



THE POWER OF ACTIVATION: THE EFFECT OF IMAGES IN GLOBAL POVERTY CAMPAIGN APPEALS

/ 26 October 2023
// DEL GB Partner Meeting
/// www.developmentcompass.org
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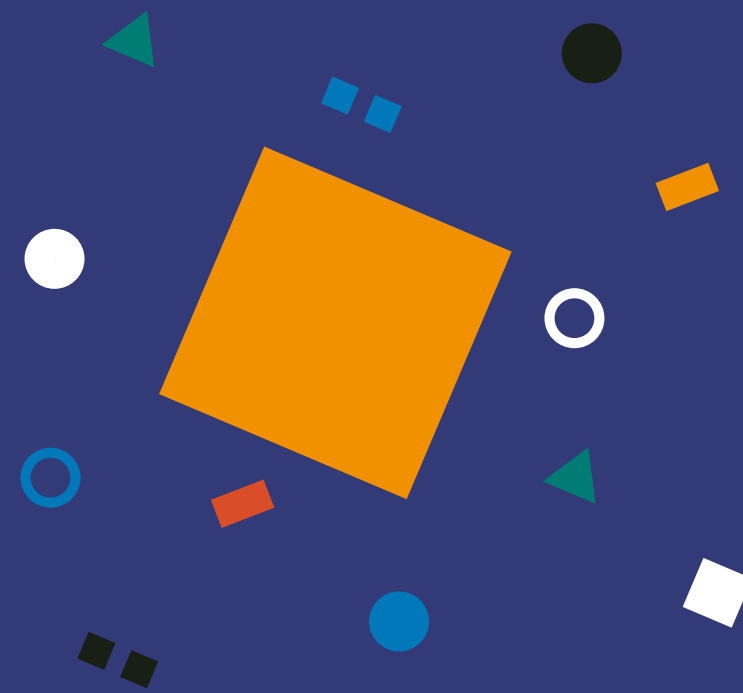
Soomin Oh
Paolo Morini
Felipe Torres
David Hudson
Jennifer Hudson

Thank you!

- This research exemplifies the DEL-Partner collaborative design model we have co-developed over the past 5 years
- Thank you for helping to refine the research question(s) and model, for giving us access to your image banks, and to content/communication managers and photographers who helped us select the 116 images we used
- This research wouldn't have been possible without the help of DEL Partners



DEVELOPMENT TROPES: VIEWS FROM THE BRITISH PUBLIC



How do images contribute to
the public's sense of
connection, progress and
hope?



DEVELOPMENT TROPES: VIEWS FROM THE BRITISH PUBLIC

After 40+ years of development campaigns, how are images used in appeals viewed by the British public?

How does the use of images impact representation and engagement?

- Localisation
- Shifting the Power

Trope - a significant or recurrent theme; a motif

1. Passive victim
2. Solving problems
3. Partnership
4. White saviour

HOW DO DEVELOPMENT IMAGES PLAY OUT IN THE PUBLIC'S MIND OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS..



Which image

- most tired of seeing
- feel most connected to people in image
- most motivated to support UK dev org



MEASURING THE IMPACT OF IMAGES: HOW DO BRITONS THINK/FEEL ABOUT THE IMAGES THEY SEE?

CONNECTION

Please indicate the extent to which you personally feel a ****connection**** with the people you see in the image.

- 0 - 'No connection at all'
- 10 - 'A very strong connection'

HOPE

Please indicate the extent to which you personally feel ****hopeful**** that the world is making progress in ending extreme poverty.

- 0 - 'Not at all hopeful'
- 10 - 'Very hopeful'

FATIGUE

Please indicate comes closest to your view.

- 0 - 'Not at all tired of seeing images like this one' to 10
- 10 - 'Very tired of seeing images like this one'

MOTIVATION

Please indicate the extent to which you feel ****motivated**** to support a UK development organisation working with people like those in the image.

- 0 - 'Not at all motivated'
- 10 - 'Very motivated'

SUSTAINABILITY

Imagine the people in the image five years from today. Please indicate what you think would best describe their lives in 5 years' time.

- 0 - 'They are still ****dependent**** on help and support'
- 10 - 'They are fully ****independent**** in their lives'



VICTIM: PITIFUL, PASSIVE & WITHOUT AGENCY

VICTIM



War, famine, and lack of clean water mean that children like Avi living in the world's poorest countries are suffering through no fault of their own. With your support, Avi can lead a life free of hunger, disease, and suffering. You have the power to save his life - please help today.



SOLVE: INITIATIVE, SKILLED, TAKING CONTROL

VICTIM

SOLVE



Jerome's children love school, but he often doesn't have the money needed for school supplies. But that is not stopping Jerome. He is learning new skills in his farming job that will allow him to earn extra money to support his children's education. Get involved with the development organisation supporting Jerome today!



PARTNERSHIP: LOCALIZATION, CAPACITY BUILDING

VICTIM

SOLVE

PARTNERSHIP



This village needs access to a clean water source. Elias and his community have been working in partnership with a UK organisation to install a new water pump in the village where they live. Once ready, the pump will provide clean water for people to drink and wash with. Please support this partnership today!



WHITE SAVIOUR: RESCUE, LIBERATE, EXPERT

VICTIM

SOLVE

PARTNERSHIP

WHITE SAVIOUR



The school in this village is supposed to offer a place to learn for kids, but it is often closed as there are not enough teachers. Hannah, a UK university student, is stepping up to help. Thanks to her, the school can stay open, and children can go back to learning. Please support Hannah's efforts today.



TROPES PLAY OUT IN MORE AND LESS SURPRISING WAYS

- **Motivation** – Motivation declines with ‘saviour trope’; statistical difference between ‘victim’ and ‘saviour’
- **Hopeful** – ‘Partnership’ trope has highest level of hope. Partnership, saviour and ‘victim’ the lowest. ‘Victim’ trope is statistically significantly lower than the rest of the tropes.
- **Connection** – The British public generally have low levels of connection with all four tropes, but ‘victim’ receives the highest score on a sense of connection. Differences between the tropes around connection is not significant.
- **Sustainable** – The public are sceptical of sustainability across all four tropes; victim receives the lowest score, and ‘solve’ receives the highest score of the four. ‘Victim’ significantly different from the three, and ‘solve’ and ‘saviour’ are also statistically different from each other.
- **Fatigue** – The British public are on average fatigued by the four tropes and in particular by the ‘victim’ trope, followed by ‘solve’. ‘Victim’ trope is significantly different from the ‘partnership’ trope (but not solve/saviour).



Question: 0-10 scale of motivation, hope, sense of connection, sustainability, and fatigue looking at the image presented | Base: GB adults | Sample size: n = 3,538 | Fieldwork by YouGov 9 Oct - 16 Oct 2023

TROPES' UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

- Organisations have reduced reliance on 'victim' imagery, but use has cross cutting impacts:
 - More fatigue, less hopeful & less sustainable
 - But more likely to feel motivated to support development organisations (urgency?)
- All images are weak on connection
- Partnership and solving own problems don't perform materially better (exception for solve & sustainability), despite being the images we think are intrinsically better



ACTIVATION IN CAMPAIGN APPEAL IMAGES



How do active portrayals of subjects in appeals affect public engagement?



WHY INVESTIGATE IMAGES?

