

EE SCAPE

VR application mitigating
emotional eating



VR Application 3D

Period

2024.03 - 2024.06

Roles

Planning, Research, Interview, UX/UI design, 3D Modelling, Unreal level design

Tools

Blender, Unreal Engine

BACKGROUND

Emotional Eating

Emotional eating (EE) is food consumption based on emotional factors such as stress or pleasure rather than physical hunger. Unlike normal appetite, this self-rewarding behavior is characterized by a desire for certain foods. Many emotional eaters are concerned about their weight gain and feel guilty. Perpetuating this vicious cycle of stress leads to further emotional eating and can become severe eating disorders.



@ Bigdata OpenPortal of Health Insurance Review & Assessment Service

TARGET USER

From advice of eating disorder experts, we set research subjects to those who emotionally eat at night at home.

**Emotionally eat
at night
at home**

Typical manifestations

"The impulsive eating is highly related to the time."

"Those who have had negative experiences in society could see food as a friend who is easy to meet, never betrays them and always responds to them."

Insights from eating disorder experts interviews.

Refer our subjects to :

“ Emotional Night Eaters ”

RESEARCH PROCESS

1

Preliminary Study

Goal

- Understand the context of emotional eating
- Derive Design Considerations

- Eating Disorder Experts Interviews
- Emotional Eater Survey
- Participatory Design Workshop

2

VR Intervention design

- Design Considerations to Solutions
- EE-Scape Design

3

EE-Scape Prototyping

Implement a mobile VR prototype by using Unreal Engine 5.1, a game engine

4

User Test

Goal

- Confirm the potential of our prototype
- Identify Design Directions

- Pre-survey
- VR Prototype Experience
- Post-survey
- 1:1 Interview

PREMILINARY STUDY

Eating Disorder Experts Interviews

- 1:1 interviews with two experts on eating disorders aimed to understand the **characteristics and problems of emotional eating** and **get advice to define research targets**.
- We asked **how we distinguish** emotional eaters from eating disorder patients, **how eating disorders are different** from other mental health concerns, and **what interventions** have been applied.



Photo of eating disorder expert interview

Emotional Eater Survey

- Emotional eater surveys aimed to identify the **context and pattern of emotional night eating**.
- We asked **how often and why** they craved food at night, **how they responded** to it, what **specific food** they craved, and how emotionally eating at night **affects** their feelings and thinking.
- A total of 31 responses were gathered from 21 females (age M = 25.5 years, SD = 7.5) and 10 males (age M = 24.2 years, SD = 4.3)

주로 몇 시쯤 마식에 대한 욕구를 느끼나요? *

- 8시 ~9시 사이
- 9시 ~10시 사이
- 10시 ~11시 사이
- 11시 ~12시 사이
- 1시 이후
- 기타...

아식을 먹은 날 수면 및 다음 날 아침 식사에 미미한 영향을 미치나요? *

ex. 별 영향 없음 / 소화 불량으로 잠에 잘 들지 못함 / 배가 만고해서 아침을 거른다

질문형 텍스트

아식에 대한 욕구를 참고 넘기기 위해서는 어떠한 노력을 하시나요? *

참자 못할 경우 노력 안 할 또는 '정지 못함'을 하여주세요.

질문형 텍스트

아식에 대한 욕구를 조절하지 못할 때, 그 이유는 무엇인가요? (또는 관련된 특별한 상황) *

질문형 텍스트

평소 얼마나 자주 야식에 대한 욕구를 느끼시나요? *

- 주 1회
- 주 2~4회
- 한 달에 한 번
- 주 2~3회
- 거의 매일
- 기타...

주로 어떤 음식을 야식으로 먹나요? *

특정 음식의 이름과 어떻게 음식을 준비하는 지(요리 또는 빼당 등) 쪽아주세요.

질문형 텍스트

야식을 주로 누구와 먹나요? *

- 혼자
- 친한 친구와
- 가족들과
- 여러 명의 친구들과

야식을 먹고 느끼는 생각 및 감정에 대해 어떻게 대응하나요? (중복 선택 가능) *

- 맛있게 먹었으나 만족한다
- 또 못하고 악어버린 자신에게 짜증이 낸다
- 살이 찰까봐 걱정된다
- 내일은 굶거나 거의 한 끼 먹어야겠다고 생각한다
- 가족 끌래 먹은 거라 둘킬려애 긴장된다
- 막히 별 생각 없음
- 기타...

