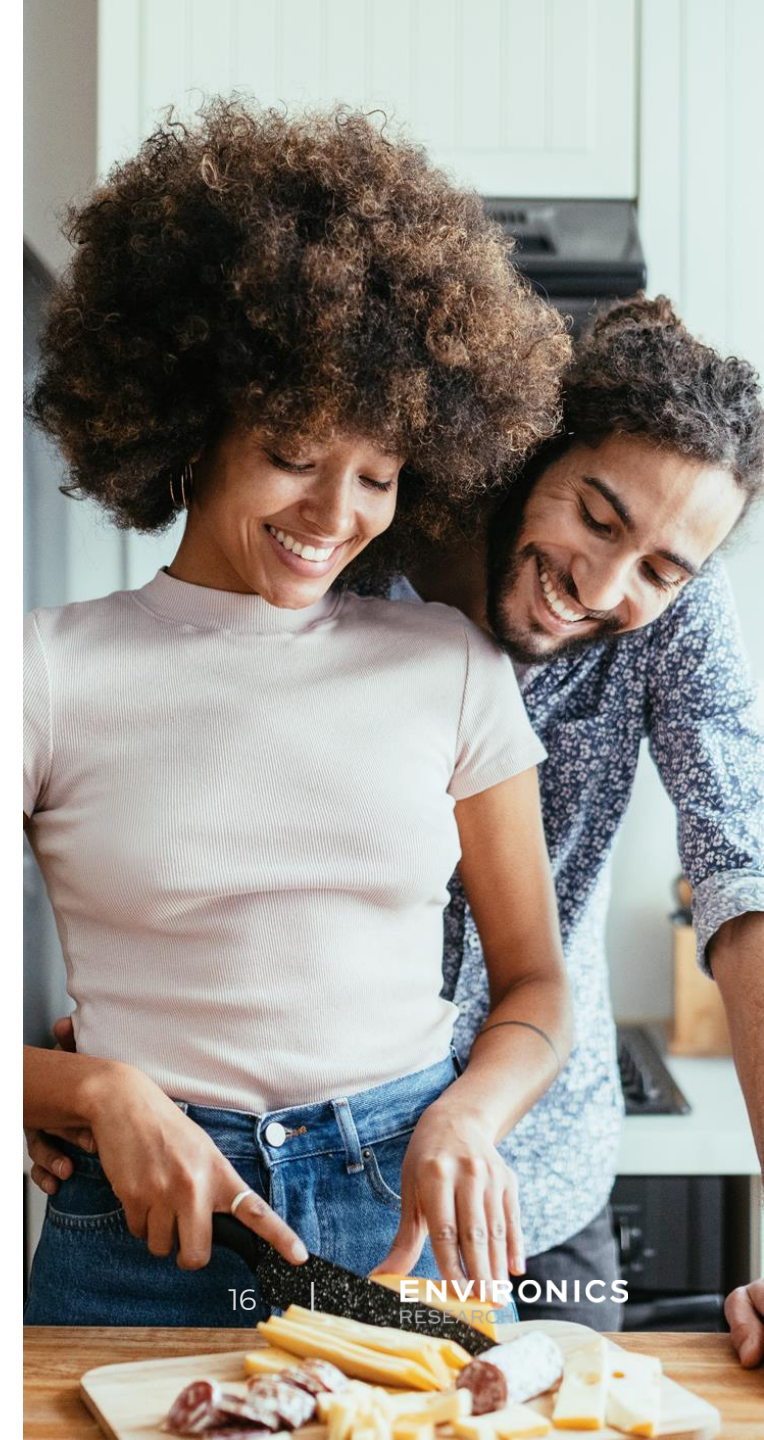
# Trend Five

## Duty

The long-term trend toward the questioning of traditional authority continued throughout COVID-19, but we saw some notable pauses or reversals, likely temporary. First, Duty, which has been in sustained decline, rebounded. Sexual Permissiveness, growing over the longer term, levelled off.

During the pandemic, most Canadians were managing health risks to themselves and others, and limiting their social interactions to keep everyone safe. These efforts reflect an underlying commitment to duty. Meanwhile, dating and even extramarital affairs became riskier propositions with consequences beyond one's own household. The overall trajectory away from deference to traditional authority will likely continue, but it appears that people pay attention and act dutifully – whether that means wearing a mask or foregoing intimate relations for a time – when the situation requires it.

Values research accords with other research findings. The Environics Trust and Readiness Barometer found Canadians placing strong emphasis on public safety during the early pandemic, with 78% saying that avoiding COVID-19 was very important and 70% saying that it was important to behave in a way that protected others in the community. Other findings contradict the claim that confidence in public health authorities declined as the pandemic progressed: we see essentially no change in trust from 2021 to 2022. Attacks on medical experts were loud but not representative of public sentiment; most Canadians found public health guidance credible and were willing to do their duty to protect others.





# Social Values

## Duty



### INCREASED DUTY

Belief that duties and obligations to others should be fulfilled before turning to one's personal pleasures and interests.



### DECREASED SEXUAL PERMISSIVNESS

A tendency to be sexually permissive regarding oneself and others. Fidelity within marriage or between partners and the prohibition of premarital sex are of little importance.

# Trend Six

## Home

Home has taken on increased importance across many segments of the population during the pandemic. This change is reflected in growing scores on the value Status via Home, which measures the extent to which people identify with their homes and want their homes to reflect their status and tastes.

