



Values, multi-crisis and the 'uncertainty complex'

Against a backdrop of increasing uncertainty and change, human values are a persistent truth that brands can leverage to strengthen relationships and drive growth, says Steven Johnson of WPP's BCW

Human values serve as 'guiding principles in life'. They influence everything we think, feel and do, and express what we believe is important in life. Once formed in adolescence, they remain relatively stable throughout adulthood and influence decisions across all life domains.

As a stable and persistent truth, values provide security and guidance: a rare source of certainty against the unpredictable backdrop of multi-crisis.

For brands, a renewed focus on these fundamental principles could help improve consumer resilience and wellbeing, whilst presenting fresh opportunities to earn attention, deepen engagement and build loyalty

In 2022, BCW undertook one of the largest ever global studies of human values to investigate this hypothesis – the '[Age of Values](#)'. Working with the world's leading values academics and researchers, we engaged 36,000 consumers across 30 markets and built a database of over 30m data points.

Rethinking values

Over recent years, the role of values as a driver of brand development and business growth has developed rapidly. Organisational values are central to ESG, brand values a key source of differentiation, and the lasting impact of the pandemic forced many of us to re-evaluate our own personal values.

However, what is lacking across this discourse is consensus on what we actually mean by values and an evidence-based understanding of how they influence behaviour.

To create a systematic framework for the robust application of values in the context of multi-crisis, BCW adopted the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values (Figure 1) as the foundation for our research and application. Regarded as the most reliable expression of human values available, the 'Schwartz Wheel' has been validated by countless studies.

Re-thinking values though a systematic framework allows brands to leverage audience values in a more consistent, structured and scientific way.

