

ATTACKS ON AID

An abstract graphic on a dark blue background featuring a large orange square in the center. Surrounding it are various smaller geometric shapes: a white circle, a blue circle, a green triangle, a black circle, a white square, a blue square, a red square, a white circle with a dot, and a black square. The shapes are scattered around the central orange square, creating a dynamic and modern composition.

Which messages lands &
how to respond

ATTACKS ON AID

How are opponents attacking aid?

What arguments are really land?

How can the sector respond effectively?

How might attacks on aid change in the future?





Ihre Steuergelder werden

MOTIVATION

- Attacks on aid & development are becoming easier, cheaper & more frequent
- The arguments used to criticise aid are not (always) new
 - Claims about waste, national interest, or prioritising domestic needs are already common and likely to intensify
- Not all attacks work as well with the public: some are more credible than others, resonate with specific audiences, and may be harder to counter once people have seen them
- Important considerations in an ever-growing AI environment

APPROACH

- Two main questions
 - Which attacks weaken public support the most
 - Whether that damage can be repaired and for whom
- Simulates a future communications environment in which anonymous, AI-generated attacks on development cooperation are cheap and scalable
- Exposes audiences to common anti-aid arguments and then testing whether targeted antidotes can repair trust, optimism, and attitude strength
- Identify which attacks pose the greatest risk to public support and which can be neutralised by antidotes

SET UP

- Stage 1
 - Treatment: Randomise message content (placebo, waste, rich countries, France first) & messenger type (doctor, businesswoman, news anchor). 12 (3x4) treatments
 - Outcome: Agreement, accuracy, authenticity, believability, hopefulness + strength of one's attitude
- Stage 2
 - Treatment: Randomise antidote videos (placebo, 1, 2)
 - Outcome: Agreement, accuracy, authenticity, believability, hopefulness + change in strength of one's attitude about the negative messages

APPROACH

STAGE 1

Videos containing anti-aid messages



Questions

(Agreement, perceptions – accuracy, authenticity, believability, sense of hope around the impact of aid, certainty of their responses)



STAGE 2

Videos containing antidotes



Questions

(Agreement, perceptions – accuracy, authenticity, believability, sense of hope around the impact of aid, certainty of their responses)

WHAT PEOPLE SAW: VIDEOS W/ NEGATIVE MESSAGES

PLACEBO

- In today's world, we are constantly flooded with digital information. But our brains are not actually designed to multitask effectively. Focusing on a single task at a time has been proven to boost performance. True productivity comes not from doing more things, but from focusing

NEGATIVE MESSAGE #1 'WASTE'

- Your tax money is being sent overseas to fund projects that are **doomed to fail**. Instead of going to the people who need it, this money gets swallowed by **waste** and **corruption**. The projects **achieve nothing**, and your money is gone for good. It's time we **stopped throwing money down the drain**.

NEGATIVE MESSAGE #2 'RICH COUNTRIES'

- Your tax money is being sent to **wealthy superpowers** like China and India. While they build their economies and space programmes, you're footing the bill for their investments. We are **paying our global competitors** to get ahead of us. It's time to **stop funding rich**

NEGATIVE MESSAGE #3 'FRANCE FIRST'

- Your politicians claim there's no money left to **fix our crumbling roads and schools**. Yet, every year they are busy rushing billions out the door in international aid. They are **putting people in other countries ahead of your family**. It's time to fix our own house before we **try to fix everyone else's**.