- Images play a substantial role in public engagement with global poverty and development
- A body of research shows that the **characteristics of images** – e.g., gender, emotions, action – shape the way people connect with what they see
- We want to know more about how these factors come together to create **active/passive representation** and how that affects public engagement

WHY INVESTIGATE IMAGES?

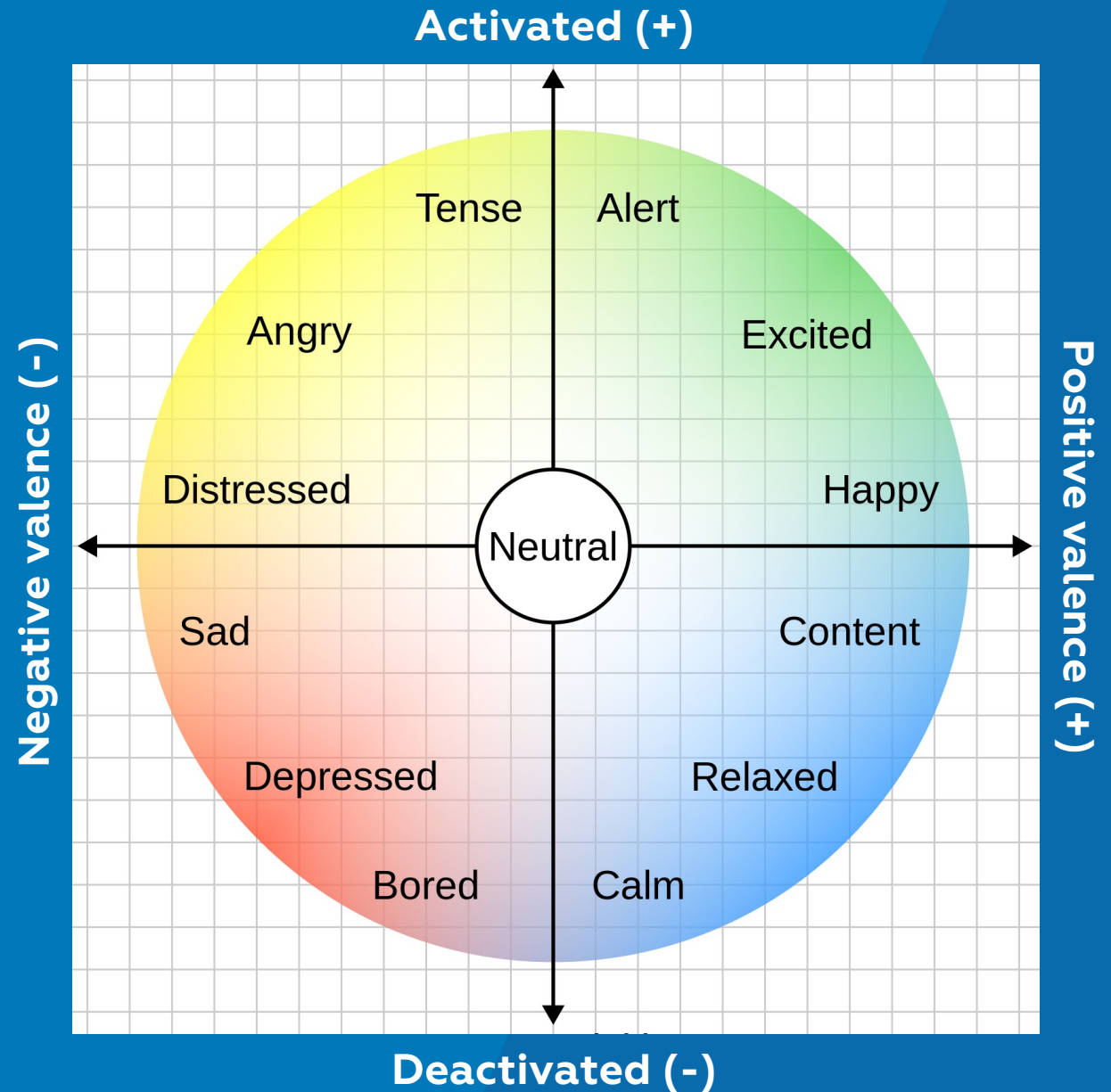


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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ACTIVE PORTRAYAL?

Active portrayal can come in different ways: active **emotions**, active **behaviours**, or even **direct gaze**

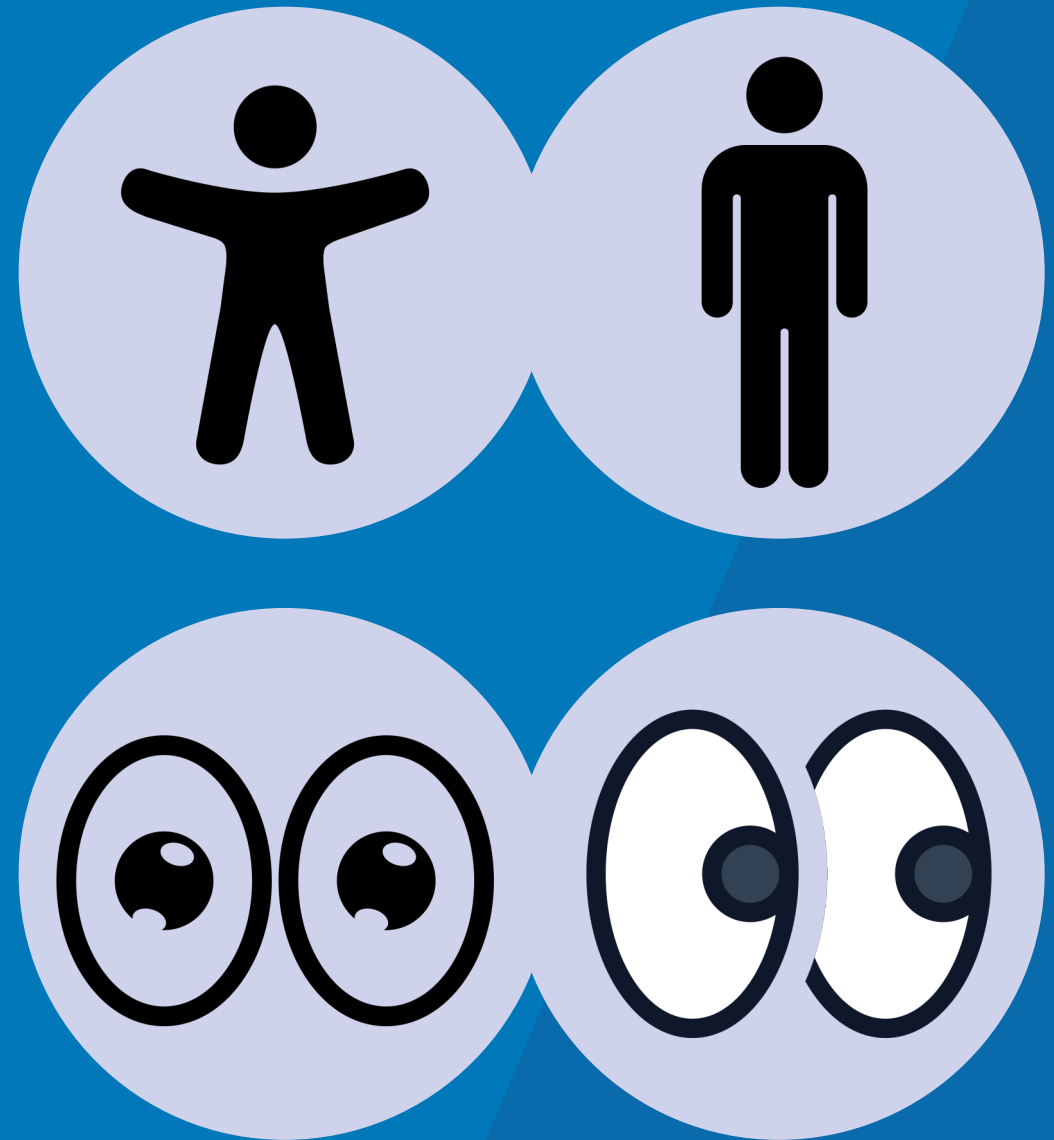
- **Active positive** or **negative emotions** include image subjects who look happy or angry instead of calm or bored
- Subjects can also be portrayed as **engaged in activity**: playing, working, or going about their daily lives instead of standing still in the image
- **Gaze** also contributes to activation: the subject in the image looks directly at the camera instead of looking away



