



Motives and Methods:

Building Resilience to Online Misinformation in Canada

Digital Equity and Inclusion Brief



MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization for digital media literacy. Our vision is that people across Canada have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. MediaSmarts has been developing digital media literacy programs and resources for Canadian homes, schools, and communities since 1996. MediaSmarts also conducts and disseminates original research that contributes to the development of our programs and resources and informs public policy on issues related to digital media literacy.

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Land Acknowledgement

MediaSmarts acknowledges that it is based on the traditional unceded and occupied lands of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg. With gratitude, we acknowledge the territory to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to building positive relationships with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples from coast to coast to coast.

We strive to ground our research processes in care and reciprocity, and this includes being in a constant state of learning – especially when it comes to understanding the digital well-being and experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities across Canada. We commit to creating and maintaining respectful processes and relationships that recognize and seek to address power imbalances across the digital media literacy landscape.



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Introduction

Across Canada, many communities are unequally impacted by the digital divide. This divide is characterized by lower digital access and skills, and reduced opportunities to fully participate in crucial services and benefits online (such as education, employment, and elections). [Research](#) continues to illustrate the importance of capturing the needs and experiences of groups whose digital inequality often intersects with race, class, gender, age, and other social, economic, and cultural contexts. For instance, Canadians in rural communities, Indigenous communities, low-income families, newcomer families, and who identify as female all tend to have lower digital access, skills, and opportunities than their counterparts.¹

This digital equity and inclusion (DEI) brief highlights findings from MediaSmarts' [Motives and Methods: Building Resilience to Online Misinformation in Canada](#) study. MediaSmarts designed the Motives and Methods project to better understand Canadians' fact-checking and sharing behaviours and to determine best practices for building resilience to online

misinformation in Canada. This project builds on MediaSmarts' successful [Break the Fake \(BTF\)](#) program, which encourages Canadians to think critically and fact-check information before they share it online. We developed five new *BTF* videos for this study, including new developments in misinformation (such as visual misinformation). The videos incorporated two different kinds of intervention messaging: *motivation* (why it is important to verify information online) and *methods* (how to verify information). Using a mixed-methods study conducted over two phases (a survey and interactive focus groups), we then evaluated the effect these interventions had on participants' ability to recognize and respond to online misinformation.

The first phase of the study involved a survey of 5,000 Canadians divided into six groups. Each of the five groups watched a different *BTF* video, while one control group received no video. The survey aimed to evaluate:

- Changes in participants' information verification processes before, and after,

¹ See: Sam Andrey et al., "Mapping Toronto's Digital Divide," *The Brookfield Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 2021, <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/95dc-Mapping-Torontos-Digital-Divide.pdf>;
Ali Cheshmehzangi et al., "The growing digital divide in education among primary and secondary children during the COVID-19 pandemic: An overview of social exclusion and education equality issues," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2022.2062515>;
Michelle Schira Hagerman and Sima Neisary, "Digital literacies learning needs in rural Ontario elementary schools: Teacher insights," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.6275>;
Michael Haight et al., "Revisiting the digital divide in Canada: The impact of demographic factors on access to the internet, level of online activity, and social networking site usage," *Information, Communication & Society*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.891633>;
E. Dianne Looker and Victor Thiessen, "Beyond the Digital Divide in Canadian Schools: From Access to Competency in the Use of Information Technology," *Social Science Computer Review*, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439303256536>;
Josh Turner, "Bridging the Gap: Unraveling the Digital Divide (DDN2-A26)," *Canada School of Public Service, Learning Catalogue*, 2024, <https://www.cspc-efpc.gc.ca/tools/articles/digital-divide-eng.aspx>;
Jasmine Winter and Justine Boudreau, "Supporting Self-Determined Indigenous Innovations: Rethinking the Digital Divide in Canada," *Technology Innovation Management Review*, 2018, https://timreview.ca/sites/default/files/article_PDF/WinterBoudreau_TIMReview_February2018.pdf.

watching a *BTF* video.