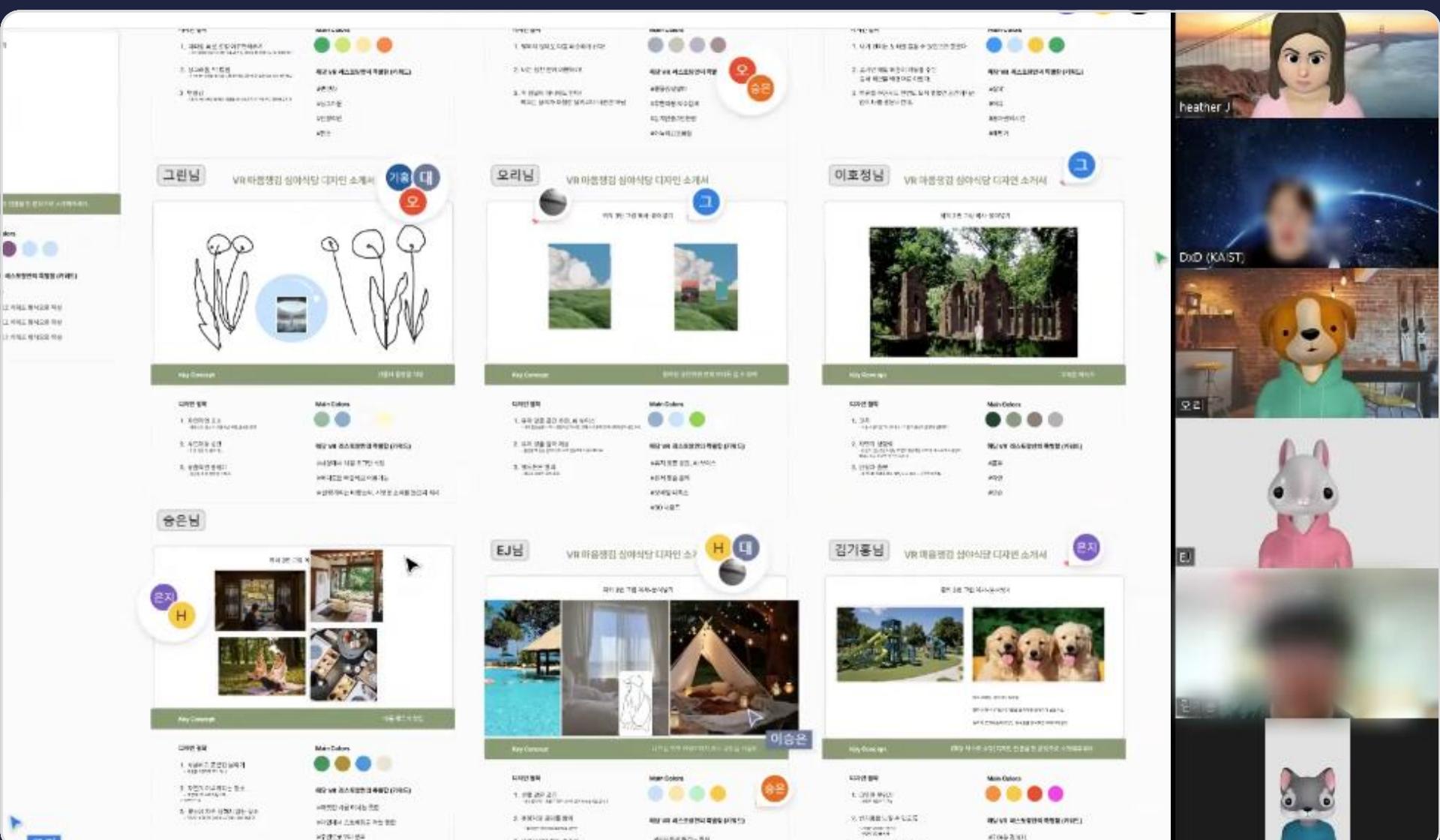
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Screenshot of affinity diagram and thematic analysis

PREMILINARY STUDY

Participatory Design Workshop

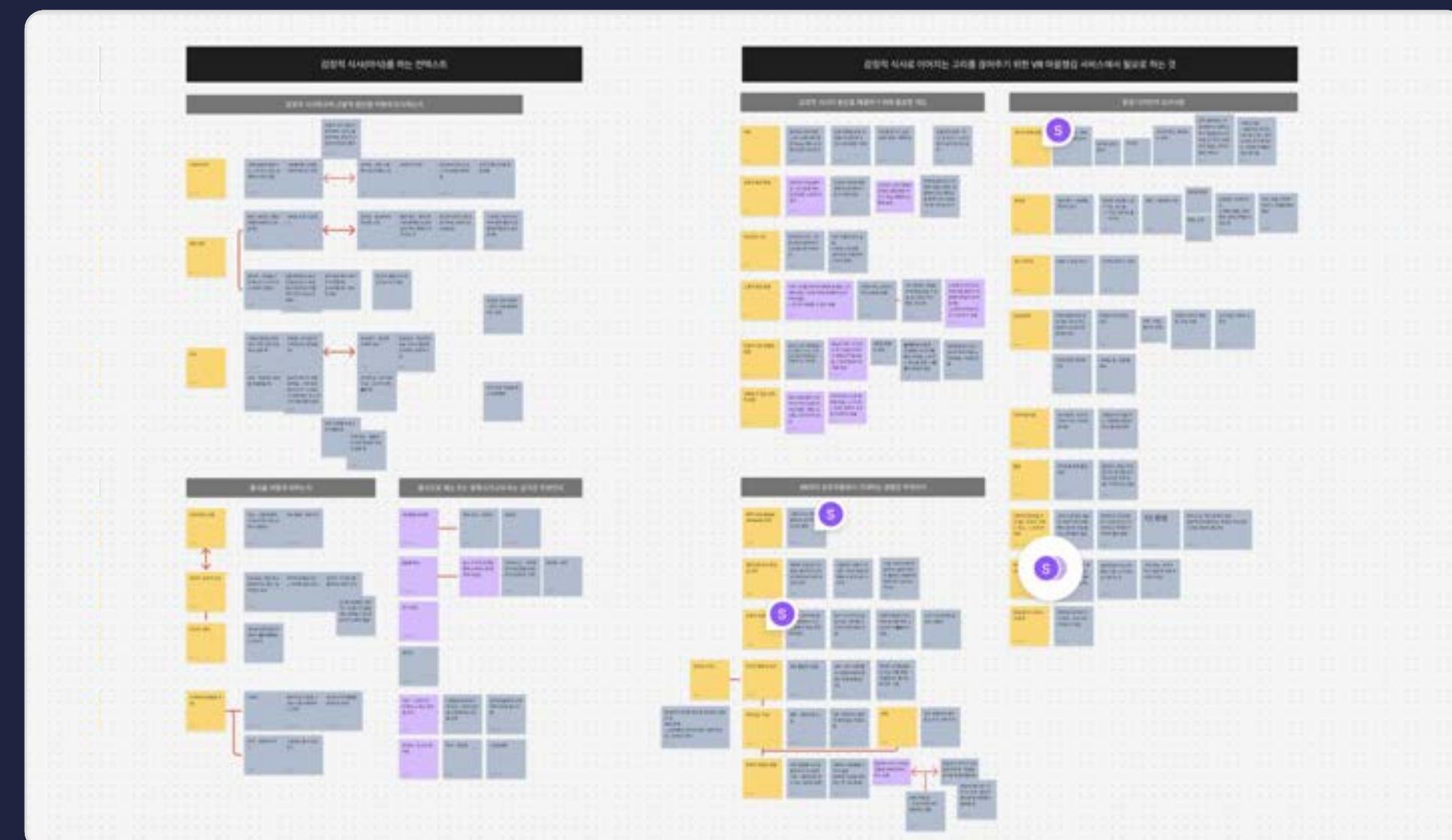
- Participatory design workshop with nine emotional night eaters, six females (age M = 25.3 years, SD = 3.7) and three males (age M = 22.7 years, SD = 4.0) aimed to **define user needs for a VR intervention**.
- Each participant shared their **emotional eating patterns** and designed **a virtual experience that helps overcome food cravings**.