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BEYOND ACTIVE PORTRAYALS: IMAGE CONTEXT & SUBJECT CHARACTERISTICS



Images show more than emotions,
activity & gaze

We examine two additional factors:

- **Context:** the subject's surrounds and environment, here understood as the degree of urgency depicted in the image
- **Subject characteristics:** the age, gender and ethnicity of the subject



AN EXAMPLE OF IMAGE CHARACTERISTICS CODING



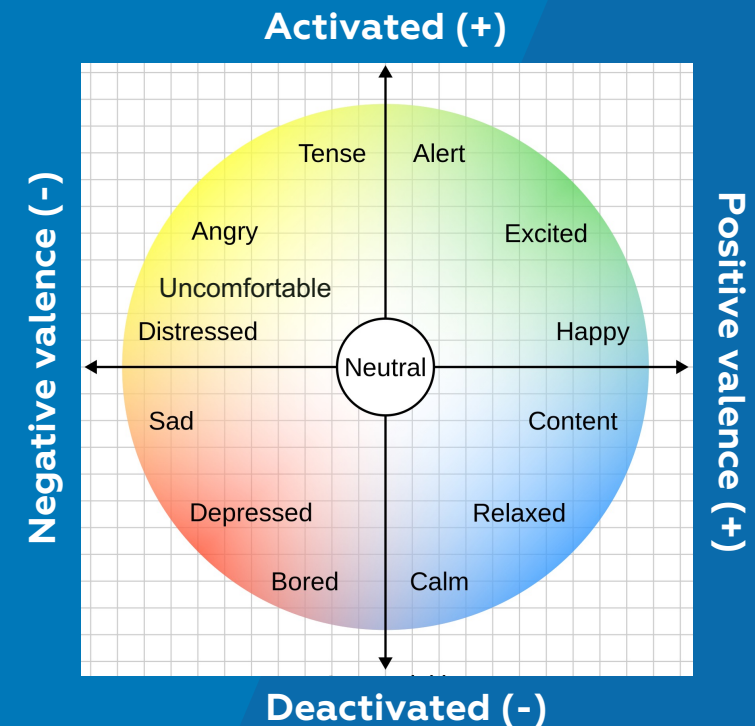
We code a total of 116 images for the partner imagery experiment, each image being a unique combination of the characteristics; each respondent saw 5 images

Characteristic	Value
Emotions	Positive activated: Happy, excited, alert, elated
Activity	Inactive: standing still
Gaze	Direct: staring at the camera
Age	Young
Gender	Man
Ethnicity	Middle Eastern/Arab
Context	Daily life in a poor country

HOW DO PEOPLE REACT TO WHAT THEY SEE?

We are interested in three ways in which those who look at images react to what they see

- Their **emotional response**
- Their sense of **urgency to take action** and help someone
- Their sense they can **make a difference** to someone's life



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HOW DO PEOPLE'S REACTIONS AFFECT THEIR ACTIONS?



We consider two actions people might want to take to help those in the images:

- **Finding out more information**
 - Click throughs (clicking on a link to find out more) or subscribing to a newsletter
- **Donating**
 - We ask about willingness to donate and the donation amount



IMAGES, REACTION & ACTION MODEL

IMAGES

Emotions

Activity

Context

Age, gender,
ethnicity

Gaze

REACTION

Emotional
response

Positive activated

happy, excited, alert, elated

Positive deactivated

Content, serene, relaxed, calm

Negative activated

Uncomfortable, upset, anxious

Negative deactivated

Tired, bored, depressed, sad

Efficacy

Urgency

ACTION

**Making a
donation**

Imagine you saw the
image in a campaign
appeal from a
development
organisation.

Would you donate to the
appeal? (Yes/No)

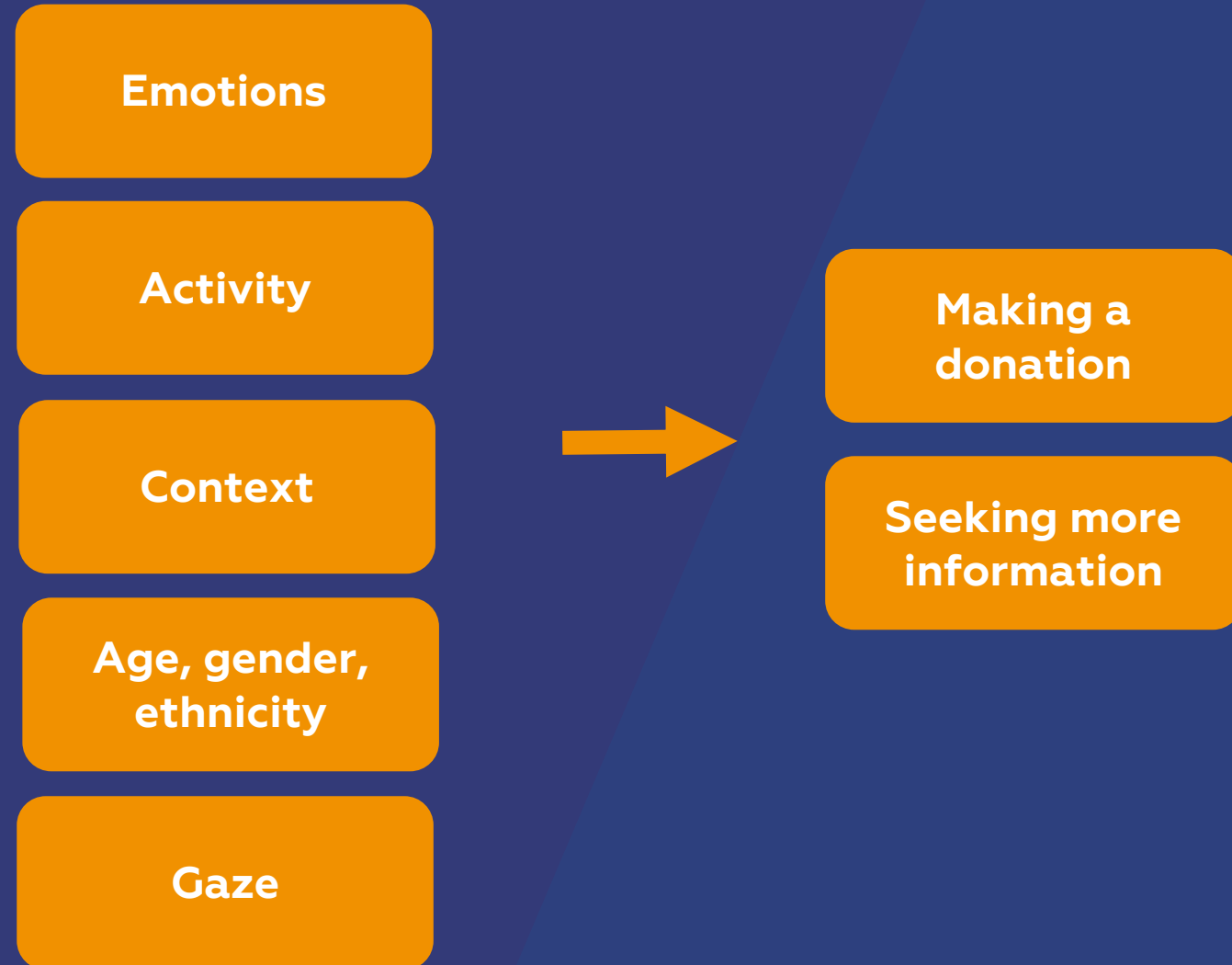
If yes, how much would
you donate?

