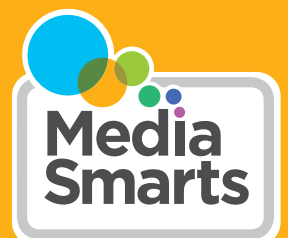


Reporting Platforms

**Young Canadians Evaluate Efforts
to Counter Disinformation**



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

This research study, *Reporting Platforms: Young Canadians Evaluate Efforts to Counter Disinformation*, created space for youth from across Canada to examine and assess reporting processes on popular apps (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube). More specifically, we wanted to understand how young people feel about current efforts to counter misinformation and disinformation online and what solutions they have regarding the problems and concerns they experience while navigating online information ecosystems and communities.

We facilitated three online focus groups with 36 participants ages 16 to 29 to answer the following questions:

- Where and how do Canadian youth encounter misinformation and disinformation online? How do they react to this content?
- How aware are Canadian youth of reporting mechanisms or other approaches that online platforms take to counter misinformation and disinformation?
- Do Canadian youth think online platforms are doing enough to counter misinformation and disinformation? Do they trust platforms to keep them informed and safe online?
- What changes or additional efforts do Canadian youth want to see from platforms regarding preventing and addressing misinformation and disinformation?

This report summarizes the findings from these focus group sessions, including our discussions with youth and their [evaluation](#) of existing reporting mechanisms, alongside other research and conversations about the form and impact of misinformation and disinformation online. We also include [reflections](#) from members of the research and education teams at MediaSmarts, who facilitated the evaluation activity, and a summary of reporting processes across the four platforms to better visualize some of the similarities and differences between the platforms that were the focus of this study.

Overall, the lack of trust and confidence that participants expressed in the ability of platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation and to keep them informed and safe online was



apparent throughout all three focus group sessions. While platform design is constantly being modified, participants emphasized that the choices presented to them by platforms, especially for reporting misinformation and disinformation, did not feel appropriately suited for flagging false, misleading, or questionable content and ideas. Ultimately, while participants understood the desire to maintain a *vibe* that allows users to ‘unplug’ and ‘unwind,’ they felt it was necessary to change or adjust the *vibe* so that users also have meaningful opportunities to engage with platforms to prevent and address misinformation and disinformation.

This report ends with a series of [recommendations](#) that were drafted by the research team based on experiences, insights, concerns, and solutions shared by youth in the focus group sessions. We have included specific recommendations for each platform (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube) as well as general recommendations for all social media apps that centre around:

- accessibility, awareness, and accuracy;
- safety and responsibility;
- trust; and
- transparency.

This qualitative research project intentionally positioned youth as experts to be actively involved in assessing current approaches and designing new policies, interventions, and tools to mitigate the spread of misinformation and disinformation in online spaces. Engaging with youth from across the country in online focus groups ensured that we reflected a diverse range of experiences and worked collectively on meaningful and comprehensive recommendations for various social media platforms. The findings in this report add to the growing knowledge base from which MediaSmarts continues to work with community partners, policymakers, and platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation.

While MediaSmarts offers a suite of resources to help people identify, verify, and report misinformation and disinformation, we know that there is a lot of work to do across various sectors (community, government, education, industry, academia) to build and foster the collective resilience required to more effectively prevent and address various online harms.



Misinformation and Disinformation on Social Media

What We (Don't) Know

While **misinformation** and **disinformation** are not new phenomena, rapid developments in technology and new forms of social connection and information seeking or sharing have drastically changed the information and media ecosystems through which misinformation and disinformation can spread.¹ Today's digital media are fully networked, placing each user and consumer at the centre of an infinite web of connections and interactions. These connections allow users to share content with any number of people on a multitude of online platforms.

Our previous [research](#) with young Canadians demonstrates that a small number of commercial platforms, primarily devoted to socialization and entertainment, dominate young people's online experiences. Both content and users move seamlessly between a handful of prominent social media and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Information moves or spreads within and across these platforms through a combination of user engagements and **algorithmic** recommendations, all occurring within the bounds of the platform's design features.

For example, misinformation and disinformation can spread on social media when people who either do not know or do not care that it is false or misleading share this information, and it goes to the people who follow them. Recipients or viewers then decide how to engage with this content: to like it, to argue with it, to ignore it, or to share it with their own followers. What they do will determine whether the message fades out or if it keeps spreading on the platform. Platforms also recommend content based on what their recommendation algorithms think users like. Those algorithms decide what to

MISINFORMATION refers to false or misleading information that is spread by people who believe it is true.

DISINFORMATION refers to false or misleading information that is spread by people who know that it is not true, usually either for political reasons, to make money, as a joke, or some combination of those three.

