

# The Sentient 26 Emotional Taxonomy

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AN EMOTIONAL MOTIVATION FRAMEWORK  
FOR UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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# Introduction & Background

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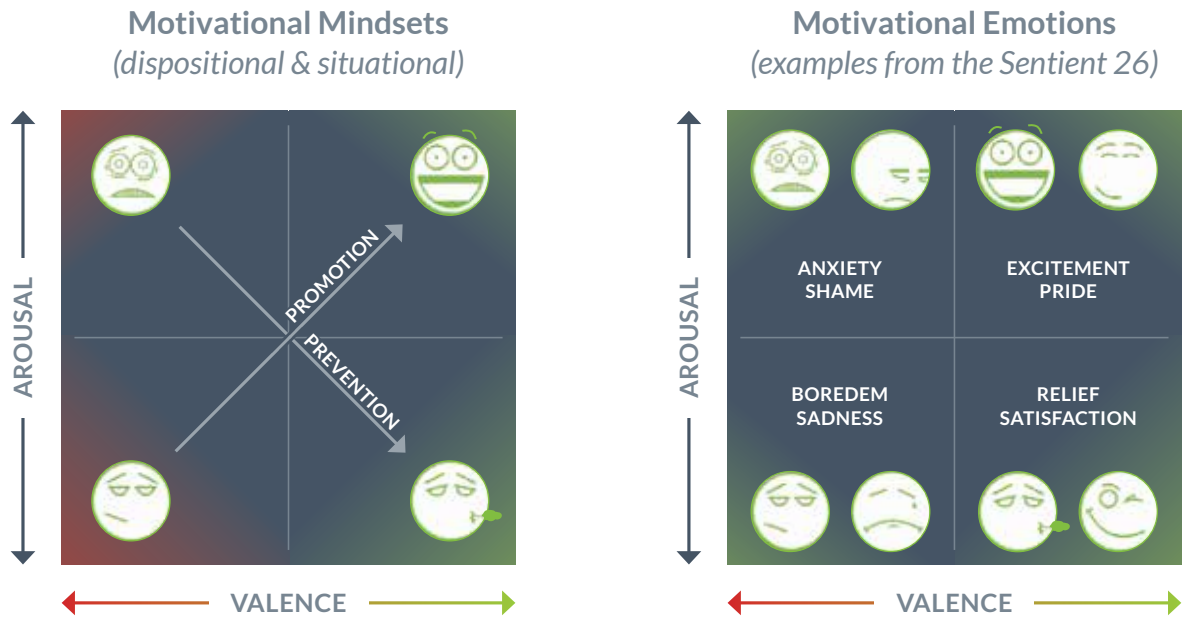
Sentient has developed an emotional taxonomy that goes beyond the seven basic emotions to characterize 26 distinct emotions that directly impact consumer behavior. The Sentient 26 taxonomy is founded in the latest academic research on the universal nature of human emotional experience drawing from the work of Paul Ekman, Antonio Damasio, Jonathan Haidt, Jaak Panksepp and Joseph LeDoux among others who have developed classification systems of emotional experience and expression. Through thousands of studies, and more than 50 million individual measures of implicit, subconscious associations, Sentient has identified a subset of emotions that have demonstrated consistent measurement properties and have shown strong predictive accuracy of consumer choice.

Furthermore, the Sentient emotional taxonomy is grounded in a fundamental human motivational framework called Regulatory Focus. This fundamental human motivational perspective provides a simple, powerful framework for identifying which emotions are relevant for each of motivational mindset (represented in the four quadrants below).

The framework specifies that people have traits that are concerned with safety and security which motivate them to avoid losses (relevant motivational emotions include anxiety, fear etc.) and approach non-losses (relevant motivational emotions include relief, calmness etc.).

The framework also specifies that people have traits that are concerned with achievement and advancement which motivate them to approach gains (relevant motivational emotions include happiness, elation etc.) and avoid non-gains (relevant motivational emotions include sadness, boredom etc.).

In all, Sentient has specified 26 motivational emotions that are directly tied to consumer behavior. These Sentient 26 emotions are easily characterized according to the prevention versus promotion mindset, which makes marketing execution clear at strategic level while simultaneously providing the discrete emotion detail needed for compelling creative execution.



To illustrate, for a brand that offers safety the prevention mindset (e.g. ADT) safety and security concerns are highly motivational, indicating that the relief of fear or guilt will be primary emotions driving brand choice. When we contrast this against promotion related motivational emotions such as satisfaction, excitement or pride, it becomes apparent that while these emotions may influence decision making to some degree, the impact is not likely to be greater than the prevention related emotions.