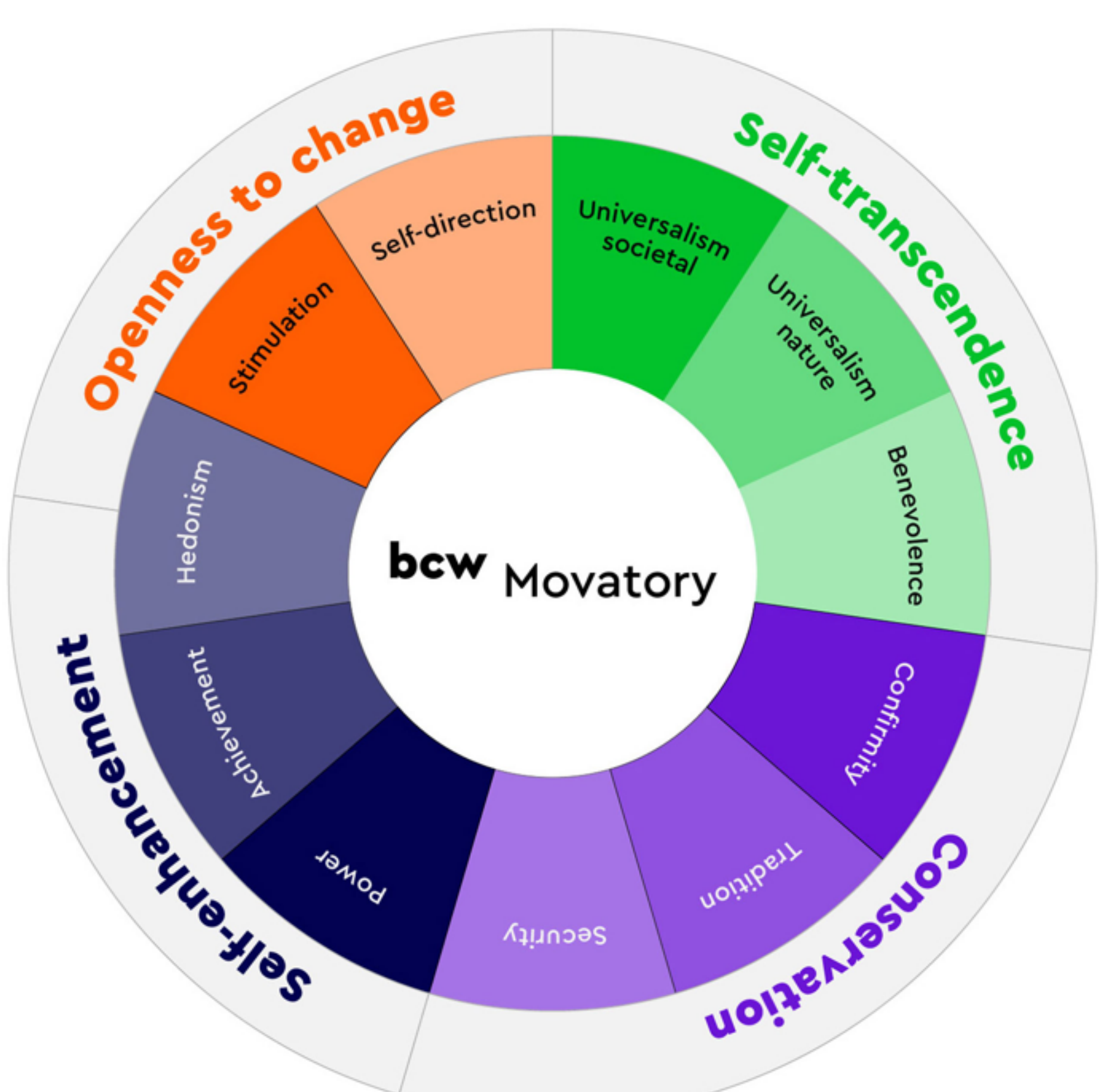


Figure 1: Schwartz Theory of Basic Values

Rethinking motivation

Our values are inextricably linked with our emotions, identity and morals and play a central role in all respected theories of human motivation. Whilst values are rarely the only thing influencing behaviour, our research showed that consumer values can predict behaviour up to twice as accurately as traditional demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, geography).

Amidst the uncertainty that defines this era of multi-crisis, consumers will increasingly rely on their values to guide decisions and behaviours.

Rethinking motivation in terms of values allows brands to tap into the deeper, foundational drivers of consumer behaviour to improve how we influence choices and build relationships despite the era of crisis we are living in.

Rethinking segmentation

Traditionally, audience segmentations tend to be demographic, attitudinal, needs-based, behavioural, or a combination roughly labelled psychographic. Statistical analyses of our dataset identified seven human archetypes based on 11 core human values captured by Schwartz:

Value archetype	Most important values
Success seeker	Achievement, power, hedonism
Adventurer	Hedonism, stimulation, self-direction
Visionary	Self-Direction, universalism-societal, universalism-nature
Protector	Benevolence, universalism-societal, universalism-nature
Good neighbour	Benevolence, universalism-societal, security
Traditionalist	Security, tradition, conformity
Conformist	Conformity, achievement, power

Rethinking segmentation in terms of values archetypes allows brands to cluster audiences into meaningful groups that will remain stable through the flux that the multi-crisis brings.

Rethinking generations

For decades, generational cohorts have been the primary lens through which brands define and understand their audiences. Our ongoing obsession with 'Gen Z' suggests this tendency shows no sign of waning.

However, in line with recent work from other leading research institutes, our study questions the validity of these arbitrary categories. When looking at the generations through the lens of values, there is significant variation within generational cohorts when it comes to their most fundamental drivers.

For instance, while nearly 30% of Gen Z fall within our 'success seeker' archetype, driven by achievement, power and hedonism values, a further 20% are 'good neighbours', motivated by very different values: benevolence, universalism-societal and security (Figure 2).