WHAT PEOPLE SAW: MESSENGERS



Ihre Steuergelder werden



Ihre Steuergelder werden

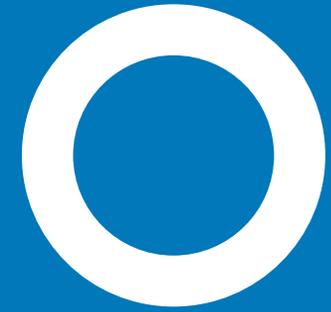
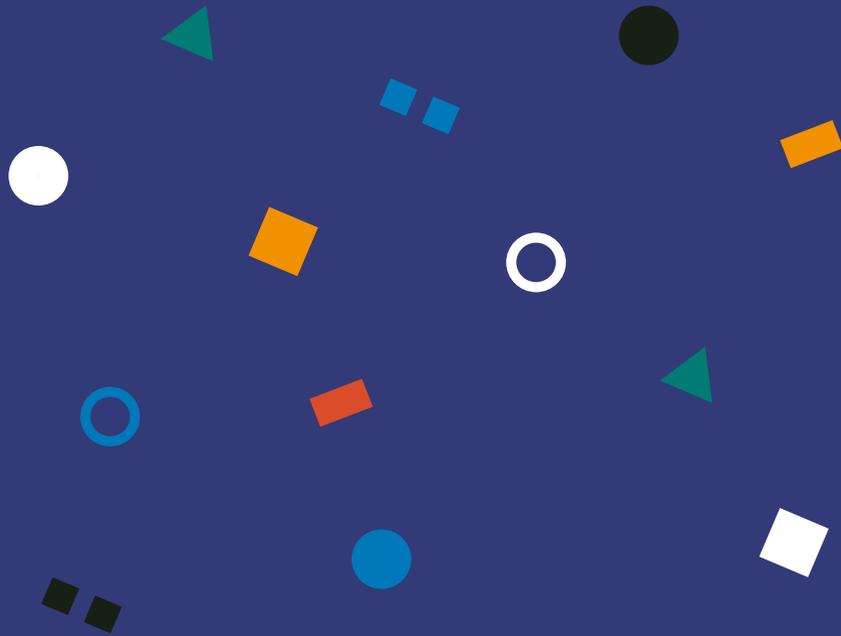


Ihre Steuergelder werden

WHAT PEOPLE RESPONDED TO

AGREEMENT	ACCURACY	AUTHENTICITY	BELIEVABILITY	OPTIMISM
<ul style="list-style-type: none">To what extent do you agree or disagree with the video you just watched?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "describes very poorly" and 5 means "describes very well", how well do the following adjectives describe the content of the video you just watched?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "describes very poorly" and 5 means "describes very well", how well do the following adjectives describe the content of the video you just watched?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "describes very poorly" and 5 means "describes very well", how well do the following adjectives describe the content of the video you just watched?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means "Not at all optimistic" and 10 means "Very optimistic", how optimistic do you feel that international aid has a real impact?