- Participants' perceptions of the *BTF* intervention, including accessibility and the relevance and impact of the video message.
- Participants' fact-checking attitudes and aptitudes, such as what motivates people to share information and why, how often they fact-check, and whether they are confident in their ability to do so.

The second phase consisted of interactive focus groups with 30 participants who had taken the survey. This rich, qualitative data allowed us to gain a nuanced understanding of key patterns, themes, and demographic differences that surfaced in the survey.

In this DEI brief, we present demographic differences from our survey findings (see *Appendix* for a complete list of survey demographics), focusing on factors identified in research as impacting or intersecting with the digital divide. Specifically, we highlight the digital media literacy needs that surfaced based on participant's gender identity, racial identity, education, and region.² For each, we discuss findings related to the different components of the survey, in which participants:

- Answered demographic questions;
- Watched [Break the Fake \(BTF\)](#) video interventions, designed to teach people how and why to verify if something is true online and how to recognize misinformation;

- Engaged in discernment exercises, where they were asked to determine if information was true or false, explain how they came to their conclusion and how likely they would be to share this information in their daily lives;
- Answered questions regarding their knowledge and confidence in engaging with online information, as well as recognizing and responding to misinformation; and
- Answered questions about the style and content of the *BTF* videos.³

We conclude this DEI brief with recommendations for addressing misinformation in Canada that speak to these unique demographic findings.



² Age, an additional key factor impacting the digital divide, is discussed within the [research report](#). For example, in the qualitative focus groups, one of five small groups consisted of older adults (55+). We positioned older adults as a community of focus in our report as research shows they are often more vulnerable to believing and sharing online misinformation.

³ For a more detailed description of the study design, see our [research report](#). If you are interested in viewing the survey instrument used in the Motives and Methods study, please contact our Director of Research at info@mediasmarts.ca.

Demographics

Gender Identity

In the discernment exercises⁴, compared to cisgender⁵ men (n=2332), cisgender women (n=2451) were:

- More likely to present a false bias (to say information was false, not true).⁶
- More likely to say they guessed as a way of assessing the veracity of information.
- Less likely to say they looked information up or that they came to a decision because they knew about the topic.
- More likely to share information overall (regardless of whether it was true or false).

When self-reporting their experiences, knowledge, and confidence with online information, compared to men, women were:

- Less likely to get their news online.
- Less likely to think information on social media platforms is fact-checked.
- Less likely to say they are good at figuring out what is real and not real online.
- Less confident in their ability to recognize deepfakes.
- Less likely to know how to conduct reverse-

image searches.

- Less likely to know about fact-checking tools (like Snopes).

In responding to the short *BTF* intervention videos they watched during the survey, compared to men, women were:

- More likely to say the video made them think about what they share online.
- More likely to say the video was easy to follow and they liked the style.
- Less likely to say the video was too long or hard to follow.

While there were few significant differences between gender-diverse⁷ participants and cisgender participants, there were a few differences in their response to the *BTF* videos. Compared to cisgender men and women, gender-diverse participants were:

- More likely to say they found the video easy to understand.
- Less likely to say they can apply the video to their lives.
- Less likely to say the video made them rethink what to share online.

⁴ For more information on the discernment exercises, see our [research report](#).

⁵ For simplicity, moving forward we refer to 'cisgender men' as 'men' and 'cisgender women' as 'women'.

⁶ Since most of the examples we provided in the study were true, this means women were less successful in discerning true from false information, following the general false bias we observed in our overall findings for the total sample

⁷ In this study, gender-diverse participants included those who identified as transgender, genderfluid, non-binary, Two-Spirit, or an additional gender identification that they specified.

Racial Identity

In the discernment examples, compared to the general sample⁸, participants who identified as Indigenous, Black, or a Person of Colour (IBPOC) (n=1242) were:

- More likely to present a truth bias (to say the information was true not false).⁹
- Less likely to say they guessed as a means of determining whether information was true or false.
 - *Black* participants (n=374) were most likely to look up information or discuss it with someone as a means of verifying information.
- More likely to share information overall (regardless of whether it was true or false).