ALGORITHM: A set of step-by-step instructions for solving a problem or completing a mathematical or computational task. Machine learning algorithms sort data to find patterns and make predictions or recommendations. The term is often used to refer specifically to computer programs trained to make predictions.

¹ See: Bradshaw, S. (2020, November 23). Influence Operations and Disinformation on Social Media. Modern Conflict and Artificial Intelligence. Centre for International Governance Innovation, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/influence-operations-and-disinformation-social-media/>
Komendantova, N., Ekenberg, L., Svahn, M., Larsson, A., Shah, S. I. H., Glinos, M., Koulolias, V., and Danielson, M. (2021). A value-driven approach to addressing misinformation in social media. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 1-12.

recommend to users based on the data profiles they have created by collecting or buying data about users. If recommendation algorithms are optimized to favour posts that many people engage with, they will deliver misinformation and disinformation right to the people most likely to engage with and respond to it.

Research on disinformation and social media highlights that “unlike in the past when disinformation campaigns were slow, expensive and data-poor, social media provides a plethora of actors with a quick, cheap and data-rich medium to use to inject disinformation into civic conversations.”² In other words, the very design of social media enhances the speed, scale, and reach of misinformation and disinformation, making its spread almost universal.³

Despite criticism that platforms have [failed to act decisively](#) to curb online harms, several platforms have taken steps to combat misinformation and disinformation, including using **artificial intelligence** to identify **bots**, flagging content as ‘false,’ ‘potentially malicious,’ or ‘scam,’ and creating procedures for users to report disinformation. However, researchers and advocates note that [we have yet to empirically examine the effectiveness of these efforts](#).

Research on best practices in countering disinformation highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement, especially for designing policies, methods, and tools.⁴ These studies reveal how existing approaches tend to view users as passive consumers rather than active co-creators. When platforms *do* engage users in processes of reducing online harms, particularly misinformation and disinformation, they tend to download the responsibility of *identifying* this content on [individuals](#). This approach is complicated by research findings that show when it comes to disinformation, users often do not feel personally involved enough to actively counter it.⁵

Not only is the effectiveness of platform response under-analyzed, but [further research is needed](#) to understand the complex

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: The simulation of human intelligence (for example, learning or problem solving) in machines programmed to think like humans and mimic their actions. Examples include speech recognition, translation between languages, image and facial recognition, and decision-making.

In this study participants understood **BOT** to mean an inauthentic account, which might or might not be automated, but which pretends to be a genuine account and is used for the purpose of spreading misinformation and disinformation.

2 Bradshaw, S. (2020, November 23). Influence Operations and Disinformation on Social Media. Modern Conflict and Artificial Intelligence. Centre for International Governance Innovation, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/influence-operations-and-disinformation-social-media/>

3 Komendantova, N., Ekenberg, L., Svahn, M., Larsson, A., Shah, S. I. H., Glinos, M., Koulolias, V., and Danielson, M. (2021). A value-driven approach to addressing misinformation in social media. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8 (1), 1-12.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

“It is urgent to reach young people before it is too late... finding effective responses, based on the lived experiences of young people, is vital.”

interactions between demographic factors like age. For example, [research shows](#) that young people, regardless of political views, are more likely to believe COVID-19 disinformation than older people. [Recent research](#) has also uncovered that younger users are turning to social platforms as their primary source for news (specifically Instagram) and [increasingly as a search engine](#) (specifically TikTok). [Disinformation experts contend](#) that “it is urgent to reach young people before it is too late... finding effective responses, based on the lived experiences of young people, is vital.”

MediaSmarts’ research ([2019](#); [2020](#)) confirms that young Canadians are frustrated with conspiracy theories and false information that flood online spaces, and they say misinformation and disinformation make it hard for them to use technology—specifically to learn. While this impacts young people’s trust in platforms to filter out harmful content, our [research](#) also confirms that youth hold platforms accountable, want platforms to remove harmful content, and want to learn how to verify information online. What we need to understand better is:

- the information ecosystems young Canadians engage in and their exposure to misinformation and disinformation within these spaces;
- what, if anything, young Canadians are doing to mitigate the impacts of misinformation and disinformation;
- whether young people are aware of platform efforts to counter misinformation and disinformation; and
- young Canadians’ evaluations of and recommendations for platform interventions.

It's a *Vibe*: The Aesthetics and Values of Social Platforms

Our previous [research](#) with young Canadians demonstrates their increasing awareness of corporate surveillance and the business models behind major online platforms (such as Google Classroom). Similarly, our [research](#) on algorithms and artificial intelligence highlights that young people are aware that algorithms play a significant role in their online experiences. Despite not fully understanding the technical design and computation of these technologies, participants were aware that algorithmic pre-selection pushed them towards more passive and restricted internet use.