STAGE 1: NEGATIVE ADS

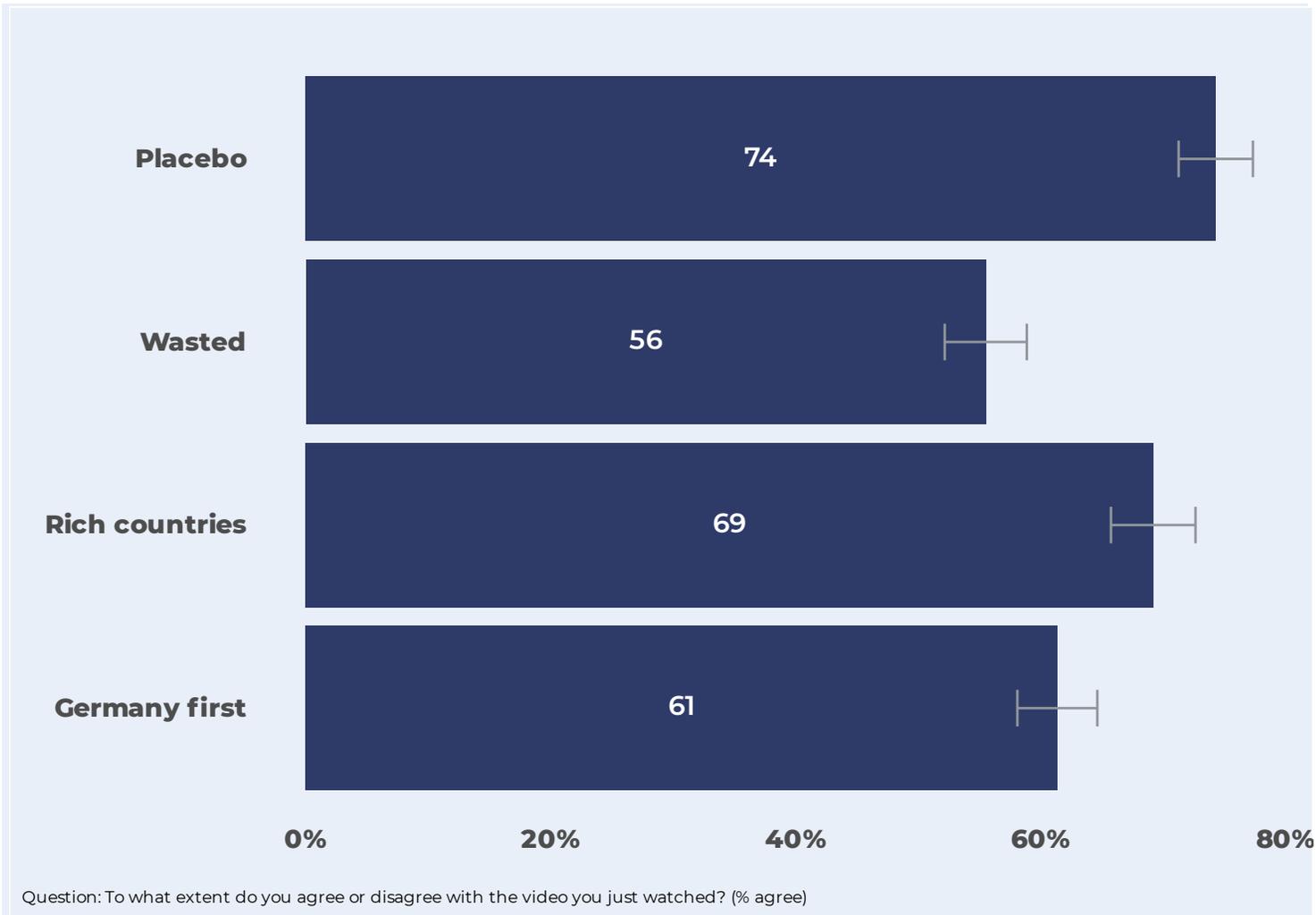


Which attacks are the most dangerous and why?

HOW DID THE NEGATIVE VIDEOS LAND?

- How much did the German public **agree** with the videos?
- How did they **perceive** the videos
 - accurate
 - authentic
 - believable
- What effect did the videos have on their **optimism** around the impact of international aid?
- What, if any, were the effects of the different **messengers**?