When self-reporting their experiences, knowledge and confidence with online information, IBPOC participants were overall more common consumers, sharers, and verifiers of online news and information than the general sample. They were:

- More likely to say they got their news online.
- More likely to regularly share information and post things online.
 - Additionally, *Black* participants were most likely to say they check whether information is true before sharing it.

- More likely to say they know what a deepfake is and have seen it online.
- More confident in their ability to identify AI-generated images.

However, IBPOC participants were also:

- More likely to say they don't know how to tell whether a source is reliable.
- More likely to say fact-checking tools are hard to find.

When it came to their response to the *BTF* video interventions:

- Participants who identified as Black or as a Person of Colour were more likely to distrust the message of the video and say they are suspicious of who made the video.
- IBPOC participants were more likely to say the video was too long and hard to understand.
 - *Black* participants in particular were least likely to remember the video.
- IBPOC participants were more likely to say they can apply what they learned from the video to their lives.

⁸ 'General sample' here refers to the overall trends presented by the total survey sample.

⁹ Since most of the examples we provided in the study were true, this means that IBPOC participants were more successful in discerning true from false information, in comparison to the false bias that was the overall trend in this survey.

Education

In the discernment exercises, there were no significant differences in discerning between true and false information or sharing information based on participants' level of education. However, when it came to the process of assessing information, those with a *high school education or lower* (n=1326) were far more likely to say they guessed to determine whether information was true or false while those who have *at least a college or undergraduate education* (n=3676) were more likely to judge the veracity of information based on how reliable or unreliable it appeared to them.

When it came to self-reported experiences with online information, compared to those with a college or undergraduate education or higher, those with a high school education or less were:

- Less likely to get their news online.
- Less likely to say they follow the news.
- Less likely to say they check to see whether online information is true before sharing.
- Less likely to say they know what fact-checking tools such as Snopes are.

Those with a high school education or less were also:

- Less likely to say that social media is less reliable than news websites.
- Less likely to say that they question everything they see online.
- Less likely to say they are good at figuring out what is real and not real online.

- Less likely to say fact-checking everything is impossible.

When it came to questions about the style and content of the videos, those with a high school education or less were:

- Less likely to report that they already know what the video is trying to say.
- Less likely to say that the video made them think about what they share online.
- Less likely to say that they can apply what they learned in the video to their daily life.
- Less likely to trust the message of the video.

Region

A few regional differences stand out in our study findings. Compared to other regions¹⁰:

- Participants in Northern Canada (n=156) were most likely to say they get their news online, followed by participants in Western Canada (n=601).
- Participants in Northern Canada were most likely to say they regularly share information and/or post things online.
- Participants in Western Canada were most likely to know about fact-checking tools.
- Participants in the Prairies (n=856) and Western Canada were most likely to say they knew what a deepfake is and to say they had seen a deep fake online.
- Participants in the Prairies (n=856) were most likely to say they do not really follow the news, and that they do not trust the media.



¹⁰ For a full breakdown of the geographic regions covered in the study, please see the table at the end of the *Appendix*.

Discussion and Recommendations

In our [Motives and Methods](#) research report, we provide recommendations for designing effective misinformation interventions based on our overall survey findings. The recommendations in this section specifically relate to the demographic group findings discussed in this DEI brief (which highlight the different digital media literacy needs of participants based on their gender identity, racial identity, education, and region). Below we summarize three overarching recommendations for the design of effective interventions for addressing misinformation in Canada based on these findings.

1. Interventions should **consider and respond to differing digital media literacy needs created by the digital divide and other forms of socioeconomic inequality**. A one-size-fits-all approach is not always effective due to varying levels of digital access and skills experienced by communities who are impacted by the digital divide.
2. Given how quickly technology evolves, and the additional complexities created by the intersection of digital and other socioeconomic inequalities, **ongoing research** is required to understand and address the needs of those unequally impacted by the digital divide.
3. Interventions should be tested with diverse groups of participants, especially those from communities unequally impacted by the digital divide, to gather **user feedback**. The unique lived contexts of equity-deserving communities can significantly impact the way they experience and respond to misinformation and interventions developed to address it. Testing interventions early in the development process can provide valuable insights regarding accessibility and efficacy for these groups to better meet their digital media literacy needs.