**Getting more
information**

Imagine you saw the
image in a campaign
appeal from a
development
organisation.

Would you find out more
about the appeal by e.g.,
signing up to receive
more information or
clicking a link to get to a
website with more
information? (Yes/No)

HOW DO ATTRIBUTES OF IMAGES DRIVE WILLINGNESS TO DONATE & GET INFORMATION?



WHICH OF THESE IMAGES MADE RESPONDENTS SAY THEY WERE MORE WILLING TO DONATE?

IMAGE A



IMAGE B



IMAGE C



BEST AND WORST IMAGES – WILLINGNESS TO DONATE

BEST IMAGES



41%



37%



36%

Between 41% and 36% of respondents say they'd be willing to donate to the top performing images.

Common characteristics: Urgent contexts, young subjects, negative emotional portrayal

WORST IMAGES



3%



3%



5%

Between 3% and 5% of respondent say they'd be willing to donate to the worst performing images.

Common characteristics: Daily contexts, adult subjects, positive emotional portrayal



BEST AND WORST IMAGES – DONATION AMOUNT

BEST IMAGES



£4.10



£3.70



£3.60

The three most chosen images for donations also receive the highest expected amounts, ranging from £4.10 to £3.60.

Common characteristics: Urgent contexts, young subjects, negative emotional portrayal

WORST IMAGES



£0.10



£0.30



£0.30

The three worst performing images are expected to receive less than £1. Two of the images are also the least likely to be chosen.

Common characteristics: Daily contexts, adult subjects, positive emotional portrayal



WHICH OF THESE IMAGES MADE RESPONDENTS SAY THEY WERE WILLING TO FIND OUT MORE?

IMAGE A



IMAGE B



IMAGE C



BEST AND WORST IMAGES – WILLINGNESS TO FIND OUT MORE

BEST IMAGES



41%



40%



38%

Between 41% and 38% of respondents say they'd be willing to find out more about the top performing images.

Common characteristics: Urgent contexts, young subjects, negative emotional portrayal

WORST IMAGES



7%



8%



10%

Between 7% and 10% of respondent say they'd be willing to find out more about the worst performing images.

Common characteristics: Daily context, adult subjects, positive emotional portrayal

DRIVERS OF WILLINGNESS TO DONATE

	Positive drivers	Negative drivers
Emotions	Negative emotional portrayal - both activated and deactivated – of subjects led to a greater willingness to donate.	Positive deactivated emotional portrayal of subjects suppressed respondents' willingness to donate.
Character	Portrayal of young subjects (vs. adult subject) increased willingness to donate.	Portrayal of adults suppressed willingness to donate.
Context	The portrayal of urgent contexts significantly increased the willingness to donate.	Portrayal of subjects in a long-term context yielded a much lower willingness to donate.

DRIVERS OF WILLINGNESS TO FIND OUT MORE

	Positive drivers	Negative drivers
Emotions	Negative deactivated emotional portrayal of subjects led to a greater willingness to find out more.	Positive deactivated emotional portrayal of subjects suppressed respondents' willingness to find out more.
Character	Portrayal of young subjects (vs. adults) increased willingness to find out more.	Portrayals of an adult subject decreased willingness to find out more.
Context	Portrayal of urgent contexts significantly increased people's willingness to find out more about the appeal.	Portrayal of long-term/non-urgent contexts decreased the willingness to find out more about the appeal.

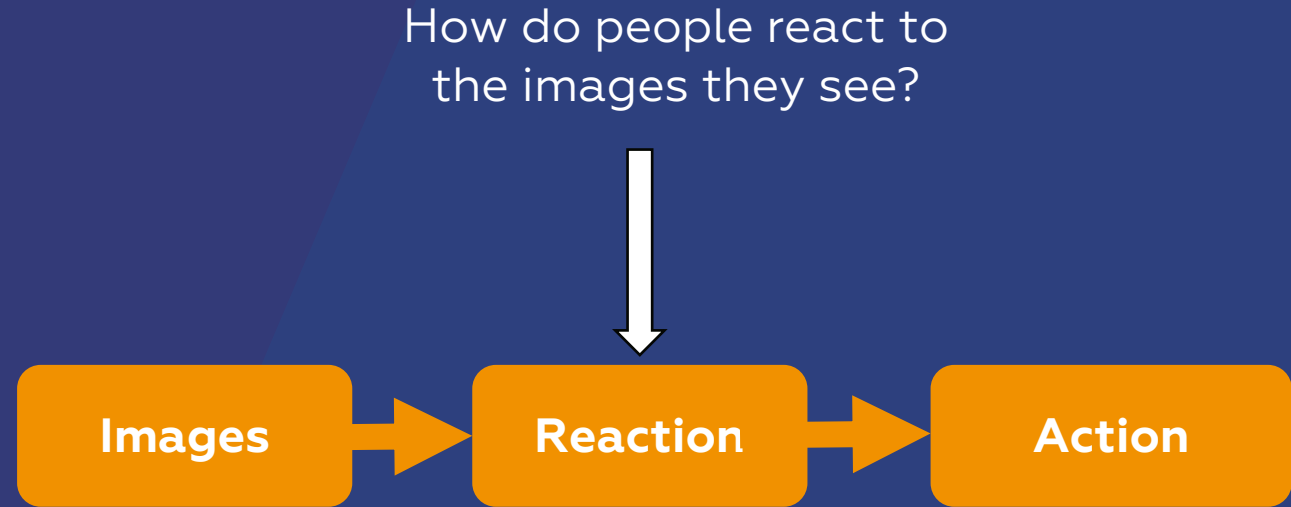
TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES ARE STILL WHAT 'WORKS' FOR THE BRITISH PUBLIC

- The portrayal of **urgent** contexts with **young** subjects portraying **negative activated and deactivated emotions** were what drove willingness to donate for the GB public
- The portrayal of **urgent** contexts with young **subjects** and the display of **negative deactivated emotions** driving willingness to find out more
- Challenge(s) for the development sector!