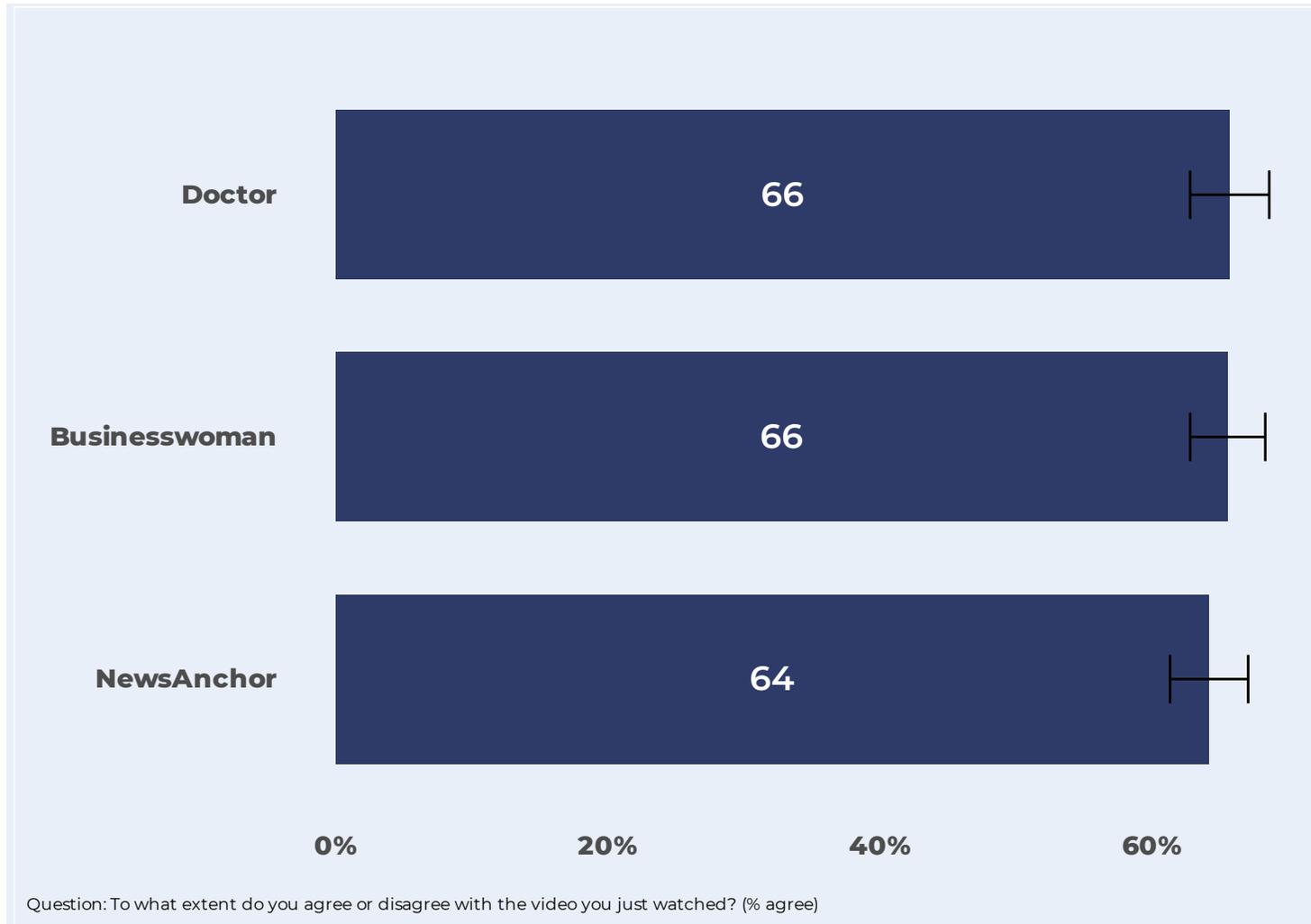
'RICH COUNTRIES' ARGUMENT RESONATES WITH THE GERMAN PUBLIC



- Compared to the baseline, **negative videos on average get less agreement and the difference is significant** (this is good news!)
- Of the negative videos, **'Rich countries'** video gains the most traction across the German public. The differences between the negative videos are statistically significant.
- **Age group differences**
 - 55+ were more in agreement with the 'rich countries' argument than the younger segments of the population (25-34 & 35-44 year olds)
- **Voting differences**
 - AfD voters agree with all the negative videos (~90%)
 - Greens disagree with 'waste' and 'Germany first', but 57% agree with 'Rich countries' video
 - CDU/CSU & SPD sit in the middle