The implications for market positioning are profound. If the research reveals that the alleviation of guilt and fear is two to three times as important in determining brand choice than the pursuit of emotions such as satisfaction, excitement or pride, then the positioning will focus primarily on the

attributes and benefits of the brand that evoke the prevention oriented emotions.

This clarity in emotional expression by the brand helps differentiate from the competition. This empowers brands to own universal emotional landscape positioning, thereby appealing universally to any person experiencing the relevant target emotion, as opposed to the crude cutting of market segments by blunt demographic descriptions. This cuts across demographic profiling, naturally capturing those within a target demographic who are more likely to be motivated by the target emotions, while simultaneously capturing those in other previously excluded demographic segments who also feel these human universal emotions but may not fit the demographic profile.

## There are four primary advantages of using the Sentient 26 taxonomy for consumer research:

### **1 DISCRETE EMOTIONS ARE DISTINGUISHABLE** *(such as guilt, embarrassment and fear).*

This provides a stronger platform for differentiating brands and greater precision in marketing execution than simply using physiological measures of general emotional engagement.

### **2 THE MEASUREMENT TECHNIQUE IS IMPLICIT**

Sentient Prime™ implicit research technology uses the Sentient 26 taxonomy as default emotion measures. Thus, when implemented through Sentient Prime™ the data is not susceptible to the can't say/won't say bias that plagues most solely explicit emotional research approaches.

### **3 THE DATA IS QUANTITATIVE AND BASED ON REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLING**

This allows Sentient to build highly predictive statistical models of how emotional response combines with rational considerations to determine consumer choice. The results provide a cross-cultural bias free measure of emotional associations with brands, products, packaging and advertising.

### **4 CONSUMER EMOTIONAL RESPONSE IS GROUNDED IN A MOTIVATIONAL FRAMEWORK**

By quantifying the degree of each discrete emotion within a regulatory focus motivational framework, the Sentient 26 taxonomy tells marketers not only which emotions are most relevant, but also which goals those emotions are helping consumers achieve.

In each of the following four sections, the discrete emotions of the Sentient 26 are briefly described. For more information on each emotion, to see examples of how these emotions come to life in marketing, and to learn how to apply each emotion to your brand contact Sentient Decision Science @SentientInsight or speak to your primary account executive.

# High Arousal; Positive Valence

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## **HAPPINESS**

A mental state of well-being. Happiness may be felt as a combination of flourishing and contentment, suggesting that happiness may be felt and expressed not only through joy about a particular event or experience, but also through a more general state of positive wellness arising from reflection upon broader topics such as one's life situation, career, family, or purpose.



## **SATISFACTION**

A feeling of pleasure derived from the fulfillment of emotional or physical needs or appetites, or when one's expectations or desires toward a goal have been met.



## **PRIDE**

Involving one's self-respect and personal worth, pride is a feeling of pleasure arising from a sense of personal achievement and can be triggered by praise or through self-reflection. Pride can also be associated with status, to the degree that a person feels they have qualities or possessions widely admired by others.



## **AMUSEMENT**

Also known simply as "good-humored fun," amusement is the pleasurable feeling of enjoyment or funny delight at being entertained. Amusement is often triggered by the unexpected. Trifling in the unexpected can be dangerous given that surprise is an emotion that can vacillate between approach and avoidance behavioral tendencies depending on the valence of the somatic marker. Thus, amusement is best approached through a temporally previous set up for something unexpectedly pleasant.



### SCHADENFREUDE

Pleasure derived from the failure of others. This emotion can be described as a “guilty pleasure” and thus can be followed by a wave of guilt. The degree of arousal of schadenfreude is determined, in part, by the emotional magnitude of the slight that the failing person inflicted against the person experiencing schadenfreude. The greater the perceived slight, the more arousing the experience of schadenfreude.



### EXCITEMENT

A high arousal positive valence emotion, excitement comes from the anticipation of a pleasurable state. The emotion is evoked cognitively prior to an anticipated experience, or during the initial throes of that experience when more of the experienced pleasure lies ahead. Excitement often arises quickly in response to something novel and it can morph into anger or fear if valence becomes negative.



### ELEVATION

Elevation can be experienced as “a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness and compassion.” (Ekman, 2005). Feelings of elevation are positive in valence and moderate to high in arousal. These feelings engender motivation to perform altruistic acts. Elevation can be described as an inspirational emotion.