Screenshot of participatory design workshop

Data Analysis

- Three researchers analyzed all the data collected by preliminary studies and then **defined design considerations**.



Screenshot of affinity diagram and thematic analysis

PREMILINARY STUDY



Design Considerations

Dealing with both mental problems and eating behavioral problems is important

All experts highlighted that interventions for emotional eating should address both the emotional problem and the eating behavior.

"In the case of eating behavior problems, underlying psychological and environmental issues should be addressed, along with the eating behavior itself."

Eating disorder expert

All design workshop participants sought a place that made them feel calm and consolation to alleviate the emotions causing late-night eating.

Reducing emotional bonds on food is essential

Emotional eaters attach meanings to food. These emotional bonds to food make them repeat emotional eating.

"Emotional eaters tend to have emotional attachments to food."

Eating disorder expert

"Food is a comforting friend to me."

P9

"I seek out foods as a reward for my hard day."

P1

"Food is my escape where I can take a break from tasks for a while."

P6

Intervention to immediately alleviate cravings is needed

Emotional eaters prefer instant or delivery foods that are ready to eat without cooking. The service should immediately intervene before their appetite leads to actual eating.

All emotional night eaters who answered our survey preferred quickly and easily prepared foods.

"Prevent binge eating by resisting the urge to craving for even five minutes."

Eating disorder expert

"Wearing a VR headset is very effective at blocking out the craving for food in real world."

Eating disorder expert

VR INTERVENTION DESIGN

Design Considerations

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Intervention to immediately alleviate cravings is needed

Emotional eaters prefer instant or delivery foods that are ready to eat without cooking. The service should immediately intervene before their appetite leads to actual eating.

Solution

Use mindfulness meditation and peaceful audio-visual elements

Apply mindfulness meditation, which is used for mitigating eating disorders. Virtual landscapes with peaceful audio-visual elements can reduce user's negative emotions.

Provide unusual experiences about the food

To help emotional eaters perceive it from a new perspective, we placed the food in unfamiliar contexts in a virtual environment.

Provide immersive experiences to lead users to focus on other than craving

It provides a novel and immersive experience that is only possible in a virtual environment, allowing users to get out of focus on appetite.

The **awareness** that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the **present moment**, non-judgmentally

Definition of Dr. Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

VR INTERVENTION DESIGN

Dépaysement

To change their fundamental perceptions of food, I applied Dépaysement as a new design strategy. This Surrealist art technique aims to render familiar objects unfamiliar by placing them in different environments or by combining unrelated elements into a single image. Among the various characteristics of dépaysement restructured by Jung-Yeol Lee, we adopted specific expression techniques of dépaysement applied to space since the spatial strategy is most closely related to our research on virtual environment design.

This approach was applied by separating images of food from their usual context, such as on a table or in a kitchen, and placing or enlarging them in unfamiliar VR (Virtual Reality) environments, such as natural landscapes.

@Paquet, M. (1994). Magritte. Benedikt Taschen

@Suzi Gablic. (1985). Magritte. Thames & Hudson.

@Lee, Jeong-Yeol. (2007), A Study on expression of interior design contemporary by application of dépaysement. Journal of the Korean Institute of Interior Design, 16(2), 79-86.

