



Study on Online Disinformation Advertising Creative Testing

Summary

Prepared for the Communications Security Establishment (CSE)

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Supplier name: EKOS Research Associates
November 2022

This public opinion research report presents the results of focus groups conducted by EKOS Research Associates on behalf of Communications Security Establishment. The research was conducted in November 2022.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Évaluation de concepts publicitaires sur la désinformation en-ligne

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Évaluation de concepts publicitaires sur la désinformation en-ligne (Final Report, French)

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SUMMARY

A. Campaign Background

Budget 2022 states that “issues ranging from COVID-19 to climate change and increasingly confrontational authoritarian regimes demand the attention of Canada and our allies. The spread of misinformation and disinformation is directly challenging the stability of even the most long-standing democracies. Budget 2022 recognizes those challenges and proposes new action to respond to them...It commits to reinforcing global democracy, to combating illicit financing, and to pushing back against the forces of disinformation and misinformation that threaten public institutions around the world.”

While both misinformation and disinformation involve the sharing of false information, disinformation is maliciously and intentionally spread. The Canadian Centre for Cyber Security also recognizes malinformation and defines the terms as follows: ¹

- Misinformation refers to false information that is not intended to cause harm
- Disinformation refers to false information intended to manipulate, cause damage or guide people, organizations and countries in the wrong direction
- Malinformation refers to information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm

The same publication from the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security also states that: “The effects of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM) cost the global economy billions of dollars each year. Often known colloquially as “fake news”, MDM are damaging to public trust in institutions and, during elections, may even pose a threat to democracy itself. MDM has become a serious concern for consumers and organizations of all sizes.” ¹

Social media plays a key role in the spread of MDM. Social media algorithms favour engagement (engagement is an action on a social media post such as a like, comment or share). The more engagement a piece of content gets, the more likely it is to be rewarded by the algorithm and shown to more users on the platform, leading to further engagement in a snowball effect.²

¹ “How to identify misinformation, disinformation and malinformation”, Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022
<https://cyber.gc.ca/en/guidance/how-identify-misinformation-disinformation-and-malinformation-itsap00300>

² “Everything you need to know about social media algorithms”, Sprout Social, March 2021,
<https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-algorithms/>

Misinformation and fake news appear to spread comparatively quickly through social media channels due to the content's novelty and capacity to illicit emotional responses. Once a user's preference for misinformation or fake news is established, recommendation algorithms may direct people to similar content and encourage people to travel down a 'rabbit hole' of misinformation and fake news.³

The spread of disinformation, specifically, reduces the government's effectiveness in providing Canadians with programs and services. When disinformation centres around vaccine safety, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian democratic process or climate change, it undermines government efforts to protect its citizens with respect to those issues.

The Communications Security Establishment (CSE) will be launching an advertising campaign that will focus on disinformation using what is known about misinformation and its spread. Through this campaign, Canadians will be invited to learn more about disinformation by visiting canada.ca/online-disinformation. This series of focus groups were conducted to test reactions to two different proposed concepts for intended use in the campaign and to assess which concepts and approaches are most appropriate for the target audiences. The information gained through this public opinion research will be shared throughout the CSE to assist it when developing communications products and strategies.

Specifically, the research was used to evaluate how the target audience responds to creative concepts for the Online Disinformation advertising campaign, including:

- the creative captures the attention of participants
- the creative is perceived as well-produced
- the effectiveness of the proposed tagline
- how likely the participants would be to visit [Canada.ca/online-disinformation](https://canada.ca/online-disinformation)

³ "Science and health misinformation in the digital age: How does it spread? Who is vulnerable? How do we fight it?", Public Policy Forum, July 2021, <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ScienceAndHealthMisinformationInTheDigitalAge-PPF-July2021-EN.pdf>

B. Methodology

Concept Testing

Two concepts were tested in eight online focus groups, which included participants from five different regions across the country. Participants logged onto a Zoom video meeting to generally discuss their comfort with distinguishing between information, news and announcements that are “real” or “fake”. Participants subsequently viewed a series of panels proposed to create a 15-second video as well as associated Facebook post, for two separate proposed concepts. They were asked to react to each concept in terms of overall impressions, clarity of message and appropriateness of the approach in encouraging Canadians to visit the CSE’s Disinformation online resource. They were also asked to provide a series of ratings for each concept along similar dimensions.