MEDIATION ANALYSIS

- We know that there is a causal relationship between **images** and **actions**, but we also want to understand the mechanism or pathway from **images** to **actions** – i.e., the *how* or *why* of the process – we can turn to mediation analysis to open up the 'black box'



IMAGES, REACTION & ACTION MODEL

IMAGES

Emotions

Activity

Context

Age, gender,
ethnicity

Gaze



REACTION

Emotional
response

Positive activated

Happy, excited, alert, elated

Positive deactivated

Content, serene, relaxed, calm

Negative activated

Upset, stressed,
uncomfortable, anxious

Negative deactivated

Tired, bored, depressed, sad

Efficacy

Urgency

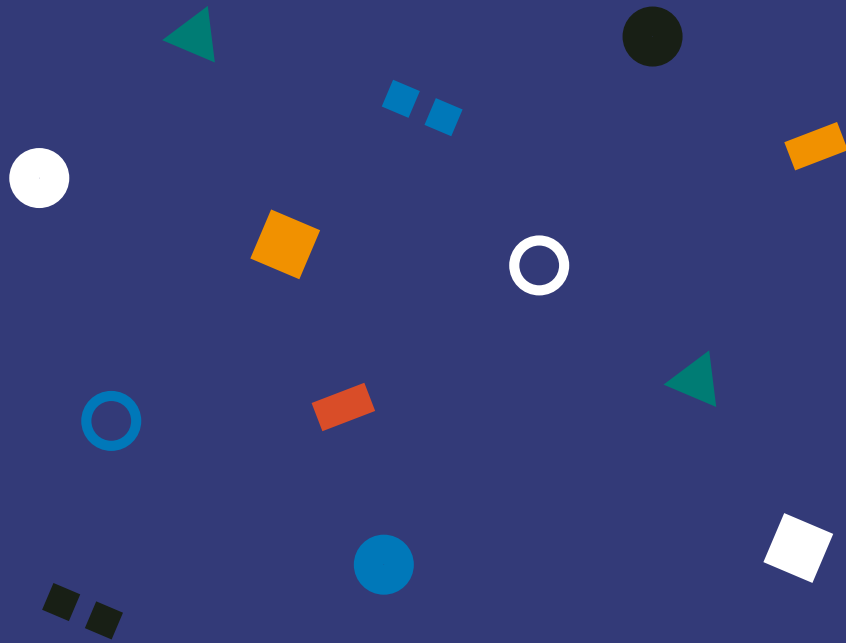


ACTION

Making a
donation

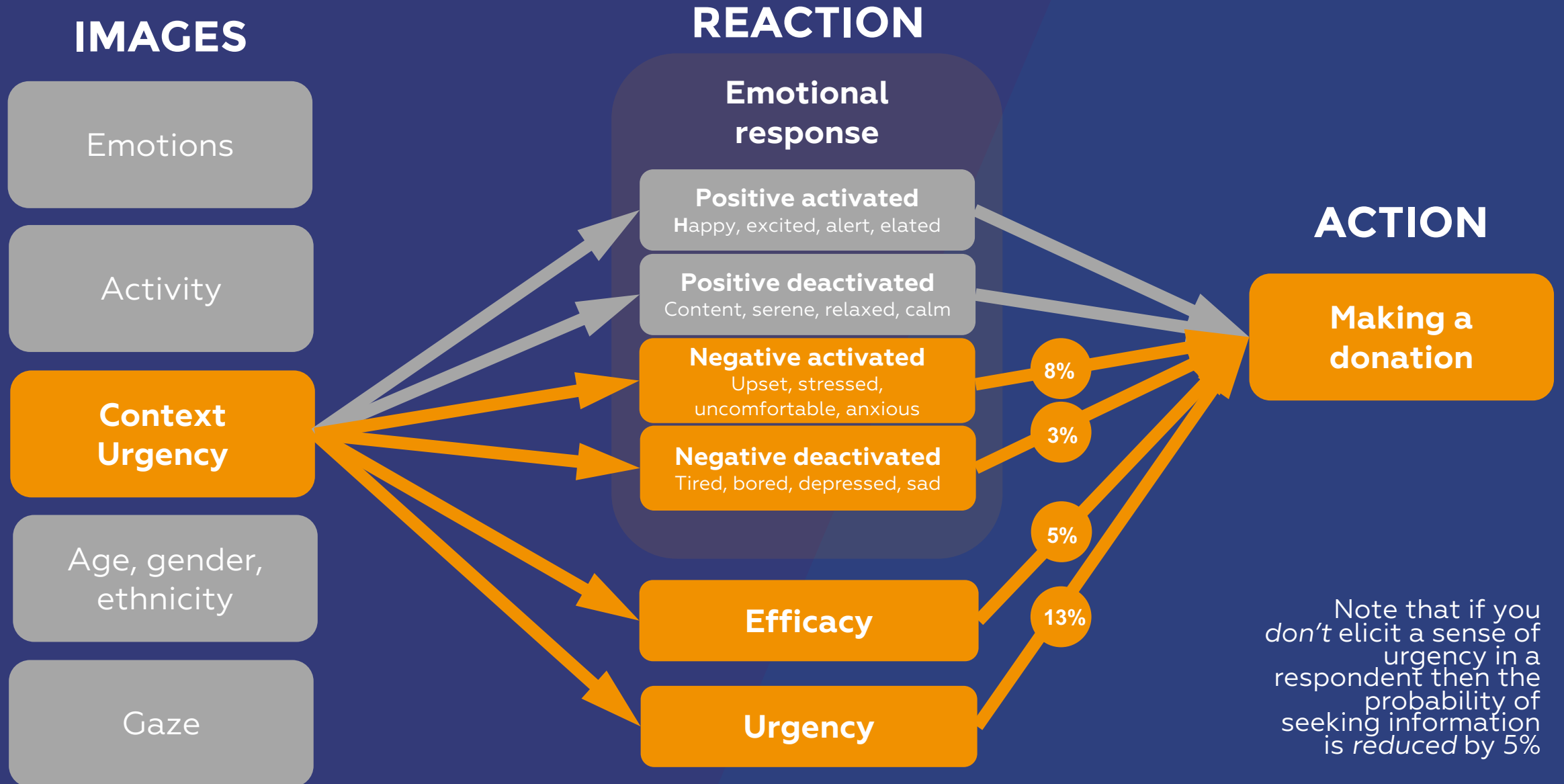
Getting more
information

DONATION PATHWAYS

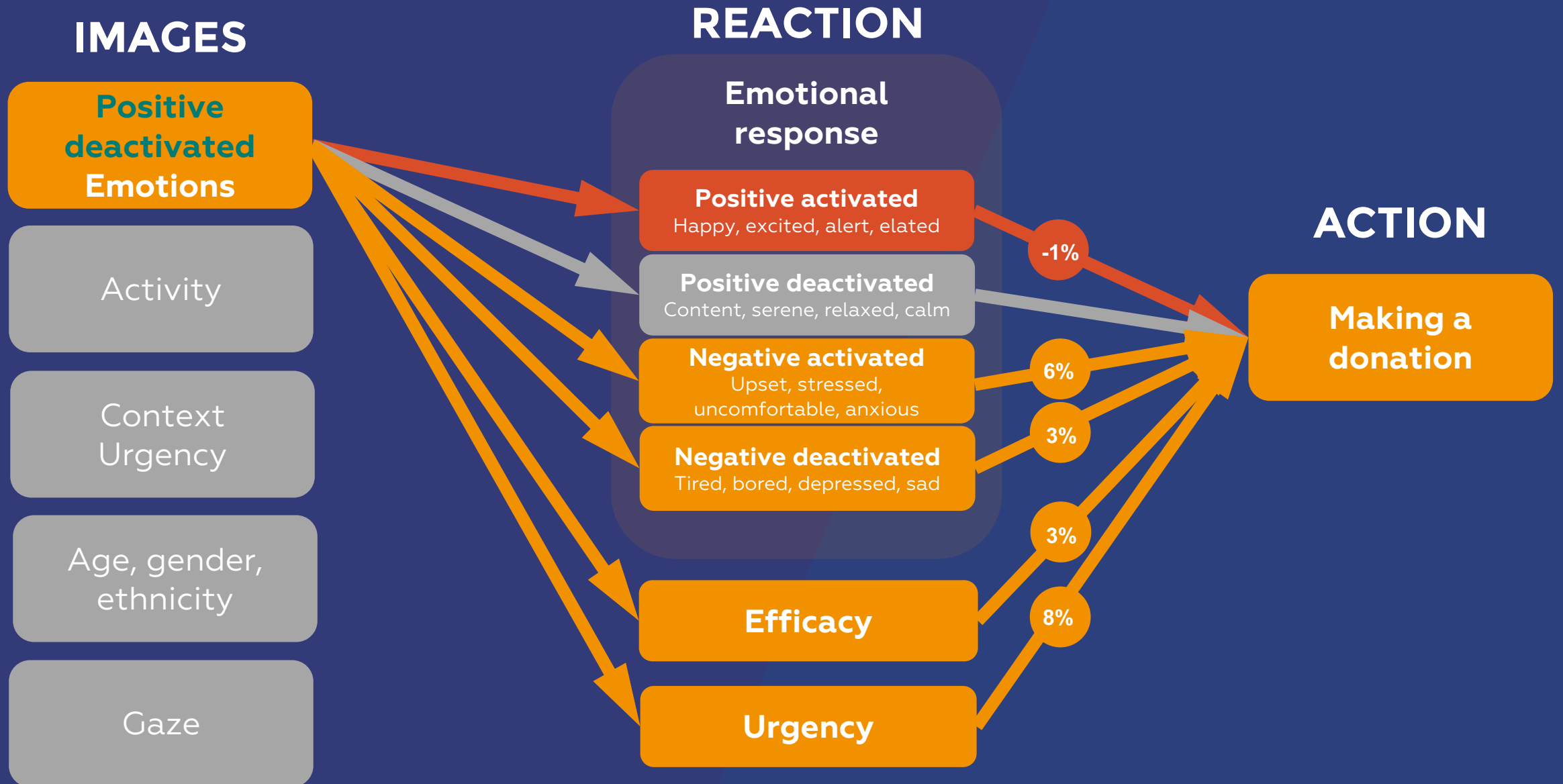


Which pathways are the strongest for predicting the decision to donate?