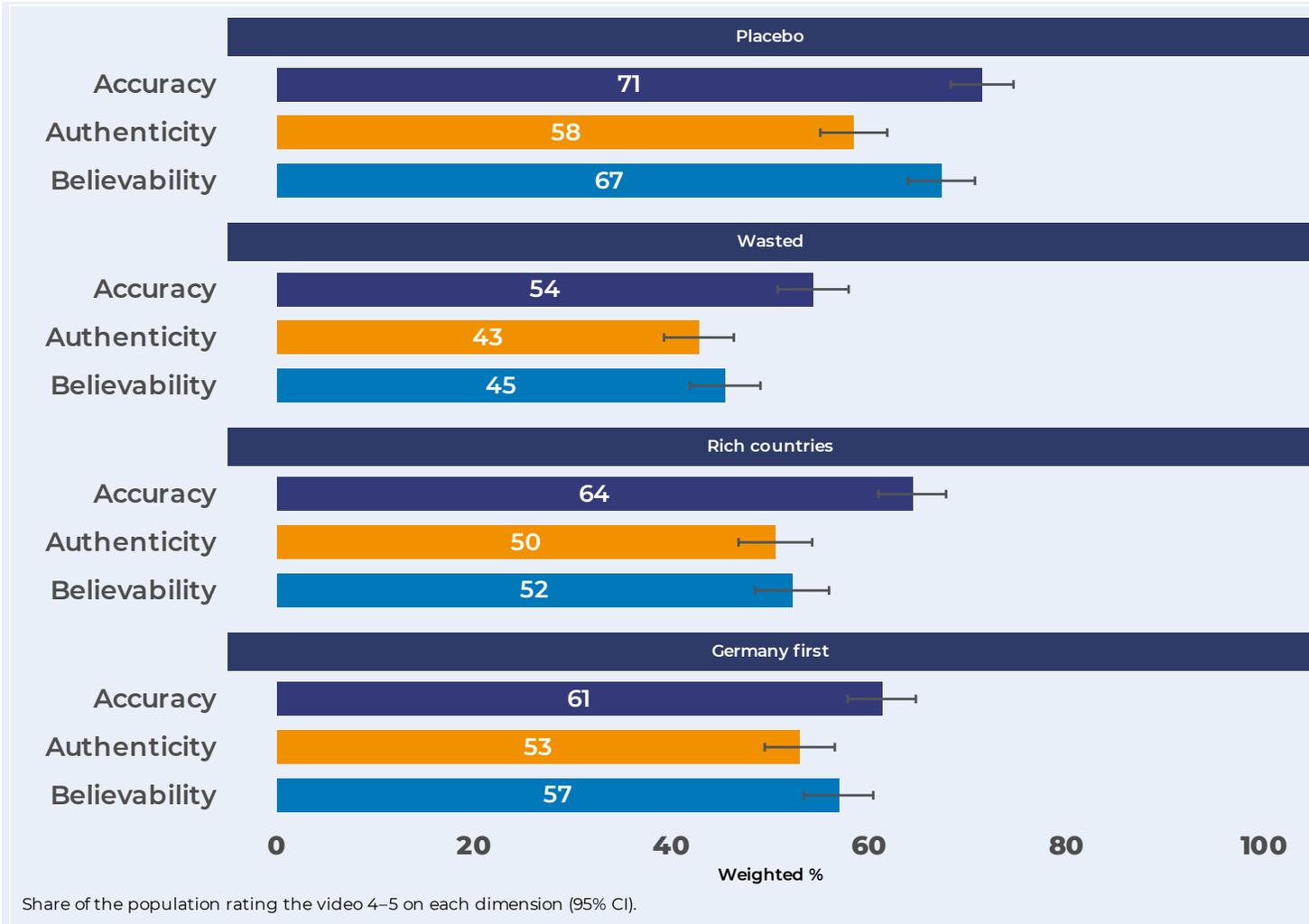
WHO COMMUNICATES IS LESS IMPORTANT



- We tested three types of messengers – doctor, businesswoman, and news anchor, but there are **no statistically significant differences between the three** in garnering agreement from the German public overall around negative messages.
- **No age group differences** in preferences
- There are no differences in agreement with the messengers across party support



ACCURACY, AUTHENTICITY & BELIEVABILITY



- We asked respondents how they perceived the negative messages around accuracy, authenticity, and believability.
- **All three negative videos are perceived significantly less positively** than the placebo video*
- Among the negative videos
 - 'Rich countries' video is seen as the more accurate
 - 'Germany first' is seen as more authentic and believable
- **Perceptions vary sharply by political alignment**
 - Green voters consistently discount negative aid narratives
 - AfD voters perceive the same messages as highly accurate, authentic, and believable
 - CDU/CSU voters sit in the middle

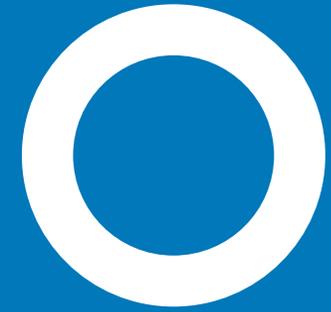




KEY INSIGHTS

- 'Rich countries' has the biggest (negative) impact on the German public (esp. 55+)
 - 'Rich countries' video is seen as the more accurate
 - 'Germany first' is seen as more authentic and believable
- The messenger doesn't matter
- Negative videos damage optimism that aid has a real impact – especially 'waste' and 'Germany first'
- **Accuracy** and **believability** are strongly associated with agreement, whereas perceived **authenticity** is not
 - Challenge in an AI era

STAGE 2: ANTIDOTES



Can the damage be
repaired?