Space of Dépaysement

Isolation

Contradictory details

Transition of space

Symbolic

Heterogeneities

Incongruity

Enlargement

Incongruity

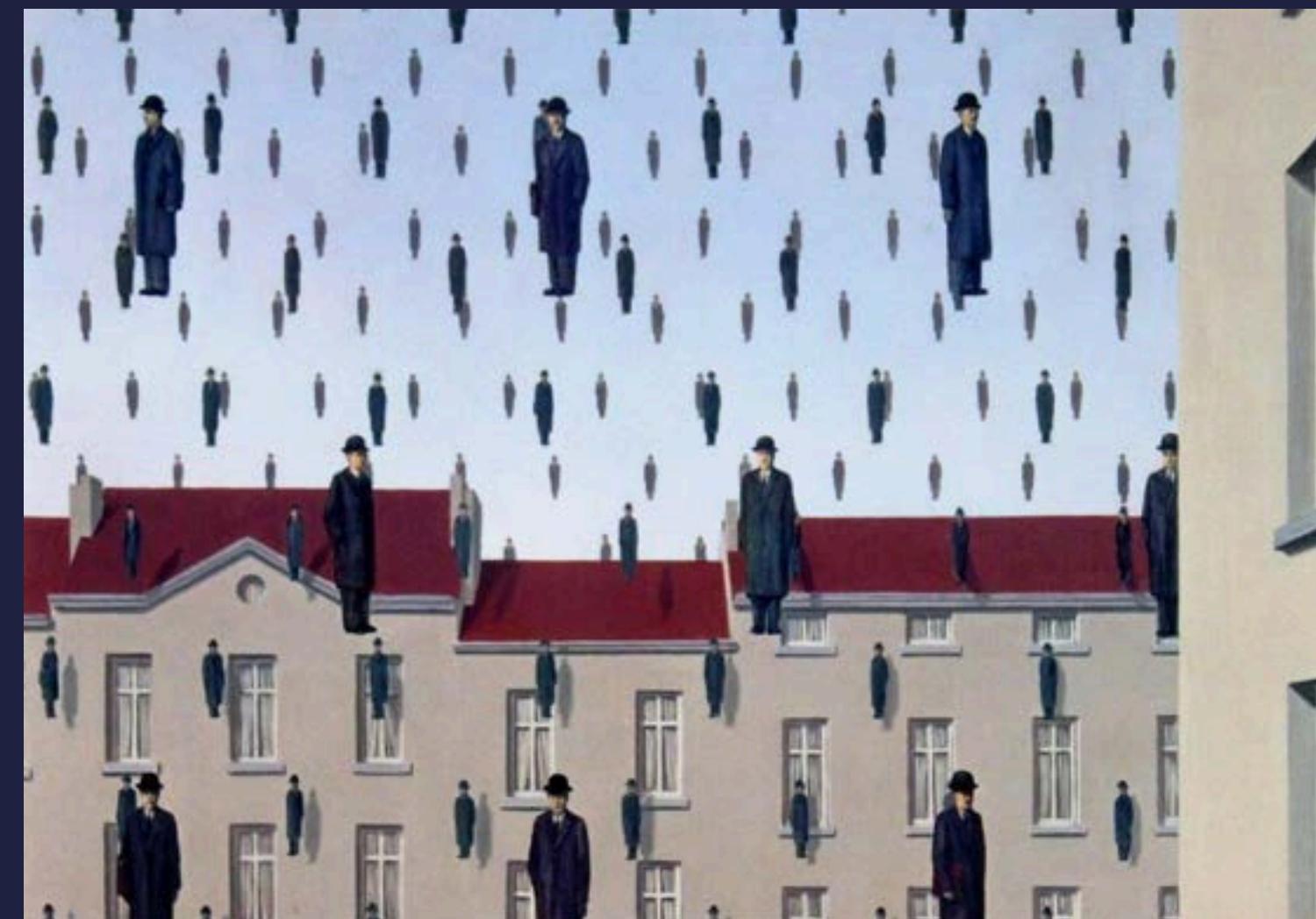
Illusion of gravity-less

Metaphysical world

Multiple perspective



Rene Magritte, *Les Valeurs Personnelles*, 1952



Rene Magritte, *Golconda*, 1953

Specific expression techniques
we applied to EE-Scape design

EE-Scape Design

Through iterative discussion with a mindfulness meditation expert, we designed **four mindful steps** of the VR application, EE-Scape,



Step 1 Observe the Food

A user picks up the food in a room and **closely observes** its surface and shape

Step 2 Food in New Context

The food is placed in **unfamiliar contexts**, not on the dining table or kitchen.

Step 3 The Enlarged Food

The food is **greatly enlarged**. This is not the usual way in which we encounter food.

Step 4 See the Food Again

A user **comes back** to the room and sees the food again, then, feel the difference with Step 1