In the rest of this section, we provide recommendations based on three key DEI findings surfaced in our demographic analysis. We briefly discuss each key finding in relation to established research, then provide related recommendations for designing effective misinformation interventions.

Key DEI Finding 1:

Self-reported knowledge and confidence in fact-checking processes and tools is impacted by gender identity and education.

- **Gender identity:** women's lower self-reported knowledge and confidence in this survey reflects research findings that women tend to understate their technological knowledge levels compared to men.¹¹ Our findings may also reflect the gender digital divide,¹² which is characterized by women often experiencing lower digital access, skills and empowerment, compared to men.
- **Education:** lower self-reported knowledge and confidence among participants with a high school education and below may demonstrate the inadequate and inconsistent nature of digital media literacy education in Canada. Digital media literacy is often introduced late in Canadian schools, relegated to optional subjects, or taught separately rather than as an integrated discipline. Therefore, K-12 students may have access to only a patchwork of curricula, mostly aimed at teaching what are considered “basic” digital skills, which excludes those that are essential for recognizing and responding to misinformation.¹³ This is further compounded by the absence of coordinated efforts to provide Canadians with digital media literacy education at all stages of life. Those who do not receive digital media literacy education in schools and continue to lack educational opportunities beyond the school-setting, must navigate evolving and increasingly necessary

11 See: Zhihui Cai, Xitao Fan, and Jianxia Du, “Gender and Attitudes toward Technology Use: A Meta-Analysis,” *Computers & Education*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.11.003>; Mackenzie A. Christensen, “Tracing the Gender Confidence Gap in Computing: A Cross-National Meta-Analysis of Gender Differences in Self-Assessed Technological Ability,” *Social Science Research*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2023.102853>.

12 Ali Acilar and Øystein Sæbø, “Towards Understanding the Gender Digital Divide: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1108/gkmc-09-2021-0147>.

13 See: Tea Hadziristic, “The State of Digital Literacy: A Literature Review,” *The Dais*, 2018, <https://dais.ca/reports/the-state-of-digital-literacy-a-literature-review/>; MediaSmarts, “Young Canadians in a Wireless World, Phase IV: Trends and Recommendations,” 2023, https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/2023-07/report_ycwiv_trends_recommendations.pdf.

technologies on their own, leaving them vulnerable to online misinformation.

Recommendations:

- **Digital media literacy education:** on a systemic level, a two-fold approach is required to ensure digital media literacy education within and beyond K-12 classrooms:
 - Canada requires a curricular framework for digital media literacy education in Canadian schools to foster a unified and flexible approach to digital media literacy education in K-12 classrooms across Canada.
 - Additionally, a national action plan for digital media literacy (discussed in detail in the ‘Next Steps’ section) is needed to support equitable and inclusive digital media literacy education beyond K-12 classrooms, as a life-long learning endeavour. Such an approach is essential to make sure all Canadians receive vital digital media literacy skills for preventing and addressing complex online harms, including misinformation.
- **Prioritize motivational messaging and clear, practical tools:** for groups who have lower self-reported knowledge and confidence (like women and those with lower education levels) interventions can center motivational messaging and clear, practical tools. In our [research report](#), we also recommend approaches that center **intellectual humility**; however, this may be more useful for groups who typically report higher self-confidence and knowledge (such as men).

Intellectual humility involves recognizing the limits of our own knowledge and being open to the possibility of being wrong.

Key DEI Finding 2:

Levels of suspicion and distrust towards media are impacted by racial identity, education, and region.