CAN THE DAMAGE BE REPAIRED?

1. Can they reduce certainty with the perceptions they hold about negative messages?
 2. Can 'antidotes' or response repair the public's sense of optimism around aid?
- Approach
 - After seeing the first video, we showed them another video – the 'antidote' – and asked the same questions
 - Two types of antidotes were shown, based on the typical responses from sector bodies

WHAT PEOPLE SAW: ANTIDOTES

PLACEBO

- Studies show that taking short breaks during focused work can boost productivity and creativity. Even a two-minute pause to stretch or walk can help people return to their tasks with renewed focus.

STATS AND FACTS/FIGURES

- Let's take a step back from the political noise and look at the actual results. In the last 25 years, global development work has helped cut child mortality by more than half, saving over 100 million lives.
- This is one of the greatest success stories in human history, and our country has been a proud leader in making it happen.

DEBUNKS/RESPONDS

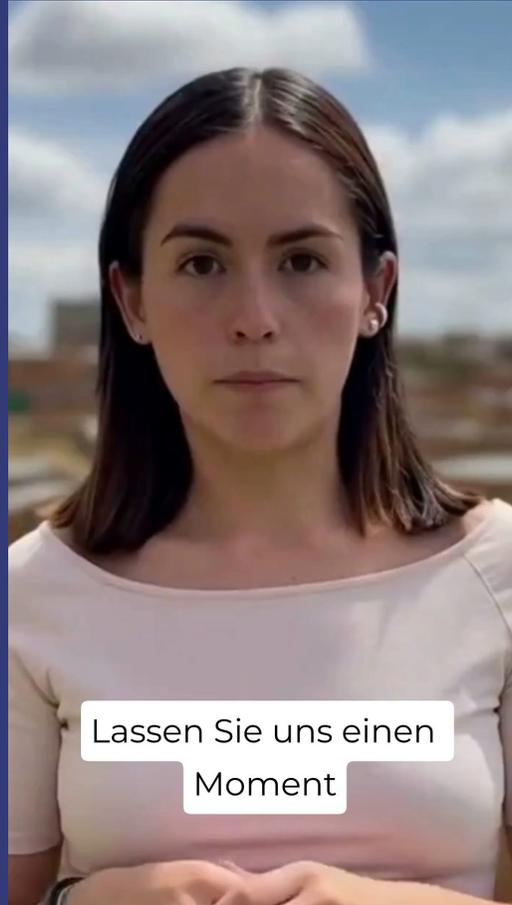
- This message is incorrect and intentionally misleading, from someone with questionable motives.
- The reality is that global instability—from pandemics to conflict—is one of the biggest threats to our own economy and security. Investing in a stable world isn't a cost; it's the most fundamental way of securing our own future.



WHAT PEOPLE SAW: ANTIDOTES



PLACEBO



ANTIDOTE 1



ANTIDOTE 2

DO ANTIDOTES WEAKEN ATTITUDES?

- Yes!
- Across all measures - agreement, perceived accuracy, authenticity, believability, and hope, the antidotes **significantly reduce people's certainty** in their earlier responses
- Antidotes don't reverse opinions, but they make them less rigid and potentially more open to change
 - Especially for 35-54 age groups
 - For CDU/CSU voters, both antidotes reduce certainty, but antidote 2 is consistently larger than that of antidote 1
 - For AfD voters, both antidotes reduce certainty, but antidote 1 performs relatively better than antidote 2
- **Antidotes are effective at weakening certainty among voters who were most receptive to anti-aid messages**



DO ANTIDOTES RESTORE OPTIMISM?

- No! Neither antidote works to make people feel more optimistic that aid has a real impact
 - Showing respondents antidote 2, makes them less optimistic (reads as defensive or not authentic, believable)
- Antidote 2 performs worse with 35-44 and 45-54 age groups and AfD and CDU/CSU supporters
 - Negative ads are particularly pernicious in damaging views on aid's impact or effectiveness, especially for politically sceptical voters





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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 funded by 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.

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