Participants were recruited to represent a region, rather than one specific city, which was a cost-effective means of obtaining feedback. Eight participants were recruited to attend each discussion, using the *Probit* online panel, targeting Canadians 18 or older, keeping in mind a mix of participants in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic status and parents vs. non-parents (recruitment screener is provided in Appendix A). *Probit* panel members were selected from those who had previously completed one of several waves of the Risk Monitor, where four items were used to calculate a “Disinformation Score”⁴. Only panel members with a Disinformation Score ranging between 3 and 8 were included for recruitment. In total, 46 individuals participated in the concept testing discussions, of the 64 recruited (see details in following table). Discussions occurred on November 8th, 9th and 10th, 2022.

⁴ Respondents were shown 4 statements and asked to indicate whether each was completely or mostly true or false. These 4 statements are: 1-The reported number of COVID-19-related deaths is being exaggerated; 2- Deaths due to COVID-19 vaccines are being intentionally hidden by the government; 3- COVID-19 vaccines can cause infertility; and 4- COVID-19 vaccines can alter your DNA. 3 points were accrued for each "Completely true", 2 points for each "Mostly true", and 1 point for each "Don't know/No response". Overall scores in the index range from 0 (low) to 12 (high).

**Table 1: Number of Participants per Region –
Concept Testing Discussions**

Region	# of Groups	Total # of Recruits	Total # of Participants
Atlantic Ontario, Anglophones in Quebec	3	24	16
Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia	3	24	18
Francophones in Quebec and New Brunswick	2	16	12

Focus group guides (provided in Appendix B) were developed by EKOS in consultation with CSE, along with a rating sheet used to rate each concept and an overall rating and ranking of the top concepts to quantify the results and obtain an initial reaction from each participant prior to discussion. Six of the eight groups were conducted in English, while the two groups held with residents of Quebec were conducted in French. Each focus group took between 65 to 90 minutes to conduct. Participants received an incentive of \$120 for their participation. Video recordings, researchers’ notes and observations from the focus groups formed the basis for analysis and reporting of results.

C. Key Findings

Concept Testing

Overall, there were a few overarching themes expressed by participants when discussing the two concepts:

- Some felt the Government of Canada should be identified earlier in an ad, as this may garner attention earlier.
- For many participants, the reference to go online for more information was not noticeable in either concept; few said they would go online to a Government of Canada website for more information.
- Many participants expressed reservations about the Government of Canada telling Canadians what is true or false. They suggested the focus be on helping Canadians identify misinformation through tips and tricks, being careful to provide neutral information without any political lens.

Both concepts are described in the Detailed Findings section. Below are a brief summaries of participant reactions to the concepts.

What is Dis?

The What is Dis concept was described by most participants as bland or not appealing. Some participants related to the action of scrolling through their phone, as well as with the phrase “Social media platforms favour popularity over fact”. The “What is Dis” question, however, did not resonate with most participants, many of whom expressed a particular dislike for the term “Dis” viewing it as slang. Further, the use of the term “Dis” resulted in the perception that the concept was intended for younger audiences.

Don’t share it?

Some participants favoured the Don’t Share It concept for its quirky humour, making it more attention-grabbing or noticeable approach. Many participants, however, saw the humour as juvenile or “cheesy”. The opening frames of the concept, displaying a blog and scrolling through the site, was seen as relevant to participants, however, when the bear popped onto the screen, many participants felt the attempt to garner attention became “silly”. Most participants also did not like the jingle sung by the bear, in part because of the double negative of the line “If you’re not sure if it’s not true, dooooooon’t share it”.

D. Note to Readers

It should be kept in mind when reading this report that findings from the focus groups are qualitative in nature, designed to provide a richer context rather than to measure percentages of the target population. These results are not intended to be used to estimate the numeric proportion or number of individuals in the population who hold a particular opinion as they are not statistically projectable.

E. Contract Value

The contract value for the POR project is \$47,369.60 (including HST).

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PWGSC Contract Number: CW2246079

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To obtain more information on this study, please e-mail CSE at: media@cse-cst.gc.ca

F. Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of EKOS Research Associates Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the on Communications and Federal Identity and the Directive on the Management of Communications. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed by:



Susan Galley (Vice President)