- **Racial identity:** the higher levels of suspicion and distrust towards the message of the *BTF* videos, and who made them, aligns with research that shows IBPOC people's trust in media is declining. This is due to the systemic racism they have faced in all media forms, including harmful narratives and stereotypes, online hate, and lack of representation.¹⁴
- **Education:** mistrust in the messaging of the *BTF* videos, paired with the low likelihood of following the news, among people with a high school education and below supports research findings that people with lower formal education have less trust in media because they are often not well-served or represented by it.¹⁵
- **Region:** despite being highly urbanized, the Prairie provinces have [higher shares](#) of people living in rural areas than most Canadian provinces. Therefore, participants from the Prairies may be less likely to follow the news or trust the media due to the continued disparate quality and consistency of internet connectivity in rural communities, which includes online media.¹⁶

Recommendations:

- **Consultation and representation:** consultation with members of diverse communities is essential to consider and address factors

¹⁴ See: Minelle Mahtani, "Representing minorities: Canadian media and minority identities," 2001, *Canadian Ethnic Studies*; Asmaa Malik and Sonya Fatah, "Newsrooms Not Keeping up with Changing Demographics, Study Suggests," 2019, *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/newsrooms-not-keeping-up-with-changing-demographics-study-suggests-125368>.

¹⁵ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Richard Fletcher "Public Perspectives on Trust in News," *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, 2024, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/public-perspectives-trust-news>.

¹⁶ AdCanada, "How Geography Impacts Media Access, Usage, and Engagement: January 2020," 2020 *AdCanada Media Usage Study*, 2020, https://adcanadamedia.ca/uploads/files/2020%20Study/2020_AgeGender_Prairies_Connectivity_RV.pdf.

that impact their trust in media, such as negative experiences with media that may overlook or misrepresent them. Such consultations will allow interventions to be more representative of these groups.

- The problem of representation extends to the lack of diversity in technology, media, and digital media literacy sectors. Decision-makers in these sectors (such as producers, industry leaders, etc.) need to be more diverse and representative of a broad group of people - especially those from under-represented, equity-deserving communities.
- **Be transparent:** viewers may be suspicious of the creators of misinformation interventions, potentially affecting its efficacy. When creating interventions to address misinformation, tell people who you are (what your organization does) and where they can learn more about the work you do. Tell people, in a clear and accessible way, about the goals and objectives of your intervention including how it was funded.

Key DEI Finding 3:

Relatability and accessibility of interventions is impacted by gender identity, racial identity, and education.

- **Gender identity:** gender-diverse participants found the *BTF* video interventions less applicable and impactful in their lives, which reflects the recorded lack of representation they often experience in media more broadly.¹⁷
- **Racial identity:** differing lived experiences, cultural reference points, or language needs may contribute to our finding that IBPOC participants were more likely to find the *BTF* videos too long or hard to understand.
- **Education:** similar to gender-diverse and IBPOC participants, the lower applicability and impact in the lives of participants with lower education levels reflect research findings that they do not feel well-served or represented by media.¹⁸

Recommendations:

- **Relevance to diverse lived experiences:** video interventions should resonate with users' every day, lived experiences. Interventions should therefore include actionable advice that is inclusive of a diversity of experiences, avoiding the assumption that all lived experiences are similar.
- **Simplicity:** video interventions should be shorter in length (60 seconds or less) to keep the viewer's attention. Use plain, straightforward vocabulary and convey one single, focused message rather than introducing several or unrelated elements in a video. This will make interventions clear and lessen language barriers for a diverse Canadian population.

¹⁷ Richard Mocarski et al., "The Rise of Transgender and Gender Diverse Representation in the Media: Impacts on the Population," *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz031>.

¹⁸ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Richard Fletcher "Public Perspectives on Trust in News," *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, 2024, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/public-perspectives-trust-news>.

- Interventions should also be translated into as many languages as possible, and as many culturally appropriate or relevant adaptations as possible.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** on a systemic level, collaboration among **community organizations** and other key stakeholders (especially those that serve the diverse needs of marginalized communities) is essential to the implementation of effective interventions.
 - Researchers, industry, policy makers, and community organizations need to collaboratively share their experiences with implementing interventions. This includes what works, but more importantly what doesn't work, for whom, how, and in what contexts.
 - This transparency and collaboration will ensure our collective action has a greater impact in equipping all people in Canada with the critical skills they need to navigate the online information ecosystem.