### WONDERMENT

This emotion incorporates elements of surprise with cusp degrees of ecstasy which balance on the wonder of whether what is being perceived has the potential to be part of the human experience or whether it is just the imaginations of some other worldly (non-touchable, out of reach) physical element.



## ECSTASY

Is best described as a state of bliss or rapture. The most common interpretation of this word goes to a state of sexual throe. This may be the easiest way to access the emotion given our evolutionary track. However, as evolved organisms we have transcended the base to a place of cognitively generated triggers to rapture. This gives rise to the state of ecstasy as being often experienced during moments more generally described as flow (e.g. optimal experience; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

This state can also described as complete encapsulation in the moment, indicating, counter-intuitively, that ecstasy can also be achieved in moments at work (in which we are completely engaged) as well as moments of personal physical pleasure (such as the moments within an athletic experience). Similar to excitement and wonderment, ecstasy is an intense experience, not something one can experience in slight degree.



# Low Arousal; Positive Valence

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## RELIEF

Physical or emotional alleviation (literally, a “lifting”) through the removal of a stressor, pain, or burden often experienced as a feeling of lightness or liberation. Frequently expressed as a weight being lifted of one’s shoulders, Relief is strongly associated with the re-establishment of physical or emotional equilibrium.



## CALM

This emotion, at its essence, is a state of equilibrium - deviated neither in the positive nor negative direction of a point of satiation (either physical or psychological). The low arousal component of calm speaks to its low action readiness potential relative to the action potential that accompanies high arousal emotions.



## CONTENTMENT

This emotion reflects the outcome of a cognitive balancing act between what is, and what could have been, both positive and negative. When a human experiences contentment, it is a reflection of a net positive evaluation of all considered end point outcomes within a defined evaluation frame (e.g. most broad: reflection on life state, more narrowly: reflection on the outcome of a negotiated temporal relationship state). A calming sense of justice. The balmy feeling of the rightness of the state of things.



## GRATITUDE

Gratitude contains elements of relief and is characterized by a thankful recognition of need servicing. A social recognition emotion, gratitude is expressed warmth, approach related gentle smiles, and a readiness to reciprocate. It is borne from the natural indebtedness felt by humans who are engaged in the exchange nature of our universal helping social contract.

# Low Arousal; Negative Valence

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## **BOREDOM**

An unpleasant feeling arising from a lack of interest in available opportunities or from a lack of stimulation, particularly when one expects to be engaged. Boredom most often manifests as a state of listlessness or restlessness and is associated with strong feelings of dissatisfaction.



## **SADNESS**

The emotion sadness is low arousal and negative in valence. It is commonly referred to by terms such as dejection (severe sadness) or depression (a mood or disorder state with greater duration), discouragement, grief etc. Sadness is an action passive emotion and leads to behavioral withdrawal - a lack of engagement. It is commonly felt as a result of the experience of some kind of loss (physical or psychological). Sadness is related to agony, but does not contain the same cognitive protestation.



## **AGONY**

Agony is a temporally immediate emotion felt at the discovery, or palpable reminder, of a significant loss. It is related to sadness in this way, however, agony is a higher arousal emotion than sadness. Agony is coupled with thoughts of protest to the loss (Ekman, 2005) and is severe in nature.

# High Arousal; Negative Valence

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## EMBARRASSMENT

Embarrassment is often coupled with feelings of shame or with fears of negative judgment and rejection relating to an unwanted revelation of an insecurity, flaw, or otherwise private attribute. The qualifying conditions for embarrassment are typically defined in relation to social acceptance, roles, or norms. Embarrassment is a self-referential emotion.



## GUILT

Guilt arises from the betrayal of one's own moral standards and is often coupled with feelings of regret or remorse about a particular action (or failure to act). Guilt can be felt as a disappointment in oneself for having failed to meet an internal expectation or an obligation to another.



## DISGUST

Disgust is a feeling of aversion that most basically arises from the distaste of something ingested orally or nasally. That is, at its most basic essence it is generated by the physical stimulation of the viscera. However, modern humans experience disgust through not only physical ingestion of matter that may harm the homeostasis, but also through the immediate experience or cognitive imagination of social contract violations that are psychologically repulsive.