While the meaning of home has shifted for many people, the change has taken different shapes depending on personal circumstances. For those with higher incomes, many of whom had comfortable work-from-home arrangements during COVID-19, home has become even more of a sanctuary. Spending so much time at home has led many to put an even stronger personal stamp there – with new forms of expression, from decoration to renovation to home gyms to “man caves.” Many came to see home as an anchor of both social life and personal quests such as fitness. Meanwhile, as the pandemic exacerbated affordable housing issues across the country, owning a home became an increasingly unattainable status symbol for many. At both ends of the income spectrum (those earning less than \$50,000 and those earning \$150,000+), we saw an increased preoccupation with home.

The focus on home cut across many demographic groups and social values segments. Women in the Boomer and Generation X cohorts scored higher on Status via Home, as did men in the Millennial cohort. Men with children also felt stronger attachment to home – some perhaps reasserting this domestic relationship as commutes and office time diminished. People born outside Canada also showed increased focus on home, perhaps reflecting the struggle many newcomers face in getting a foothold in the housing market.



# Social Values

## Home



### INCREASED STATUS VIA HOME

Feeling a strong sense that one's home represents an extension of one's image. People strongest on this construct make great efforts to decorate and equip their homes in a manner that will impress others, and pay particular attention to the way they entertain in the home.



### DECREASED NEED FOR STATUS RECOGNITION

Desire to be held in esteem and respect by others, and to express one's social standing or aspired status, through a display of fine manners, good taste, style or "chic".



### DECREASED OSTENTATIOUS CONSUMPTION

Desire to impress others and express one's social standing through the display of objects that symbolize affluence.

# Trend Seven

## Consumption

The stress and loss associated with the pandemic had a strong effect on how Canadians relate to consumption. First, we saw a redefinition of what's meaningful and therefore worth buying: consumers were inclined toward relationships and experiences as opposed to “stuff.” When it comes to brands, the pandemic strengthened the appeal of offerings that felt genuine and authentic as opposed to mass-produced: supporting small, local businesses and purchasing craft and artisanal products helped consumers feel they were having meaningful experiences during a stressful time, and helping to sustain real enterprises connected to real people.

The trend toward supporting small, local businesses and more ethical and sustainable modes of production was growing before the pandemic. But as consumers saw local favourites struggle amid lockdowns – and also heard news of the challenges facing front-line workers (some precariously employed by large corporations) – this trend accelerated. While a shift to more thoughtful consumption held satisfactions, there was also an increased attraction (evidenced by growth in values like Joy of Consumption and Buying on Impulse) to consumption as an escape or a treat – a reprieve from daily stresses. This was especially evident among parents. Similarly, attraction to advertising grew across society, perhaps as an outlet for fantasy and aspiration amid the tedium and constraints of lockdowns.

Attraction to ostentatious displays diminished – perhaps driven by a sense that it was unseemly to show off when so many were struggling financially. Young people in particular scored lower on values like Need for Status Recognition and Ostentatious Consumption.



# Social Values Consumption



## INCREASED JOY OF CONSUMPTION

Intense gratification through the purchase of consumer goods (rather than basic necessities). Enjoying consumption for the pleasure of consumption. People who are strong on this construct are often more excited by the act of buying than by the use of the products they buy.



## INCREASED IMPORTANCE OF BRAND

Giving great weight to the brand name of a product or service, a tendency to have favourite brands.



## INCREASED ETHICAL CONSUMERISM

Willingness to base consumer decisions on the perceived ethics of the company making the product (whether management treats employees fairly, cooperates with governments that do not meet ethical standards, or uses testing methods that involve mistreatment of animals).



## INCREASED CONFIDENCE IN ADVERTISING

Tendency to trust and use advertising as a source of reliable information. Also, a tendency to identify with the fashions and the role models promoted by advertising and the consumer society.

# CONCLUSION

# Conclusion

## Varying Severity

Like the virus itself, the pandemic was more severe for some than for others. While Canadians on the whole weathered the pandemic fairly well, experiences varied widely – with some experiencing much more stress and hardship than others – and the recoveries of households and businesses are similarly varied. In social values, we see notable differences in Canadians' life outlook, sense of purpose, time stress and other dimensions late in the pandemic. These differences are, in turn, affecting consumer confidence and spending; relationships to others; self-care practices; health; and work-life balance. On the whole, women and Canadians with lower incomes have been more negatively and lastingly affected.

One example of variations in Canadians' pandemic experiences: Adaptability To Complexity is a value that reflects people's sense that they're capable of adapting to – and even finding opportunity in – the changes and uncertainties of modern life. In the earliest days of the pandemic, Canadians actually registered stronger scores on this value, feeling able to confront and navigate the challenges ahead. Scores on this value declined in 2022, likely driven by fatigue. Declines were especially sharp among Generation X (a segment in mid-life, perhaps worn down by juggling a combination of caregiving and work responsibilities) and among Canadians with lower incomes (likely feeling battered by work stress, housing affordability and general inflation).



# Conclusion

## Recovery Plans

Leaders should craft recovery plans with an awareness of the variations in Canadians' pandemic experiences and recoveries.

Many leaders have expressed a desire to “build back better” in the wake of the pandemic – and commentators have warned against the danger of, in the phrase of Toronto Star columnist Alyshah Hasham, “building back bleaker.” Some segments of Canadians are feeling overwhelmed – both psychologically and financially – and less able to exercise control in their daily lives. Although governments are winding down emergency financial measures connected to the pandemic, it’s worth contemplating what other forms of collective engagement might help more Canadians regain a capacity to look forward with a sense of optimism and control.

In order for Canada to emerge from the pandemic as a strong and prosperous country, it will be critical not to leave groups behind. Canada’s “new normal” should be one that enables as many people as possible to participate and recover. Policy-makers, brands, employers and others need to understand differences in Canadians’ pandemic experiences in order to support a smooth transition into the final stages – and eventual conclusion (however gradual) – of this period in our collective life.





# About The Study

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