Next Steps

The [Motives and Methods](#) study examined Canadians' fact-checking processes, aptitudes, and attitudes, as well as their sharing habits and motivations. The study also measured the importance of cognitive ('how to' skills) and affective (motivational) factors in misinformation interventions. This DEI brief highlights the demographic-specific findings for communities who are identified as unequally impacted by the digital divide. It focuses on four factors: gender identity, racial identity, education, and region. Age, another key factor identified in research on the digital divide, is covered in our [Motives and Methods](#) research report.

The results of the [Motives and Methods](#) study provide the evidence-base for building interventions that can support Canadians' **collective resilience** to online misinformation. This DEI brief adds to this evidence-base, demonstrating that interventions need to be responsive to the often-overlooked needs of communities impacted by the digital divide in Canada.

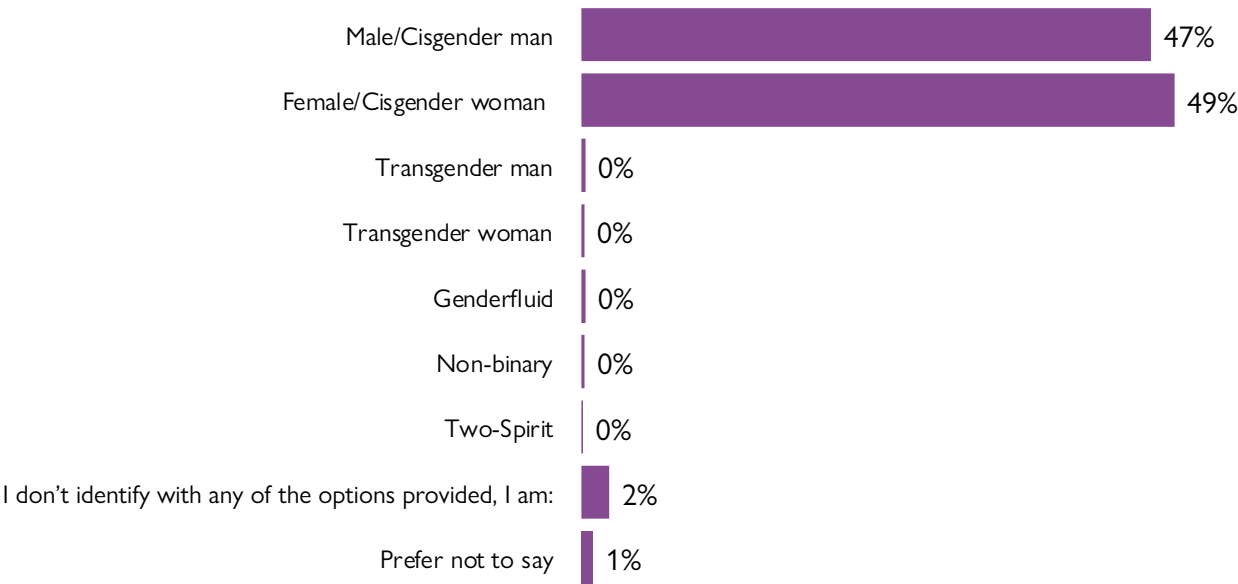
In our continued digital media literacy work, MediaSmarts commits to centering an equity and inclusion lens to pay attention to and address the diverse needs and concerns of equity-deserving communities across Canada. Additionally, we continue to [demonstrate](#) the ongoing need for access to universal digital media literacy resources, education, and support. This includes more research to keep up with the ever-evolving online landscape and greater systemic interventions, such as an equitable and inclusive national action plan for digital media literacy in Canada. This systemic intervention is crucial to adequately support those unequally impacted by the digital divide in Canada, which leaves marginalized communities more vulnerable to misinformation with less access to interventions needed to address it. A national action plan can lay the groundwork for a holistic and flexible approach to address wide-ranging digital media literacy needs, mitigate the impacts of the digital divide, and empower *all* Canadians to safely and effectively access, use, understand, and engage with media in all forms.

