

COVID-19 Public Health Measures and Mental Health Concept Testing (2021-22), Phases 1 and 2

Health Canada

Executive Summary

April 2022

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This public opinion research report presents the results of two waves of research consisting of 26 online focus groups conducted by Quorus Consulting Group on behalf of Health Canada. The research consisted of a first phase of 10 online focus groups (from September 23 to September 29, 2021) that focused on young adults 18 to 34 years of age, adults 35 years of age and older, and on members of Indigenous communities. A second phase consisted of 16 online focus groups (from October 13 to October 25, 2021) which focused on youth (18 to 24), seniors (65 and older), parents (with school-aged children), members from Indigenous communities, and ethnic and racialized individuals.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Test de concepts (2021-22) - mesures de santé publique et santé mentale en lien avec la COVID-19, phases 1 et 2.

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Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Nadeau", is written over a light gray, textured rectangular background.

April 11, 2022
Rick Nadeau, President
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

Background

COVID-19 continues to have serious public health measures and mental health implications.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, even as case counts slowly come down and vaccine uptake increases, public health measures have remained an important preventative practise to also help reduce the spread of the virus. However, public support for continuing to practise these measures has wavered – particularly among younger segments of the Canadian population aged 18 to 39 years. To address this, Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada have undertaken work to educate and motivate younger Canadians to continue practising core public health measures.

In addition to normalizing public health measures, Health Canada (HC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) continue to address mounting mental health and substance use stresses that have grown under the pressures of the pandemic through informational and support services.

Public communications efforts to make Canadian aware of and motivate interest in preventative information and free supports continue to be a necessity. This calls for research with Canadians to continue putting their health and safety needs at the heart of HC and PHAC's pandemic response.

Research purpose and objectives

HC and PHAC commissioned Quorus to conduct exploratory research through two phases of focus groups to be held in 2021 and 2022. Research was completed in late 2021 to assist the development of creative advertising concepts. Held in late September, the first phase campaign's early objectives were to reach Canadians aged 18 to 39 years to make them aware and motivate interest in practising core public health measures to protect themselves and the health and safety of others. Held in late October, the objectives of the second phase were to raise awareness of the pandemic's effect on Canadians' mental health and to motivate the use of free resources, tools, and professional support services available through the [Wellness Together Canada](#) web portal.

This research was designed to support the Government of Canada's mandate to pre-test campaign creatives with a media buy over \$1 million and to assist the goals of COVID-19 prevention and public safety measures.¹ It was also designed to elicit insights from audience groups relevant to designing future creative concepts and supporting materials for PHAC and HC COVID-19 advertising and marketing campaigns. It would also further develop the understanding of attitudes towards the campaign's creative concepts, building on knowledge gained from previous public opinion research.

¹ <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30682>

Methodology

This report is based on online focus groups that Quorus completed between September 23 and October 25, 2021.

- A first wave of groups, held in late September 2021, consisted of 10 focus groups, of which four were with young Canadians 18 to 34 years of age, four were with adults 35 years of age and older, one was with members of the general population, 18 years of age and older, and one was with members of Indigenous communities. English sessions were conducted with participants in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Prairies, British Columbia and in the three Territories, and French sessions were held with participants from Quebec.
- A second wave of groups, held from October 13 to October 25, 2021, consisted of 16 focus groups. The sessions were exclusively with specific target audiences, notably: four sessions with youth (18 to 24), three with seniors (65 and older), three with parents (with school-aged children), two with members from Indigenous communities, and four with ethnic and racialized individuals. English sessions were conducted with participants in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Prairies, and in British Columbia, and French sessions were held with participants from Quebec and some francophones in Atlantic Canada.

In total, 162 individuals participated in the research.

Qualitative research disclaimer

Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and to leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is shared by others.

Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.

Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

Research results – phase 1

Four concepts were tested in the first wave of research, namely:

- A. “Hello goodbye,” featuring a series of pandemic-related scenes that showcase some activities and actions that Canadians are being encouraged to continue practicing and others that they can look forward to not having to experience anymore;
- B. “It’s okay,” featuring two characters (Cat and Matt) who are each successfully navigating public health measures in their own ways;
- C. “Rhythm,” an ad featuring various pandemic-related sounds coming together to create a cohesive rhythm or beat; and,
- D. “Good work,” showing people practicing public health measures being celebrated and encouraged to keep up the good work.

“**Hello goodbye**” was fairly well received in most groups, mostly for its lighthearted and memorable approach to communicating the importance of public health measures without being heavy handed or overly negative. Although some could not relate to some of the scenes, many felt the concept took a positive and optimistic angle and it motivated them to keep practicing public health measures because it reminded them of what they did not want to relive while also showing what they could look forward to once the pandemic is over. Participants felt that the main weaknesses in this concept was its ill-timed use of humour, its focus on the past, and the overall flow from beginning to end. There was also a sense that the general messaging lacked originality and that the concept featured information that was already well-known. In terms of the main message, most felt this concept was reminding Canadians to stay the course and to keep practicing public health measures, especially if they do not want to relive the past. Most participants would describe the tone in this concept as lighthearted, humorous, funny, positive and optimistic. That said, not everyone felt that the lighthearted tone was necessarily a positive feature of this concept and would sooner describe the overall tone as trite. If this ad were seen, there was limited interest in visiting the website.