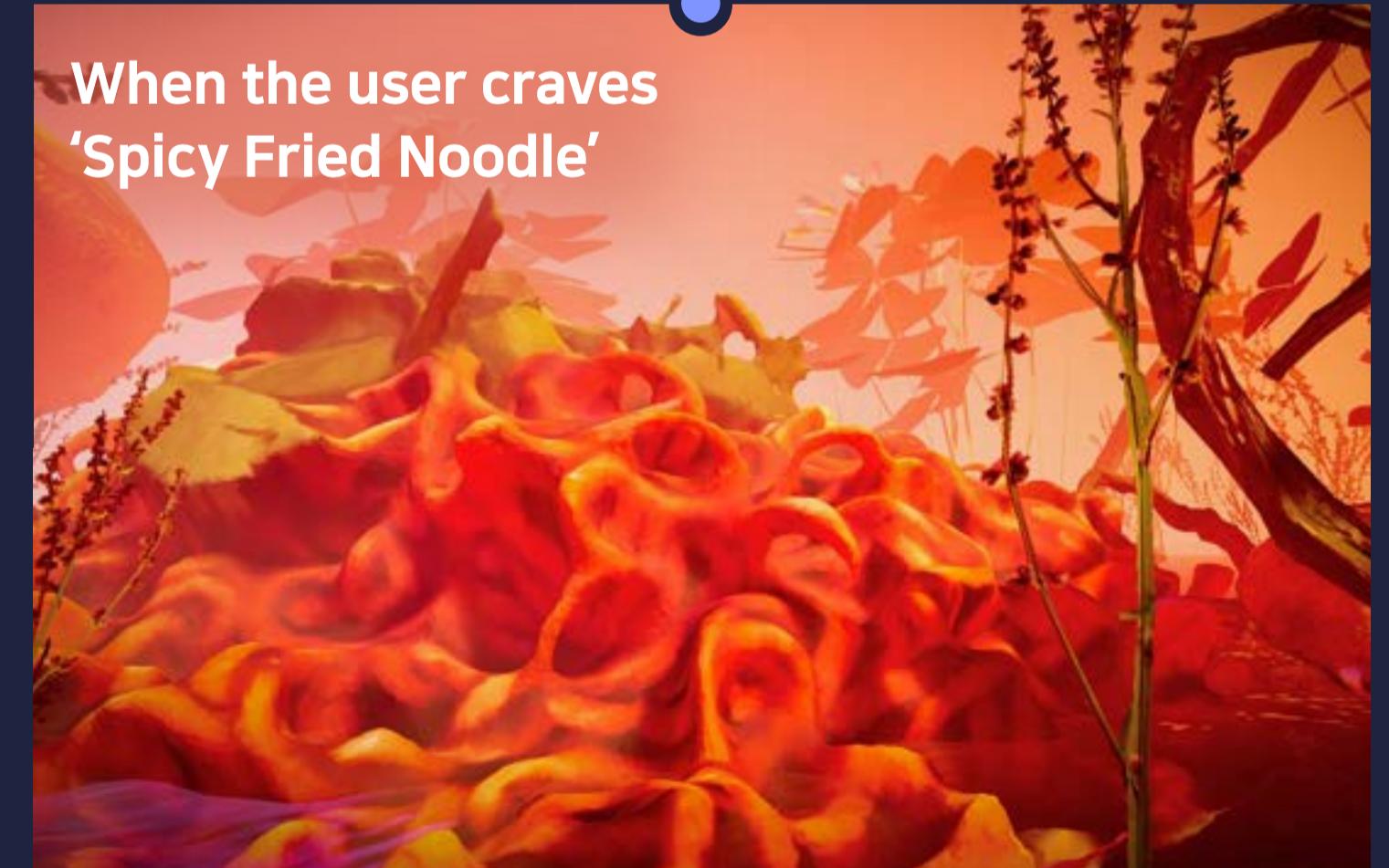
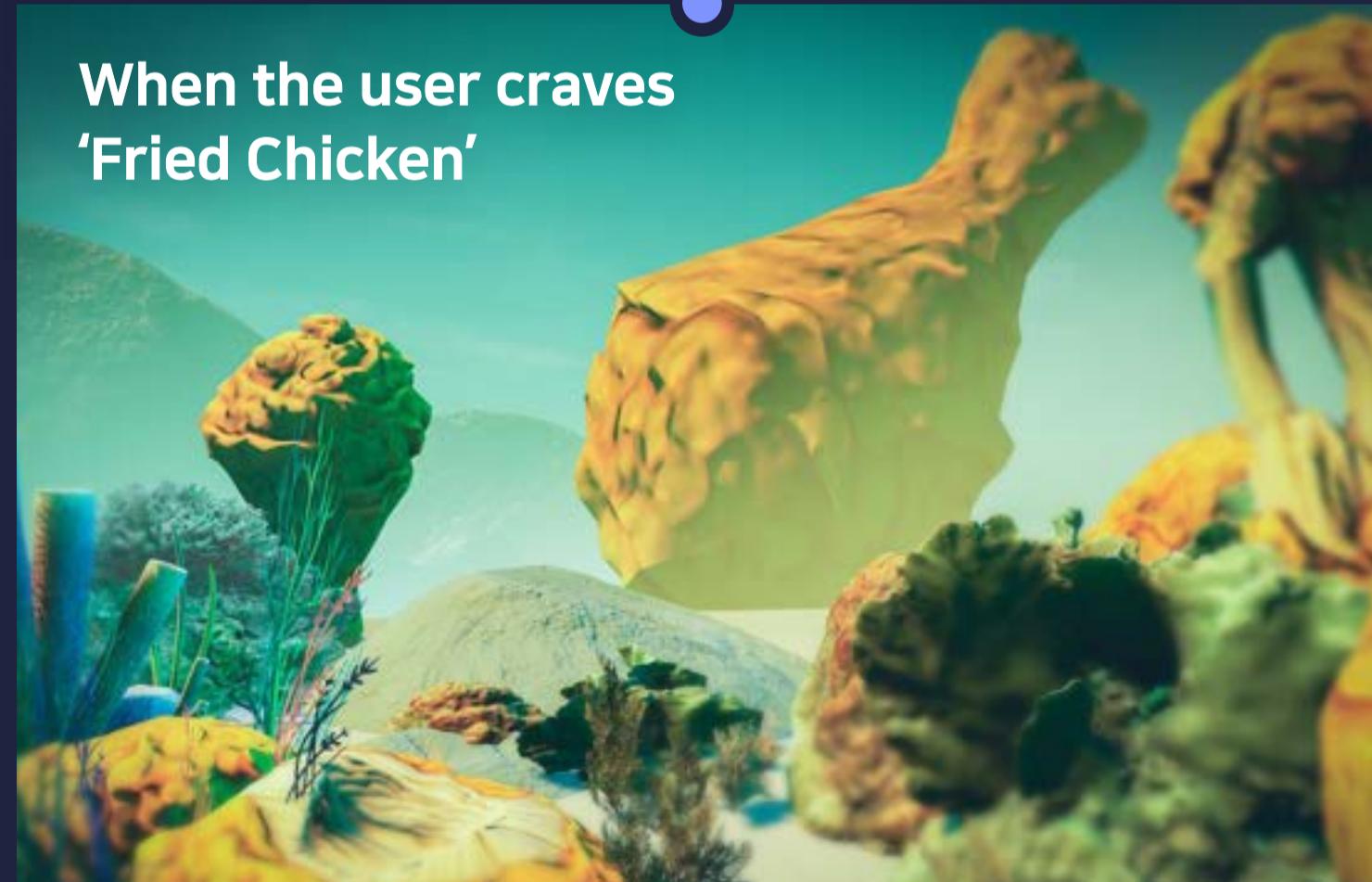
VR INTERVENTION DESIGN