Collective resilience is the ability of a community (or group of people) to collectively respond to or recover from changing and sometimes stressful or adverse environments. In the online context, this can be expressed as a person's ability to: participate in safe and inclusive online communities, draw strength and support from the people around them, foster trust, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Findings and recommendations from this study are being shared with community partners, policymakers, researchers, and platforms to expand our knowledge on how to mitigate online misinformation. We will continue advocating for and providing the critical digital media literacy education that is the right of every digital citizen and will help close the digital divide in Canada.

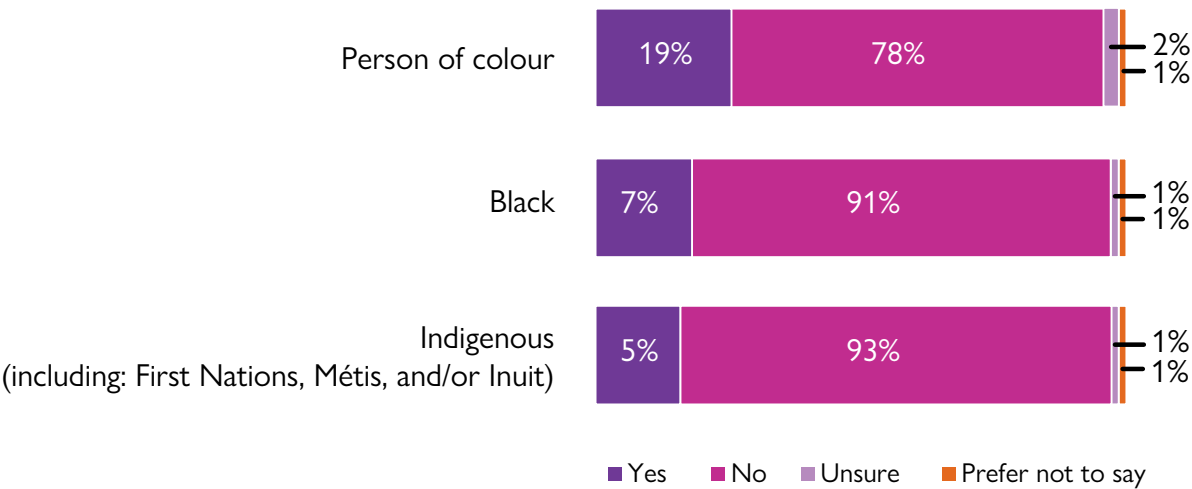
Appendix: Survey Demographics

GENDER



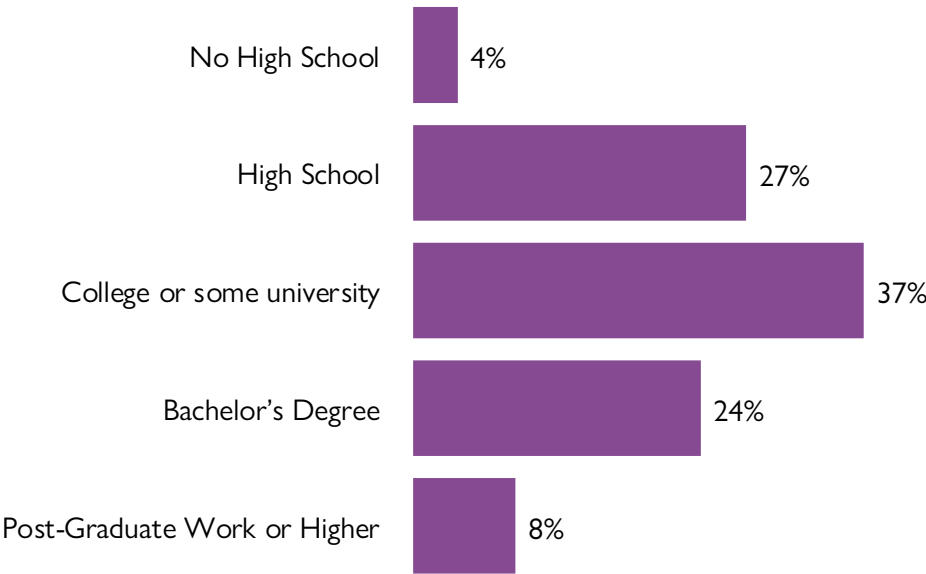
[Base] n=5,000