“**It’s okay**” generally received moderate ratings with stronger ratings in a few groups. The key strength of this concept is that it suggests that Canadians have some say in how they practise public health measures and that it did not come across as moralizing. The concept instills confidence in how each Canadian might be practicing public health measures and recognizes that we can all achieve a common goal through individual approaches. Although some could not relate to the main characters, many appreciated that the characters reflected ethnic and gender diversity and that they also appeared to be trendy and healthy. The main concern with this concept was that it was perhaps too accommodating towards all the different ways that one can practice public health measures and that the overall message was somewhat contradictory to what public health agencies are telling them, which is that all public health measures should be practiced rather than

some sort of subset based on personal preferences and lifestyles. For most, the main message focused on reminding them to keep fighting COVID their own way and that together, we will succeed. Overall, participants felt this concept was lighthearted, simple and accepting. If this ad were seen, there was limited interest in visiting the website.

“Rhythm” generally received strong ratings overall, especially in the focus groups with young Canadians. This concept was widely praised for its potential to be a fun, unique, creative and engaging way to remind Canadians about the importance of practising public health measures. Although there was nothing new in the concept, it was communicating known information in a different, non-judgmental way which was refreshing to many. Another commonly noted strength were parts of the tagline that say “We’ve found our rhythm for staying well.” and “don’t miss a beat.” In terms of weaknesses, participants felt the concept was taking a roundabout way to convey a fairly simple message that they have been seeing and hearing far too often. Some were also concerned that the combination of noises might not be pleasant. While a few felt that the ad could still be effective given the self-explanatory nature of the images used and the good tagline on the last frame, most were skeptical that the ad would be effective without any sound. When asked about the main message, many were tempted to just repeat the voice-over script – that the Government is asking us to not miss a beat. The perceived tone largely depended on what participants’ expectations were of the sounds or music that would accompany the images. On a fairly consistent basis, youth were much more likely to perceive positive types of tones whereas adults were for the most part more neutral or negative. This concept would prompt some participants to visit the website, mostly out of curiosity.

“Good work” fared moderately well and was generally more likely to appeal to adults compared to younger Canadians. The unique and creative approach taken to celebrate the many small things and hard work that is done to limit the spread of viruses was praised. Participants felt that an ad that celebrates their efforts and indirectly says “thank you” is a refreshing and welcomed change. They also liked that the ad focuses on the importance to “help us, our friends, and our families stay safe” and “let’s keep up the good work.” Those less inclined to like this concept felt the ad ‘childish’ and that the government was treating Canadians like children who needed positive reinforcement for doing a job well done. Some also considered the tone overly celebratory and joyful which many felt was either inappropriate or disconnected from the fact that Canada was still in a pandemic state. Participants consistently felt that the main message was to “keep up the good work.” Whether the concept was liked or not, participants detected a celebratory, festive and cheerful tone in this concept. There was limited interest in visiting the website based on this concept and those who would visit it, tended to be adults.

After evaluating each concept separately, a brief discussion was held to identify the concept that participants feel would be most successful in motivating them to continue following public health

measures. Concept A (Hello goodbye) was most often selected as the preferred concept, mostly because of humour, relatable scenes and how it depicts what we want to avoid and what we want to achieve. This was closely followed by Concept C (Rhythm), which was liked for its creative potential, its unique musical approach to presenting a comprehensive list of public health measures and its strong tagline. It was a particularly popular concept among youth and younger participants not only for these reasons, but they were also generally more open to the idea of being reminded of the full range of public health measures compared to older audiences.

At the end of most sessions, participants were asked to focus on the four calls-to-action featured across all the concepts and asked to select the one they preferred. Participants tended to prefer options B (Learn how to keep up with healthy habits @ Canada.ca/coronavirus) and D (Let's keep up the good work. Learn how @ Canada.ca/coronavirus):

- Option B was concise and has a clear call to action that points straight to the website. It suggests that the website might have new information and it also suggests, through “keep up” that the information will be changing on an ongoing basis.
- Youth were less inclined to like any option that came across as a directive or an instruction – they did not like being “told what to do.” For this reason, many gravitated towards option D. There was appreciation for its positive, reinforcing and motivating tone. This was also a popular option among those who were no longer interested in learning anything new about public health measures or who felt there was nothing new to learn.