EE-Scape Design

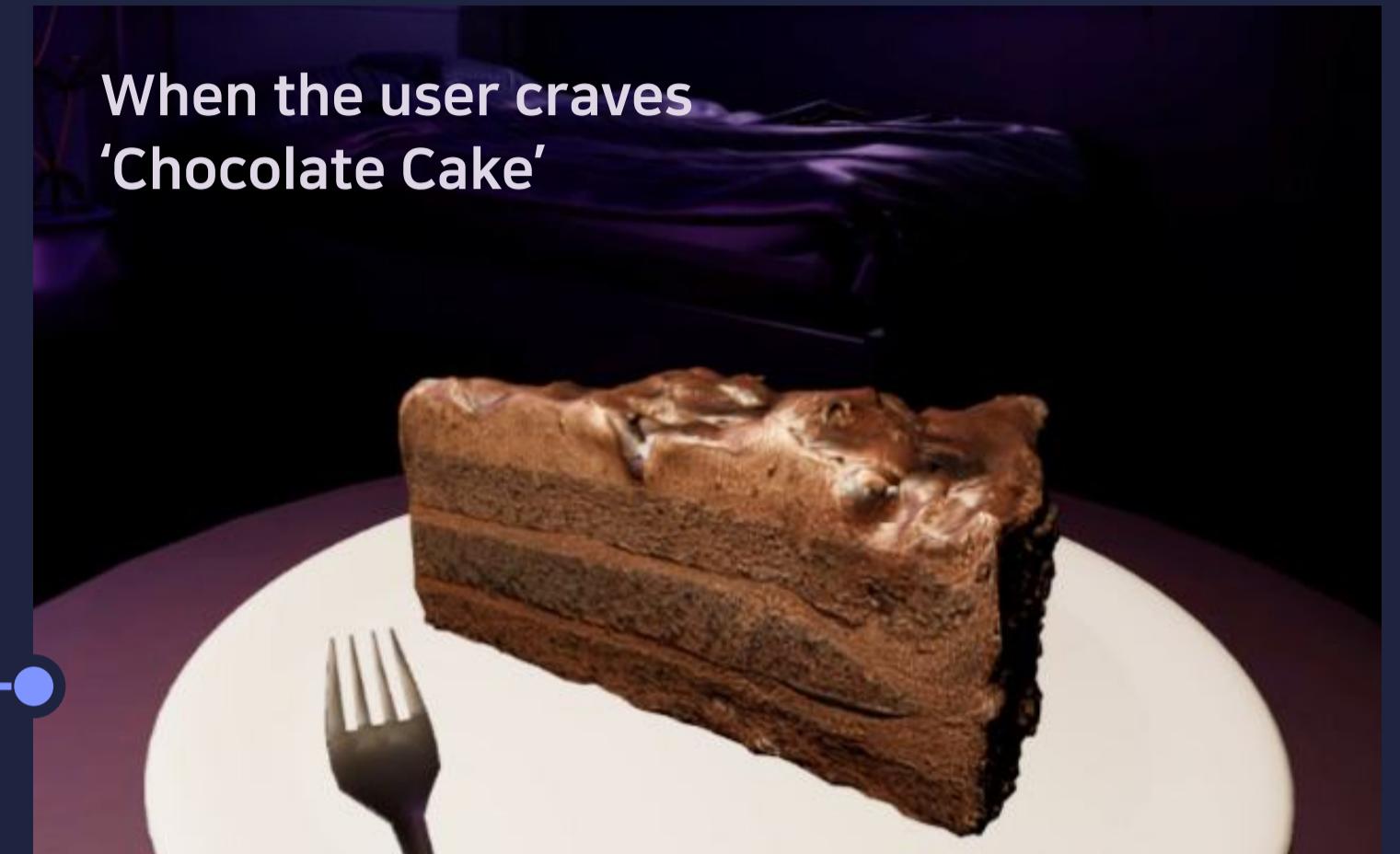
Reflect the specific food that each user is craving at that time

Different people crave different foods in different situations. Based on this, the **VR experience of EE-scape changes according to the food the user craves** at that moment.

- The 3D food in EE-scape changes according to the user's choice.
- At the step of facing 'The Enlarged Food', the selected food is surrounded by virtual landscape, which is composed with visual elements that resemble the characteristics of each food, such as texture and color.



Screenshots of step 3, 'The Enlarged Food', of EE-Scape



Screenshots of step 1, 'Observe the Food', of EE-Scape

USER TEST

Conducted with 10 of emotional night eaters, 6 females (age M = 23.3 years, SD = 4.5) and 4 males (age M = 24.3 years, SD = 3.0)



Pre-survey

- We asked users to describe **how they feeling now** and **what food they want to eat**.
Question 5 aimed to understand each user's perspective on the food

Q1.
What kind of food are you craving right now?

Q2.
How much would you like to eat?
(10-point Likert scale)

Q3.
Why do you want to eat this food?

Q4.
How do you feel now?

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely | <input type="checkbox"/> Joyful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fear | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Annoyed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Calm | <input type="checkbox"/> Bored |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pleasure | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Tired | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused |

Q5.
What words come to mind about this food and why?



EE-scape experience

- Users followed **a step-by-step VR mindfulness meditation** taking a minimum of 5 minutes and a maximum of 10 minutes per person.



Post-survey

- Post-survey had very similar questions to those on the pre-survey in order to **determine changes before and after VR prototype experience**.

Q1.
How much would you like to eat?
(10-point Likert scale)

Q2.
How do you feel now?

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely | <input type="checkbox"/> Joyful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fear | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Annoyed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Calm | <input type="checkbox"/> Bored |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pleasure | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Tired | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused |

Q3.
What words come to mind about this food and why?