**A wonderful observation from Ekman 2005, referencing Miller, reveals the interpersonal dependence of disgust:**

*"Someone else's tongue in your mouth can be a sign of intimacy but it can also be a disgusting assault. ... Consensual sex means the mutual transgression of disgust-defended boundaries. ... Sex is only one kind of boundary crossing, involving one kind of nakedness. There are other strippings, exposures, and knowledges upon which intense intimacies are founded, the intimacies of prolonged, close, and loving contact. One thinks of sharing and revealing doubts, worries, concerns; of admitting aspirations, confessing shortcomings and failures; of simply being seen as having warts, weaknesses, and needs..*

.. We could define friends or intimates as those persons whom we let whine to us so that in return we may whine to them, with both parties understanding that such whining is the privilege of intimacy which our dignity and disgust would prevent in the absence of the privilege . . . [L]ove . . . privileges another to see us in ways that would shame us and disgust others without the intervention of love.”

The thought here is that protection, either through mutual exposure, or through the perceived anonymity of the environment (random audience, size of anonymous crowd, or privacy protection) is what enables the expression of otherwise disgusting behavior. This means that there is social component to disgust.



## CONTEMPT

Contempt is related to disgust but includes a cognitive, condescending moral judgment on a behavioral expression that is considered to be volitional. Perceived volition (the opportunity to choose a different course of action) is important for the experience of contempt. For example, the experience of accidentally stepping in dog feces evokes feelings of disgust but not contempt. Volitionally stepping in feces as a manner of humoring oneself, may evoke feelings of contempt in one who feels superior to that kind of judgment.

*“The maximum contempt does not come near the maximum disgust in its strength...I am less certain that contempt is negative; indeed, I believe it feels good to most people to feel contemptuous. We may be embarrassed afterward that we felt that way, but the feelings we experience during the emotion are more pleasant than unpleasant.” (Ekman, 2005)*

Thus, from an approach versus avoidance perspective contempt belongs on the approach side of the map. This is meaningful for marketers who want to inspire specific behaviors through in-group/out-group manipulations. This emotion is relevant for a subset of the most extreme of brand lovers - not only do they want to feel pride, but they may also be attracted to feeling contempt for those who do not ascribe to their values because it reinforces the core essence of their self identity.



## JEALOUSY

Jealousy is an interpersonally evoked emotion. It is moderate to high in arousal and modestly negative in valence. Jealousy is an emotion that we commonly attempt to control through cognitive exercise. While negative in valence, it has distinct approach related action tendencies, which attempt to remove the points responsible for evoking the emotion from other people (e.g. gossiping about the reputation of another person of whom you are jealous).



## ANGER

Most negative emotions elicit avoidance related behavior. For example, guilt and shame induce withdrawal. However, anger is a unique negative emotion that actually induces approach related behavior (i.e. approach to harm). Anger is high arousal and negative in valence, and in a consumer context can incite the spread of negative word of mouth.



## SURPRISE

Surprise arises from the witness of a sudden, rapidly unfolding, unexpected event. Surprise, in and of itself, is a high arousal emotion that is neutral in valence until the outcome of the unexpected event is revealed as positive or negative. The subsequent feeling state depends on the sign of the valence.



## FEAR

Fear, like excitement, is a high arousal anticipatory emotion, however the valence is negative and it contains strong avoidance behavioral tendencies. When feeling fear our heart rate increases and blood flow to the large muscles in our legs increases. These physiological responses demonstrate the action readiness characteristics of fundamental emotions. Fear is instigated by impending pain, physical or psychological. Fear has an action readiness that is distinct from anxiety.



## **ANXIETY**

Anxiety, in contrast to fear, is an emotion felt when the impending experience is more temporally distant, and does not exhibit the same physiological markers of action readiness as fear. Anxiety is an emotion that is motivational along the prevention orientation spectrum. Alleviating anxiety is often the goal of many consumer focused products and services. Feelings of security are an antidote to anxiety and can be provided by services as obvious as a security system or as subtle as a premier brand choice ensuring social acceptance by peers.



## **SHAME**

Shame is a social consequence based emotion. Shame is related to guilt but is higher in arousal, and includes greater withdrawal behavioral tendencies. Shame can be felt when one has engaged in a socially unacceptable behavior, and that behavior is made public knowledge.

To learn more about how emotion is quantifiable and interacts with reason to determine consumer choice, download our white paper Emotion and Rationality.

The image shows a white paper cover on the left and a dark blue background with a green button on the right. The white paper cover features the text "You are in the cookie aisle at the grocery store..." and includes icons for a shopping basket, a scale, a cookie, and a heart. The dark blue background contains the text "Download our white paper on Consumer Emotion & Rationality" and a green button labeled "DOWNLOAD NOW".

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