



# Study on Online Disinformation Advertising Creative Testing (2023-2024)

## *Summary*

**Prepared for the Communications Security Establishment (CSE)**

**Supplier: EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INC.**

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### Prepared for the Communications Security Establishment (CSE)

**Supplier name:** EKOS Research Associates  
November 2023

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 October 2023.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Évaluation de concepts publicitaires sur la désinformation en ligne 2023-2024

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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: <sup>1</sup>

- 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.”

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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “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>

<sup>2</sup> “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, algorithms may direct people to similar content and encourage them to travel down a 'rabbit hole' of misinformation and fake news.<sup>3</sup>

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 continue its advertising campaign to educate Canadians on what disinformation is, while also increasing awareness of who creates it and why they do it. The ads will feature a strong call to action that directs individuals to the campaign [landing page](#) where they can learn more about disinformation.

This series of focus groups were conducted to test reactions to three 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
- how likely the participants would be to visit [Canada.ca/online-disinformation](https://Canada.ca/online-disinformation)

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<sup>3</sup> "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

Three 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 disinformation, what it means and who is creating it, along with motivations for doing so. Participants subsequently viewed a video of a storyboard with voice over proposed to create a 15-second video as well as associated website and social media static ads, for three 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 (recruitment screener is provided in Appendix A). *Probit* panel members were selected from those who registered their interest in participating, based on their age (under 45 or 45 or older, region they live in, gender, whether or not they considered themselves to be a visible minority, and the extent of their participation in and reliance on social media for information). Groups were segmented based on language, and region of the country, as well as based on inclusion in one or more of three target groups for the campaign: women, visible minorities and heavy users of social media. In total, 44 individuals participated in the concept testing discussions, of the 62 recruited (see details in following table). Discussions occurred on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

**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	17
Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia	3	24	17
Francophones in Quebec and New Brunswick	2	16	10

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 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 two groups were conducted in French. Each focus group took roughly 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

A few highlights about views on disinformation and the campaign include:

- Some indicated a preference for Reality Check or Raised Eyebrow because of the humorous approach which they saw as an advantage and even necessary to garner attention. Only a few saw humour as a disadvantage because the sponsor is Government of Canada and disinformation is a serious topic.
- A number of participants expressed reservations about the Government presenting itself as an “authority” on disinformation, perceived that the Government of Canada would be declaring what is true or not, or cautioned that an authoritative tone would reduce the likelihood that some Canadians would go to or use the website to learn more. Many emphasized the need for neutral presentation of examples of what to look for or how to fact check, being careful not to use this as an opportunity to further an agenda.
- That said, most believe that this is an important topic that will benefit Canadians (i.e., a reminder that disinformation exists, that it is important to question sources and motives and cross-reference against other known and trusted sources).
  - A few said that most of those who will be reached by the campaign are already aware of the issue and need for safe practices, or already deep into disinformation and will not heed any messaging put forward by GC on this topic.
  - A few also said they believe that key targets for such a campaign are seniors and children, and more dedicated campaigns may be needed for these groups.

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

### ***Before You Share: Be Aware and Compare***

This was not generally the preferred concept. For many it was described as bland and similar to other ads making it unremarkable. Some also found the bright colours and moving images to be over the top, or juvenile for the topic. Among those who liked the ad, they described the caption



and message as clear and easy to remember. The static ads to be used for social media and websites were generally preferred over the approach to the video.

### ***Reality Check***

While this concept was well liked by some participants, others did not like it, making opinion about this concept the most divided of the three approaches. Those who liked it saw it as very humorous, and therefore memorable and likable. Some of these participants said this helped to create a clear story. Participants who did not like the ad felt it was difficult to link to disinformation and that the message did not go far enough in conveying the need to question and verify. For those who liked the quirky humour used in the video, the static ads were not viewed as positively. While some liked the idea of a check mark featured prominently in the static ads, many did not like the colouring or meaning of the check mark. Some also felt that the video and concept of the check mark oversimplified a complex issue.

### ***Raising an Eyebrow***

Of the three concepts, this one garnered more support. It was seen as relatable because of the use of a commonly understood facial expression. As a result, it was seen as memorable and intriguing, but also conveying a complete message in a clear and concise way. While the static ads were not met with the same level of enthusiasm, most focused on the images used as the element that they did not like and provided suggestions for more appropriate images.

## **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 \$45,192.09 (including HST).

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