In this study, we wanted to give participants a similar opportunity to reflect on how online environments shape their online experiences. This time, in the context of the online information ecosystems they engage in and whether they feel platforms are doing enough to combat misinformation and disinformation in their online communities.

Our [focus groups](#) with youth ages 16 to 29 began with a short introductory learning exercise, where participants were encouraged to think about the impacts of platform design features on the types of information and content they encounter and potentially share on a platform. For example, design decisions such as showing shares and likes can make people share more. Platforms can also intentionally add friction, such as prompts or extra steps to reduce either sharing in general or sharing of a particular kind of content. Platforms can also provide users with tools specifically for responding to misinformation and disinformation, like downranking posts, adding context or linking to fact-checks, and reporting it when it violates the platform's **terms of service** or **community guidelines**. If a platform was worried about a *specific* kind of content, they might make it a specific category, making it easier for users to report. For example, on TikTok, users can report misinformation under four categories: elections, health, undisclosed branded content, or other harmful misinformation.

During the focus groups, participants spoke about how a platform's aesthetics, atmosphere, feeling, and values — what they generally referred to as the **vibe** of the platform — contributed to whether a platform provided meaningful opportunities for countering misinformation and disinformation in those spaces.

TERMS OF SERVICE: The legal agreement between an online business (platforms, apps, websites, social networks) and the person who uses their service.

COMMUNITY GUIDELINES: A set of rules created by a platform to establish a standard of behaviour expected and the types of content that are prohibited on the platform to create a safe environment for users to engage and interact.

A platform's **VIBE** refers to the atmosphere, aesthetic, feeling, and values of a platform.

Platform design is the vehicle through which the *vibe* of a space is communicated and transmitted to users. Research on value-sensitive design explains how design features encourage certain values and behaviours from users.⁶ Looking at Twitter, researchers demonstrate how values like accessibility, speed, confirmation, amusement, and engagement are translated into the design features, whereas responsibility, credibility, clarity, accuracy, and knowledge get downplayed in the platform design.⁷ In our [research](#) on countering online hate, we explain that the values or norms of online platforms and communities are essential for young people's perception of the social consensus within those spaces and the values users conform to and inevitably spread as they engage online.

Similarly, recent research on the values espoused by the same social platforms we examine in this study (Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok) uncovered five overarching principles (or values) consistent across these platforms: expression, community, safety, choice, and improvement.⁸ However, this research also found that while platform values may serve a public good, platforms limit or offload their responsibility to uphold these values by selectively downgrading those that do not serve narrow corporate goals and upgrading those that do.⁹

In our study, participants' reflections on and evaluations of platform efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation tied these

efforts to the values they experienced (or did not) through the design and, ultimately, the *vibe* of the platform. For example, the value of choice signals that users should be free to pick options that align with their preferences.¹⁰ Several focus group participants commented on how platforms prioritize the value of choice by providing users with design features that allow them to ignore or hide misinformation and disinformation rather than report it. Participants characterized this prioritizing of choice as a 'cop-out' and emphasized that these design choices diminish the extent of the problem of misinformation and disinformation in these spaces. This also contributes to a lack of trust in platforms among young people.

Participants were deeply skeptical that platform efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation would improve because they felt that combatting this online harm went against the *vibe* – which is ultimately designed to pursue corporate business interests. Participants explained that platform design (including recommendation algorithms) that prioritize engagement and watch time *allow* false and misleading content and comments to persist because it is 'good for business.' In fact, many of the young people we spoke to in this study expressed resignation with the fact that false and misleading content and comments 'get clicks and likes.'

6 Van Engelen Y. & Marin L. (2022). The double-edged sword of Twitter during crisis situations. A value-sensitive design approach to decreasing the impact of online misinformation. *Research Square* [Preprint]. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1900328/v1>

7 Ibid.

8 Scharlach, R., Hallinan, B., & Shifman, L. (2023). Governing principles: Articulating values in social media platform policies. *New Media & Society*, 14614448231156580.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

It's [combatting misinformation and disinformation] against social media's brand. They want people to scroll through, to keep them engaged on the platform, and not add extra steps [friction] to their scrolling.

23- to 29-year-old

Keeping people on the platform is more important to the platform [than combatting misinformation and disinformation].

19- to 22-year-old

Similar to our [Algorithmic Awareness](#) study, participants emphasized that the *vibe* of these platforms encouraged passive engagement, and we once again heard participants describe how these spaces encourage 'mindless scrolling' or 'surfing rather than searching.' Many participants explained how they are 'careful' on these platforms and take extra steps to 'check' the information they encounter since authenticating and verifying information, which involves active, critical engagement, feels contrary to the '*vibe*.'