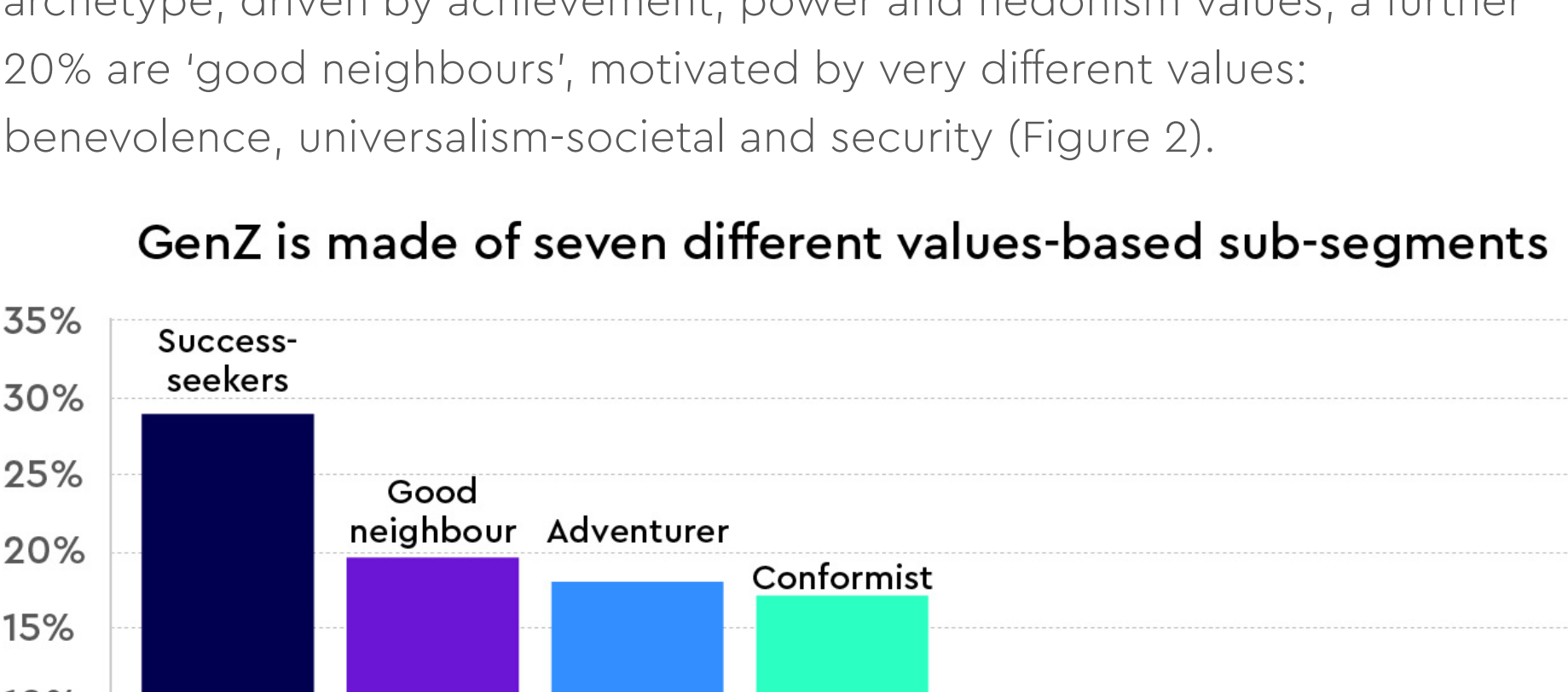


Figure 2: Values archetypes within Gen Z

Rethinking generations in terms of values allows brands to take a more refined approach to targeting and tailoring, ensuring that we respect and reflect the complexity of the multi-crisis context and the important differences that create diversity within age-based cohorts.

Rethinking behaviour

Our study took a deep dive into consumer behaviour in relation to climate change, one of the defining crises of our time. Looking at pro-environmental behaviours through the lens of values unearthed critical insights that would otherwise have remained hidden.

For instance, we found that, while climate change behaviours strongly correlate with the universalism-nature value at a general level, the purchase of electric vehicles is more strongly associated with achievement and stimulation.