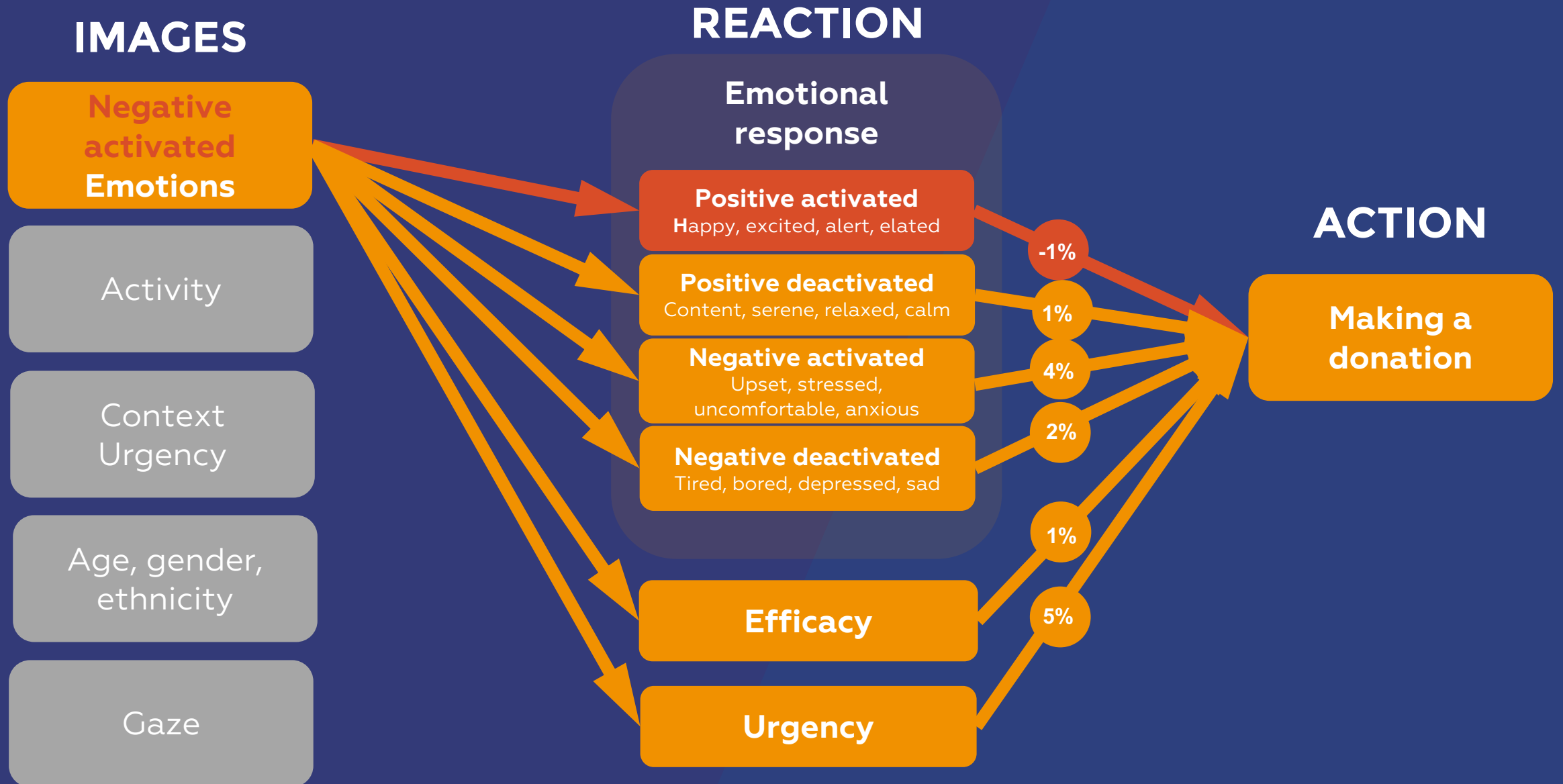
URGENCY AND DONATIONS



POSITIVE DEACTIVATED EMOTIONS AND DONATIONS



NEGATIVE ACTIVATED EMOTIONS AND DONATIONS

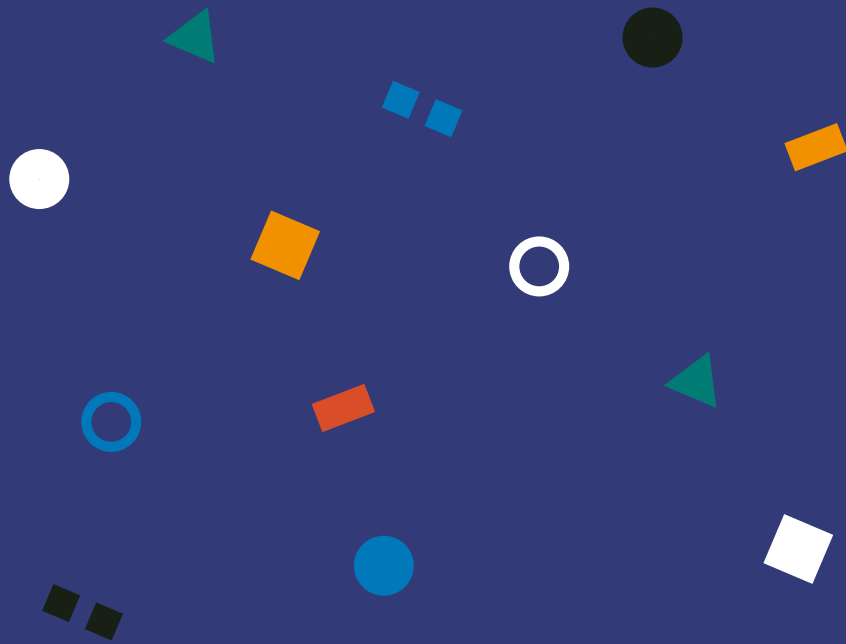


YOUNG SUBJECTS & DONATIONS

- As shown earlier, younger subjects are more effective in generating donations
 - The mediation analysis confirms this effect
- However, the effect of younger subjects does not work through stimulating respondents' emotions, sense of urgency or sense of efficacy
- We suggest that the effect of age operates through an alternative pathway – e.g. deservingness, unfairness, not had a chance at life, lack of agency, etc.



INFORMATION SEEKING PATHWAYS



Which pathways are the strongest for predicting the decision to engage by seeking out further information?

URGENCY AND INFORMATION SEEKING

IMAGES



REACTION



ACTION



-2%

-1%

8%

3%

5%

12%

Note that if you don't elicit a sense of urgency in a respondent then the probability of seeking information is reduced by 7%