RACIAL IDENTITY



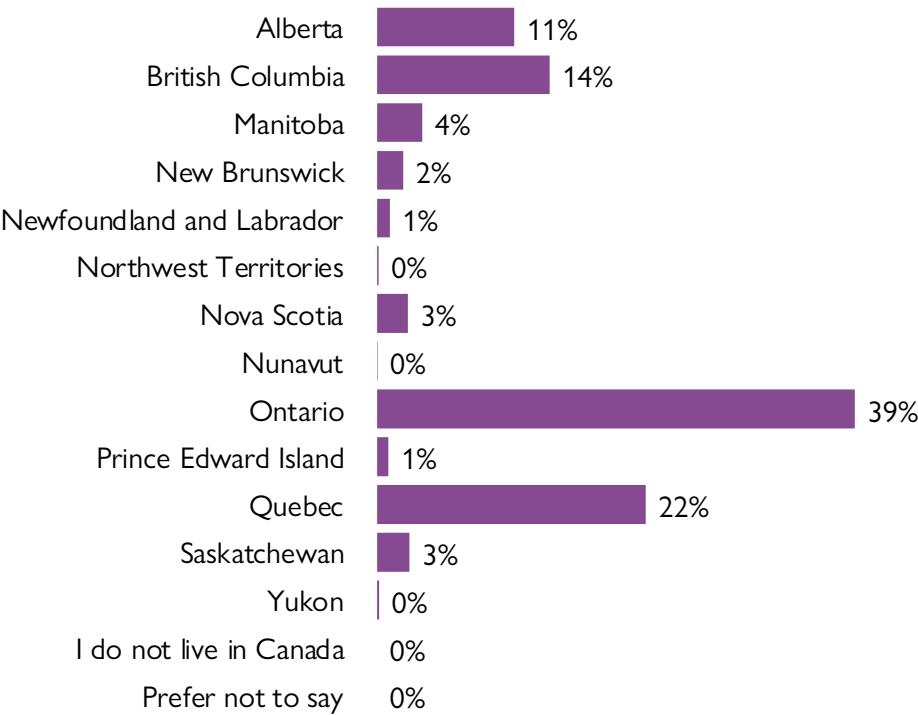
[Base] n=5,000

EDUCATION



[Base] n=5,000

REGION



[Base] n=5,000

Survey Sample Demographics, Weighted:

	Total	100%	n=5002
Age	18 - 24	11%	437
	25 - 34	18%	922
	35 - 44	17%	876
	45 - 54	15%	778
	55 - 64	16%	876
	65 - 74	16%	758
	75 - 84	7%	329
	55+	39%	1989
	85 or older	1%	26
Region	Western Canada (BC)	14%	601
	Prairies (AB, MB, SK)	18%	856
	Central Canada (ON, QB)	61%	3071
	Atlantic Canada (NB, NFL, NS, PEI)	7%	318
	Northern Canada (NWT, NU, YK)	0%	156
Gender	Male/Cisgender Man	47%	2332
	Female/Cisgender Woman	49%	2451
	Gender Diverse	4%	175
Racial Identity	Black	7%	374
	Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Metis)	5%	249
	IBPOC	24%	1242
	Person of colour	19%	995
Education	Highschool and below (high school and no high school)	31%	1326
	College or Undergraduate (college or some university, bachelor's degree)	61%	3158
	Post-graduate or higher	8%	518