This means that, for many the purchase of electric vehicles has little to do with concern for the environment and is more likely to be driven by a desire for exciting experiences and a need to signal one's success and status within society (Figure 3)

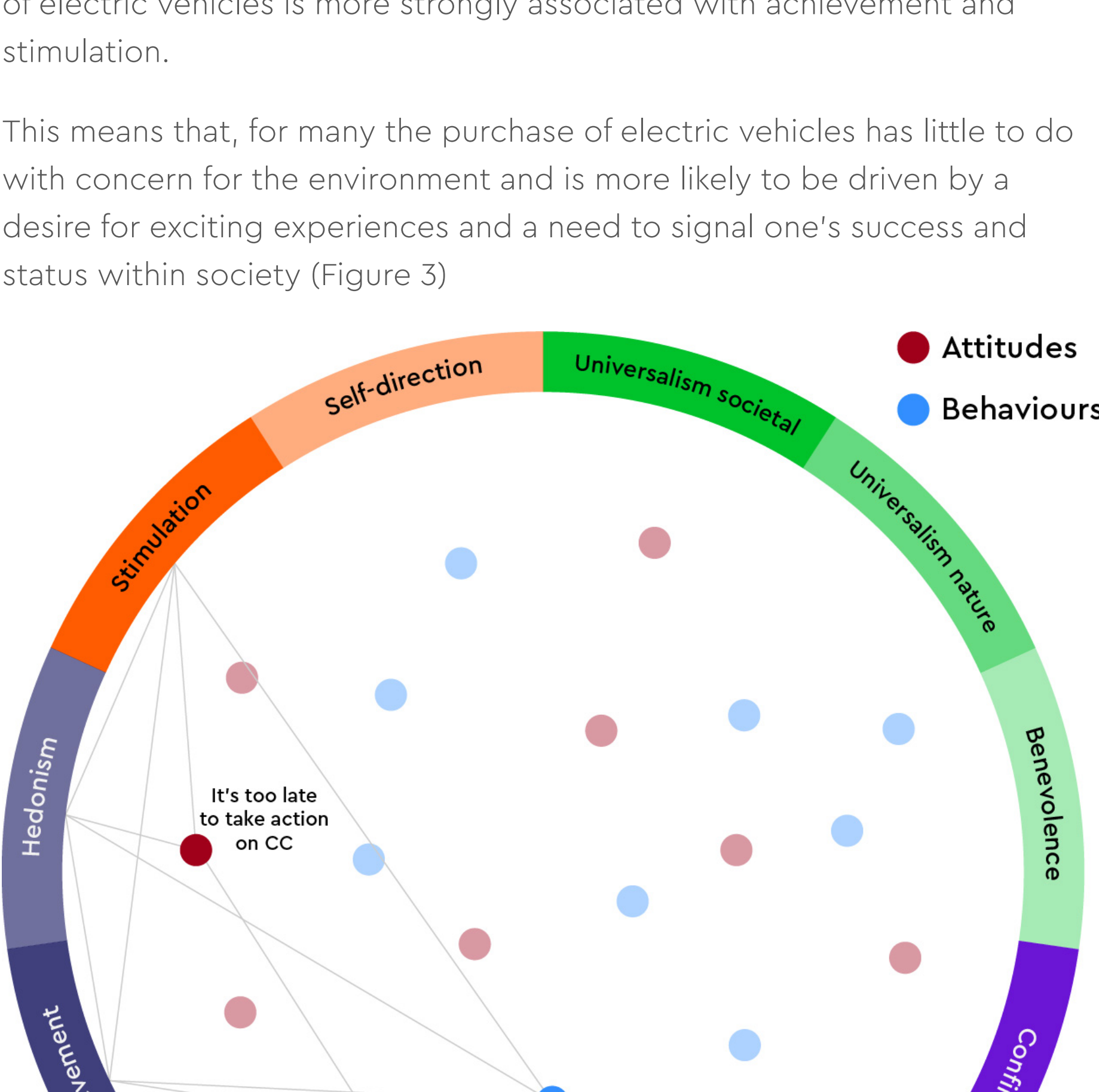


Figure 3: Analysis highlighting key attitudes (in orange) and values (around the circle) that influence electric vehicle purchase.

Rethinking consumer behaviour in terms of values will allow brands to unearth critical behavioural insights that would otherwise remain hidden amongst demographic characteristics and enduring assumptions.