Interview

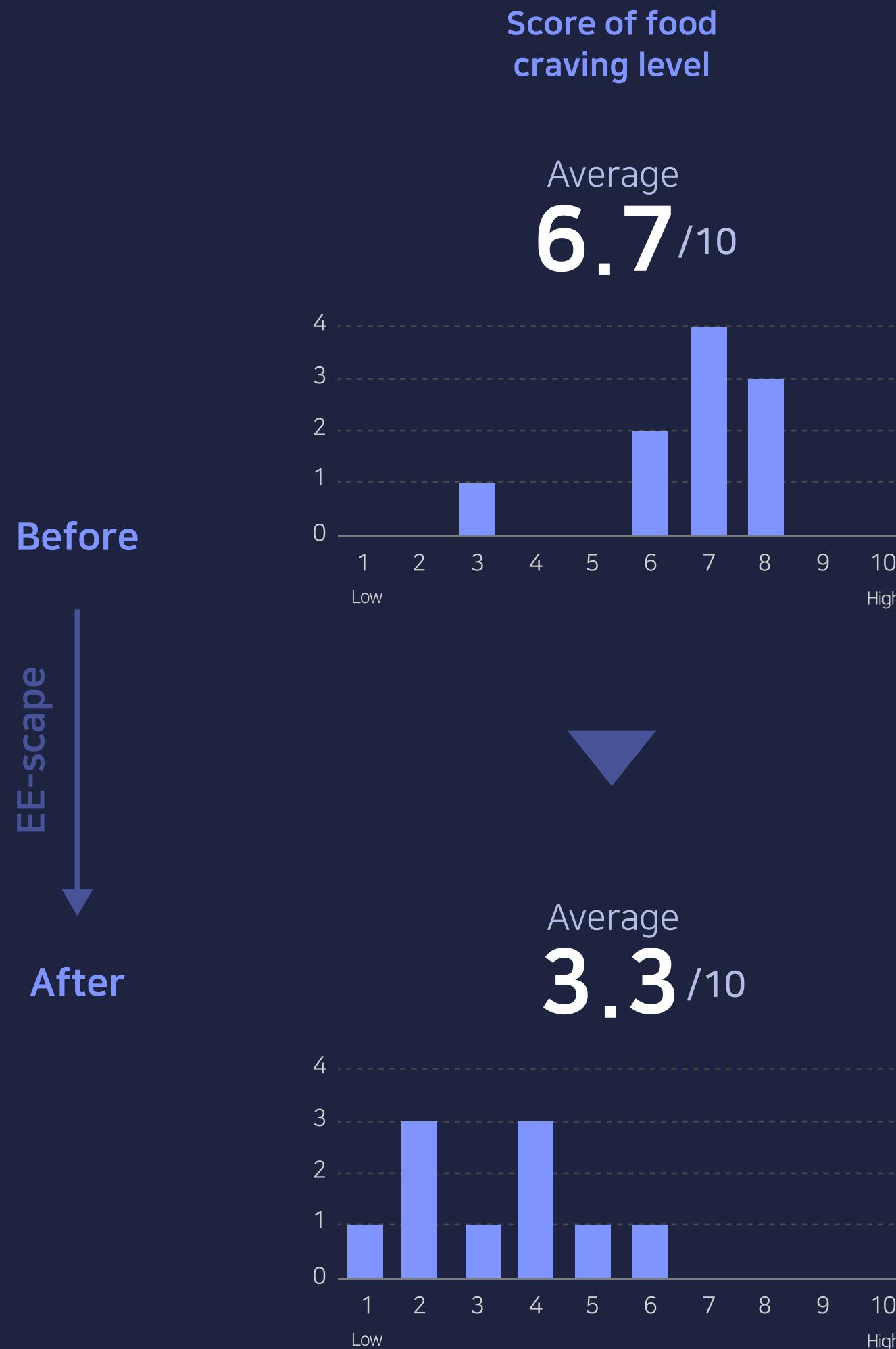
- Interview covered two main subjects:
1. **User reflections** on the experience of the VR prototype
 2. **Potential and improvements** of our approach to regulate emotional eating