POSITIVE DEACTIVATED EMOTIONS & INFORMATION SEEKING IMAGES

REACTION

Emotional response

Positive activated

Happy, excited, alert, elated

-2%

Positive deactivated

Content, serene, relaxed, calm

-0.5%

Negative activated

Upset, stressed, uncomfortable, anxious

6%

Negative deactivated

Tired, bored, depressed, sad

3%

Efficacy

3%

Urgency

8%

ACTION

Seeking more information

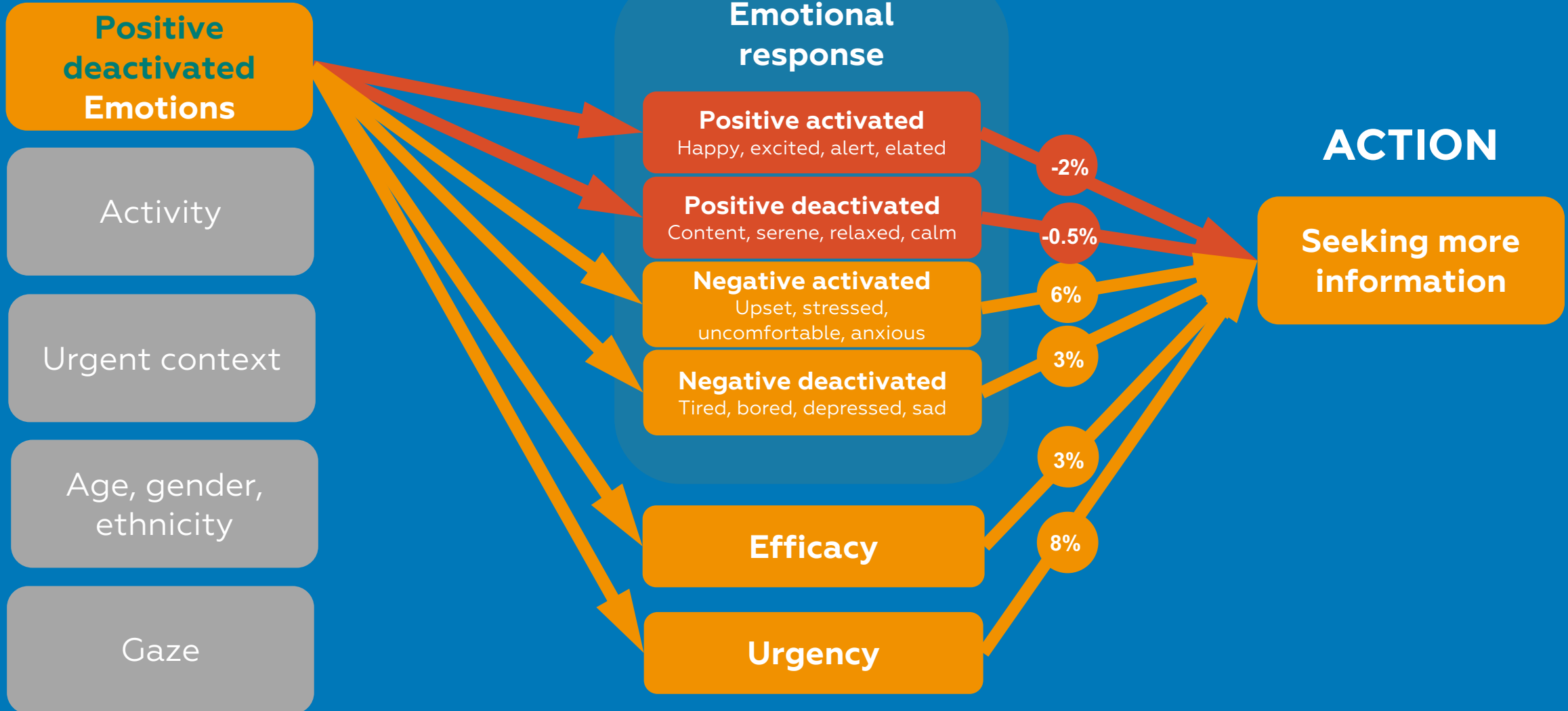
Positive deactivated Emotions

Activity

Urgent context

Age, gender, ethnicity

Gaze



NEGATIVE ACTIVATED EMOTIONS & INFORMATION SEEKING IMAGES

REACTION

Emotional response

Positive activated

Happy, excited, alert, elated

Positive deactivated

Content, serene, relaxed, calm

Negative activated

Upset, stressed, uncomfortable, anxious

Negative deactivated

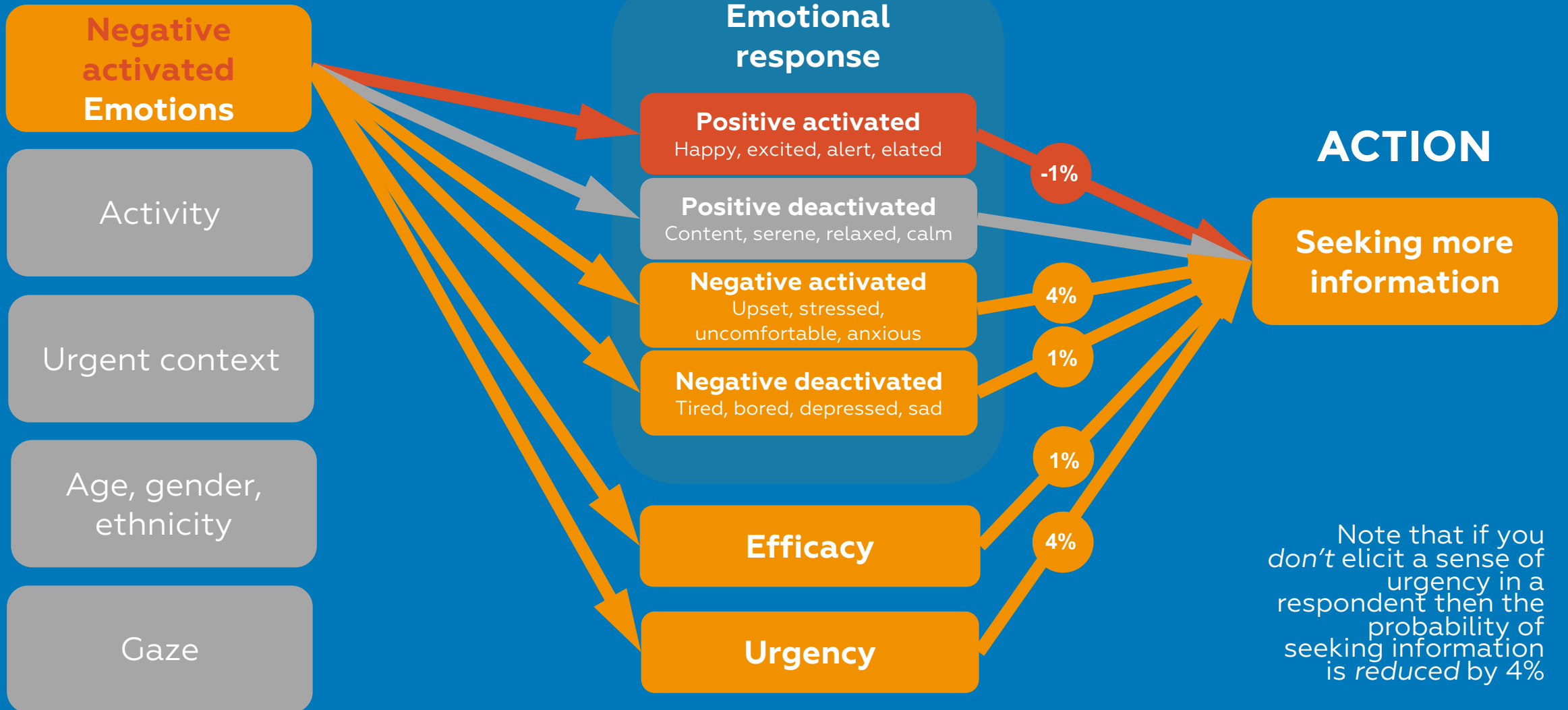
Tired, bored, depressed, sad

Efficacy

Urgency

ACTION

Seeking more information



Note that if you don't elicit a sense of urgency in a respondent then the probability of seeking information is reduced by 4%

YOUNG SUBJECTS & INFORMATION SEEKING



- As shown earlier, younger subjects are more effective in eliciting requests for more information
 - The mediation analysis confirms this effect
- However, the effect of younger subjects does not work through stimulating respondents' emotions, sense of urgency or sense of efficacy
- We suggest that the effect of age operates through an alternative pathway – e.g. deservingness, unfairness, not had a chance at life, lack of agency, etc.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Peoples' **feelings of urgency** and **being able to make a difference** are the key mechanisms explaining why people give or engage – more so than their emotional responses to images
- The pathways or mediators that work to drive donations – urgency, calm (positive deactivated) and anger (negative activated) – also drive the willingness to find out more, in the same ways
- Angry / calm or urgent images 'work' best when they evoke a **matching** emotional reaction in respondents; if they do not 'match', the effect is muted or zero or even negative – creating a '**backfire**' effect
- You can use happy subjects in images, but they must elicit positive emotional activation in respondents to drive donations (and their effect is small)



DO!

- Use **authentic urgency**: a race to the bottom with everyone using urgency has significant risks; folks have to believe it's urgent
- Urgency in images triggers negative emotional responses which drives donations
 - However, in tension with this, urgent appeals also result in **smaller donations** (when people do donate)
- Urgency is also the primary pathway when it comes to seeking further information
- Use images that show subjects positive deactivated (calm); but this has to trigger negative emotional response or sense of urgency (it doesn't go through positive emotions)
- Do use images that have a direct gaze when asking for donations; no effect for more information