Rethinking the role of brands

Value-behaviour congruence – living life according to values – correlates with higher levels of well-being. However, a majority of consumers find it difficult to make values-based choices in their day-to-day lives. As the pressures of the multi-crisis intensify, this values-behaviour gap will become increasingly pronounced.

This creates the potential for a powerful new role for brands in the lives of their consumers. Going beyond using values to engage and influence audiences, brands can develop communications, initiatives, products and services that actively help consumers make value-congruent choices – to live a more values-based lifestyle and benefit from the associated improvements in health and wellbeing.

Rethinking the role of brands in terms of empowering consumers to make values-based choices could be a catalyst for innovation and new opportunities to forge deeper, more meaningful relationships with audiences.

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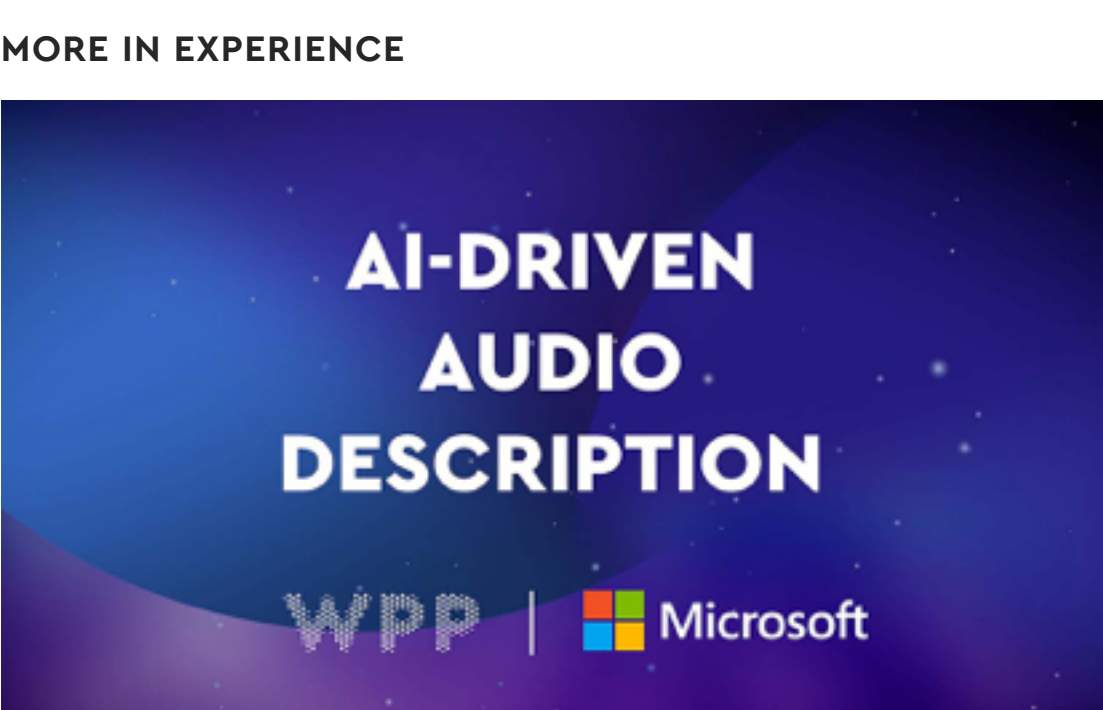
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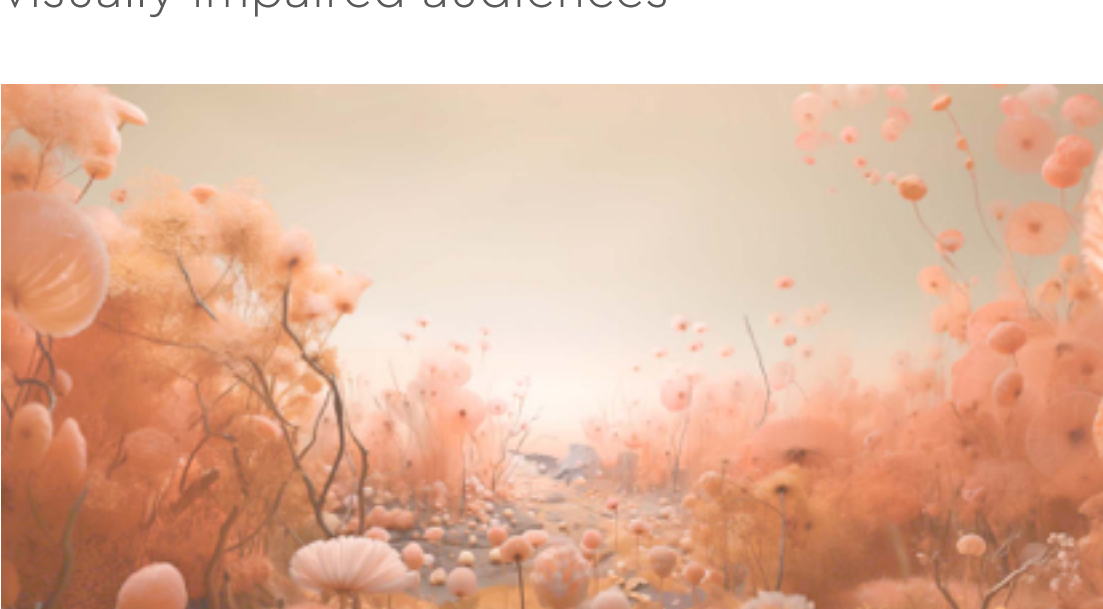
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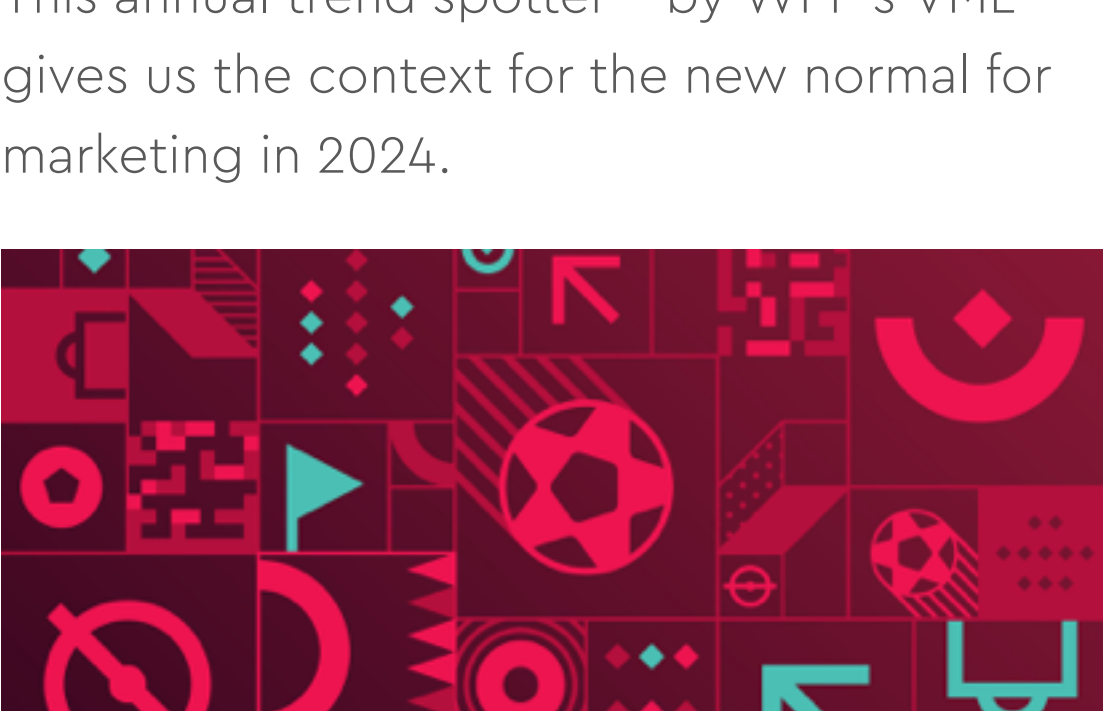
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