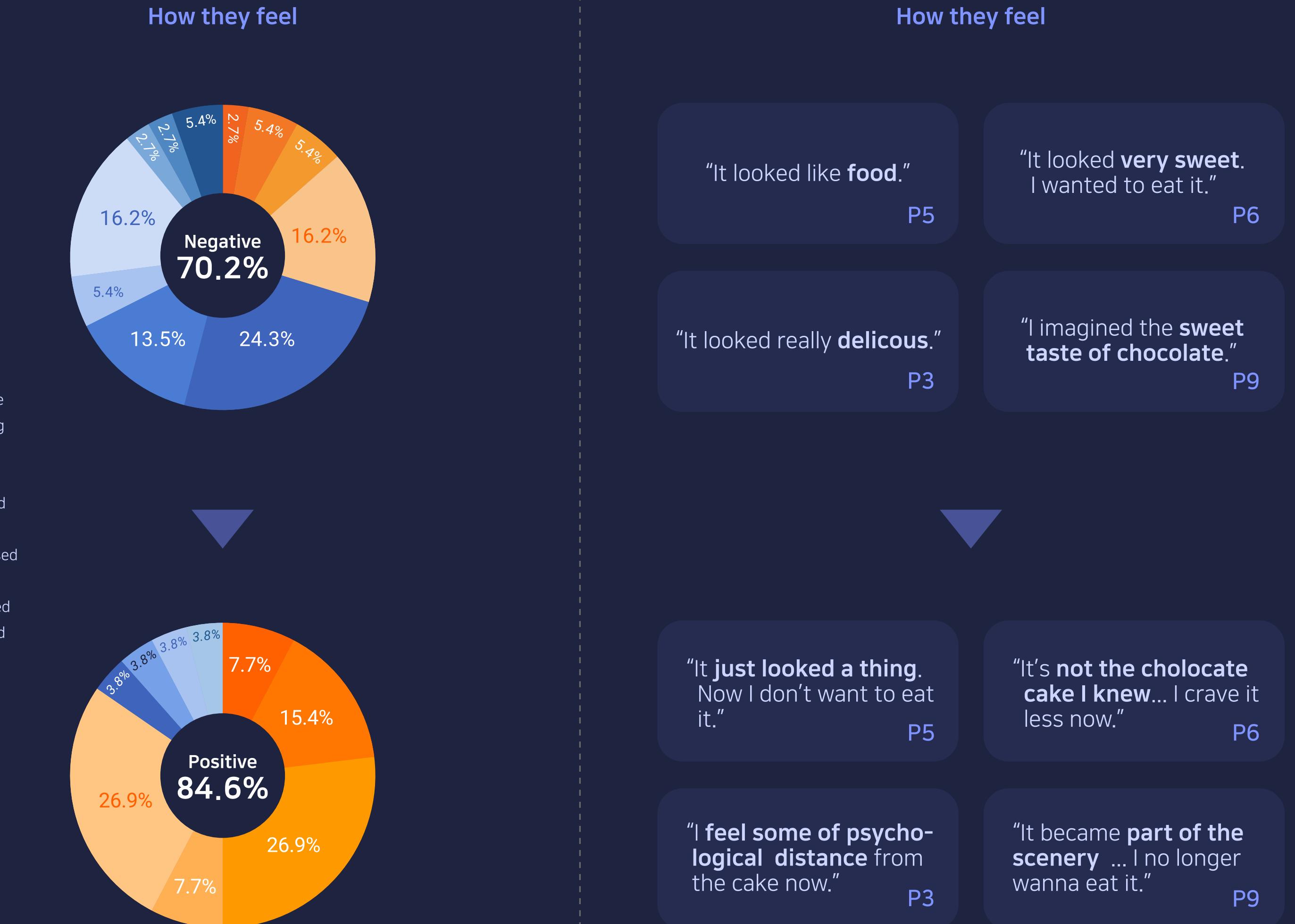
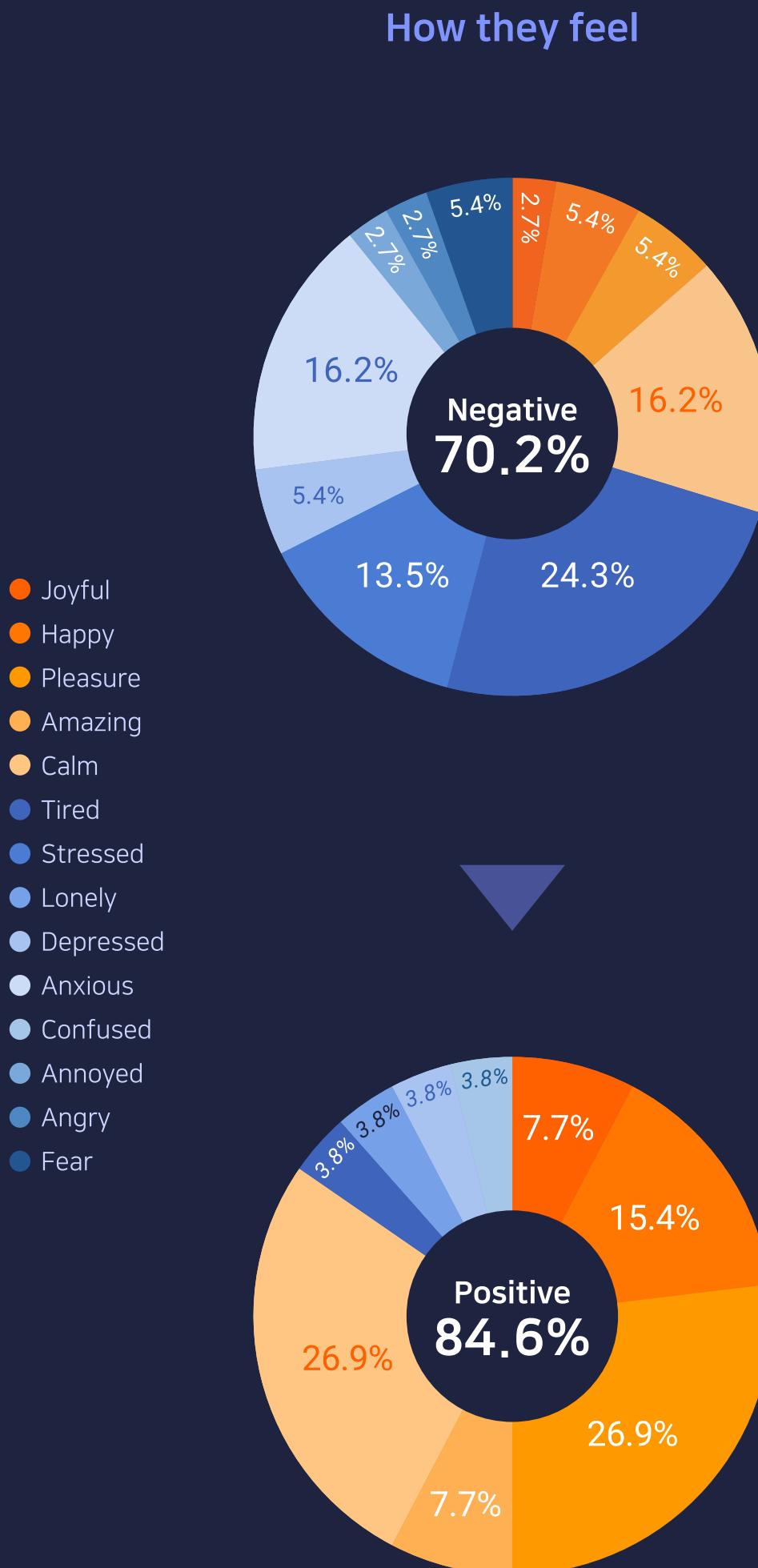
Data Analysis

- Three researchers analyzed all the data collected by user test with thematic analysis.

RESULTS



Reduction of food cravings



RESULTS

Helpful features

From the interview data, we found three features of our VR mindfulness prototype that were helpful to users in reducing their cravings.

■ Effect of experiencing food from a new perspective

Participants indicated that EE-Scape reduced their cravings by **changing their perception of food**.

In particular, seeing food from a new surrealistic perspective across step 2 and step 3, affected participants' attitudes toward food.

■ Effect of focusing elsewhere rather than on a craving

Some participants emphasized that **beautiful and novel environments** of EE-Scape helped them to distract from a focus on cravings.

"I forgot about my appetite since I was more focused in new experiences of EE-Scape." P2

"The virtual environment was so exciting that I could resist the urge to eat." P4

■ Effect of solving emotional problems

The EE-scape helped participants to relieve their negative emotions that urged emotional eating so that they were less inclined to eat.

"My mind is so relaxed by experiencing EE-Scape that I don't have much appetite now." P10

"I usually eat at night when I'm stressed, but now my stress is calmed, so I don't crave food." P7

Improvements

Provide new contents

The content should be constantly renewed. In particular, elements such as the design of the virtual environment around the food or the background music should be different each time to help users overcome their emotional desire to eat by focusing on new experiences. We can use generative AI for continuous content development.

Improve accessibility

The low accessibility of VR headsets makes it challenging to use the service sustainably. In addition, only users having VR devices, among many emotional eaters, can use the service. It is necessary to make the service available on more portable and accessible devices.

Personalize the user experience

Content should be differentiated for each individual user's situation. For example, P6 and P9 felt calm in the universe, while P7 felt uncomfortable there. therefore, each user's visual preference should considered. Also, users who frequently experience EE-scape can gradually become able to control their emotional eating, so the service should provide a variety of content to address underlying problems.