Research results – phase 2

Four concepts were tested in the second wave of research, namely:

- A. “More help,” featuring a series of words preceded by the term “more”, starting with negative words, gradually becoming increasingly positive as the ad progresses;
- B. “Help is everywhere,” featuring three different approaches to reaching out to Canadians who might be experiencing certain types of pandemic-related duress: pandemic news overload on a coffee cup, financial worries on an overdue bill, and isolation on a crossword puzzle;
- C. “Get help here,” an ad featuring four different approaches that each show a scene that are intended to depict loneliness or isolation: an empty park bench, a sofa in a family room, a table at a diner, and public transportation bench.

“More help” garnered very mixed reactions. Those who liked it could relate to the words featured, they appreciated the simplicity in the overall approach and the logical flow of the words, from

negative to positive, as well as the background colouring from dark to light. The repetition of the word “more” was also effective. Those who liked the concept less felt it did not grab their attention and that there was too much to read. To some, the concept felt unoriginal, outdated or of low production value. It was also noted that the concept lacked an early “hook” to keep them engaged and that the negativity at the beginning of the ad would likely deter them from wanting to see more. For most, the main message was related to “help” or “support” - that even though the pandemic has been difficult, there is hope and help to make things better for Canadians, and that some of this help is being offered by the federal government. The call to action to visit the website was for the most part clear to participants. In most groups, there were a few participants who indicated they would potentially click on the link, even if only out of curiosity to see what type of “free” help the government would have to offer. Even some who may not feel that they themselves needed help, mentioned that they may want to see what information or supports there are so that they can pass it along to others in their lives.

“Help is everywhere” garnered a moderate amount of appeal in most groups. Appeal was largely driven by relatability to the narrative or the situation shown (especially paying bills) and that the concept featured people, which enhanced the relatability of the concept. Getting a drink at a coffeeshop was not necessarily something that everyone could relate to, especially those who lived outside urban centers or those who said that they hadn’t gone out much during the pandemic. The voice over script was a positive element of this concept, as were the words “Help is here” above the URL. Those who liked it less could not relate personally or struggled to make a connection between the scenes (coffee shop or paying bills) and the pandemic and to COVID-related mental health issues. For all three variations, many suggested showing the face of someone who is visibly sad, struggling or otherwise in distress or in need of help, in order to enhance relatability as well as the main message. Due to some of the confusion related to the coffeeshop and paying bills, the perceived main messages were not always understood as they were intended. That said, the overarching main messages that were seen were that the government of Canada is here to help with mental health and substance use issues and is offering free support online. For the most part, the calls to action were seen as the same as the main messages. Visiting the website was also understood by the majority of participants as the intended and most important call to action, however, there was limited interest in visiting the website based on what was shown in these concepts.

“Get help here” generally received middle-of-the-road to positive reactions from participants. The creative execution of going from dark to light was deemed effective as it clearly depicted a way out, or hope. The voice over was seen as a strong element and the overall tone was considered empathetic, which was generally appreciated. The call to action to “get help” also appeared early in the concept, helping to draw viewers in. In terms of relatability, the park bench (C1) and couch (C2) were the most successful. Those who liked it less felt the concept in general was boring or

gloomy (at the beginning) and would not likely catch their attention. Others conveyed that the images shown didn't speak to them or their situation. Many across all groups felt a person should be featured and that the concept would be improved if it combined the images from all four concepts to better convey the notion of "anywhere." The main message of this concept was generally seen as a call for people to seek help for mental health issues resulting from the pandemic, and to seek it from the Government of Canada for free – no matter where they are, and no matter when. The call to action to visit the website for more information or for help was clear for most participants. A few in each group indicated they would click on the link to find out what type of free support was offered, although if they would, it would mainly be out of curiosity or to pass along to others.

After evaluating each concept separately, a brief discussion was held to identify the concept that participants feel would be most effective. The concept that received the most positive feedback and that was most often selected as the preferred one to be produced, was concept C, with A and B not too far behind, essentially tied for second place. Concept C was generally seen as the most comprehensive, relatable and "complete" concept. The idea to "Get help" conveyed early on as well as the prompt start of the voice over contributed to this. The visual of going from dark to light and the hope or positive outcome this insinuated were also appreciated. In this concept, the variations with the empty couch and the empty park bench tested better than the other variations although there was strong support for using variety of settings within a single ad rather than using one setting.

In two groups with Indigenous participants, radio concepts were tested – one in English and one in French. In both groups, the radio concepts received overwhelmingly positive feedback, mostly for having a relatable and to-the-point message conveyed with clear language and for being an ad that would engage them from beginning to end. Notorious Cree and Samian were recognized and popular among Indigenous youth on social media and great people to relay this message. "Culturally responsive" in particular was mentioned as a very positive term in the English concept. Participants also liked that there would be help in Indigenous languages and that more languages should be included. It was suggested that a simpler, shorter URL without hyphens would be better and more memorable.

In most groups, a brief discussion was held about the expectations for website content. Suggestions included a 24/7 phone number to speak directly to a mental health professional, a list of local and regional resources, an online live chat feature, FAQs on mental health, advice on how people can help themselves, including coping mechanisms, and free group-based or one-on-one counseling sessions.

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