- Use young(er) subjects: on average they perform better in driving donations & engagement
 - But based on this analysis, we cannot confirm the precise mechanism / pathway / why



DON'T!

- **Don't use sad subjects:** sad subjects through any pathway decrease donations
 - Sad subjects stop efficacy and urgency
- Don't use older subjects
- Avoid everyday life contexts
- Don't use women/girls predominantly: very small impact on donations with women/girl subjects, but only if image generates sense of **urgency**; all other gender effects for women/girls is negative and small



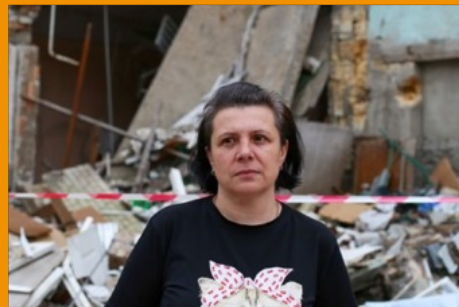
REFLECTIONS

- Representation | Localisation | Decolonisation
 - What works clashes with what we'd like to work
 - How 'stuck' are we in the old model of communicating with the British public; what will it take to shift engagement?
 - Evidence shows that Black/African subjects decrease likelihood to donate/get information and White respondents increase likelihood
- Urgency works; we have to make clear need; but use of urgency is not without consequences
 - Long term, consistent urgency produces fatigue in us all ...
 - Are we there already? Have we burnt out the public?

BEST IMAGES: EFFICACY



BEST IMAGES: URGENCY



DATA AND USE

DATA

The data for this deck come from DEL 2023 GB Sandbox (n= 3,639). Fieldwork by YouGov, 9-16 October 2023. Data are weighted to be nationally representative.

USE

DEL data and analysis are a public good and can be used and shared with the appropriate citation.

CITATION

Oh, S., Morini, P., Torres, F., Hudson, D. & Hudson, J. 2023. *The Power of Activation: The Effect of Images in Global Poverty Campaign Appeals*. London: Development Engagement Lab.



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

The Development Engagement Lab (DEL) is a five-year study of public attitudes and engagement with global development in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States (2018-2023).

DEL is a partner focussed research programme, convening and co-producing research and insights with over 30 international development NGOs and government agencies to understand the drivers of engagement and inform development communications.

Fieldwork is carried out by YouGov and surveys are weighted to be a nationally representative of the adult population. DEL is a grantee of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by Professor Jennifer Hudson (University College London) and Professor David Hudson (University of Birmingham).

The Development Engagement Lab

(Aid Attitudes Tracker Phase 2) has three goals:

1. Co-production of an evidence base for development campaigning
2. Enabling collaboration across the sector
3. Increasing advocacy capacity through the sharing of research and strategic insights

You can find out more information about DEL research at www.developmentcompass.org, follow us on Twitter [@DevEngageLab](https://twitter.com/DevEngageLab) or by contacting del@ucl.ac.uk.

Cover photo: [Eva Blue](#) on [Unsplash](#)