Participants also expressed skepticism based on the values they were *not* experiencing on these platforms. These include the values that are often actively downplayed, like credibility and safety,¹¹ as well as values youth emphasized were important to them, such as trust, transparency, and shared responsibility (between users and platforms) to accurately represent the scope of the problem of misinformation and disinformation and meaningfully address it.

The findings and observations that have surfaced in this study about a platform's *vibe*, especially the types of content and user interactions it encourages and discourages, are critically important in the context of platform efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation. We will provide a more detailed description of the impacts of a platform's *vibe* on young people's decisions to counter misinformation and disinformation in the [evaluating platforms](#) section of this report.

¹¹ Ibid.

Young Canadians Evaluate Platform Efforts to Combat Misinformation and Disinformation

When addressing and preventing online harm, young people are often expected to build online *resilience*: to effectively self-regulate their use of digital technology and avoid harmful content. The [focus on individualism within the resiliency framework](#) places the responsibility of handling online problems on youth while ignoring important systemic factors like the design and efficacy of platform responses. The online resilience approach is also contrary to best practice in countering misinformation which highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement in designing policies, methods, and interventions.¹²

Our previous studies ([2019](#); [2020](#)) confirm that youth are frustrated by a lack of opportunities to learn about and engage in best practices for countering misinformation and disinformation. Further, the persistence of this online harm makes it hard for them to navigate information ecosystems and erodes their trust in platforms to mitigate this harmful content. Nevertheless, [youth hold platforms responsible](#) for removing this harmful content and argue that [youth should have a voice in the design and regulation of online platforms](#) because policies created by adults directly impact the quality of their lives and opportunities.

[Our research](#) confirms that when youth feel better prepared to recognize and respond to online harms, they are more likely to push back against these harms, engage in healthy debate, contribute to value setting on platforms, and model empathy and ethical digital citizenship. In this study, focus group discussions and evaluation activities assessed the value, merit, worth, significance, and quality of platform efforts to counter misinformation and disinformation. Following the work of [Pawson and Tilley \(2004\)](#), young Canadians engaged in an evaluation of platform reporting tools and a process of [collaborative outcomes reporting](#) to identify what works and does not work, in what respect, to what extent, in what contexts, and how.

In our [previous qualitative projects](#), we observed that when youth have clear and accessible descriptions of the various online processes that impact their lives and the things they see and share online, they are eager to engage in the development of resources that will help others build awareness – allowing everyone to more meaningfully, and safely, engage with digital media and technology. This study follows that tradition, empowering young Canadians to take steps to mitigate the potential impacts of misinformation and disinformation, enhancing the **collective resilience** of young Canadians.

COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE:

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 young 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.

¹² Komendantova, N., Ekenberg, L., Svahn, M., Larsson, A., Shah, S. I. H., Glinos, M., Koulolias, V., and Danielson, M. (2021). A value-driven approach to addressing misinformation in social media. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 1-12.

Research Method

The [research team](#) at MediaSmarts designs projects that create safe spaces for youth to share their experiences, concerns, strategies, and solutions related to the internet and digital technology. We work closely with the education team to facilitate scaffolded experiences that blend learning with research. Findings from our research then serve as the foundation for our advocacy and knowledge mobilization work and the educational resources we create and share with schools, homes, and communities across the country.¹³

For this project, we designed and facilitated focus groups with youth ages 16 to 29¹⁴ from across Canada to evaluate efforts by social platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation. This qualitative evaluation allowed us to build on our quantitative data related to this topic and created space for the meaningful participation of young people in the research process.

The following research questions guided this project:

- Where and how do Canadian youth encounter misinformation and disinformation online? How do they react to this content?
- How aware are Canadian youth of reporting mechanisms or other approaches that online platforms take to counter misinformation and disinformation?
- Do Canadian youth think online platforms are doing enough to counter misinformation and disinformation? Do they trust platforms to keep them informed and safe online?
- What changes or additional efforts do Canadian youth want to see from platforms regarding preventing and addressing misinformation and disinformation?

We conducted three 90-minute online focus groups (via Zoom).¹⁵ Participants were grouped by age (16-18; 19-22; 23-29) and recruited via social media and with the support of MediaSmarts' communications team and our network of partners.¹⁶ The objectives of these focus group sessions were:

- To better understand where and how Canadian youth encounter misinformation and disinformation and how they react to this content.
- To gauge awareness among Canadian youth about how various online platforms attempt to counter misinformation and disinformation.
- To evaluate the efficacy of current platform procedures for addressing misinformation and disinformation.
- To make recommendations to platforms that reflect the diverse experiences and concerns of Canadian youth as they relate to misinformation and disinformation.

¹³ Other recent projects that follow this research-to-resource model include: [Algorithmic Awareness: Conversations with Young Canadians about Artificial Intelligence and Privacy](#), [Young Canadians Speak Out: A Qualitative Research Project on Privacy and Consent](#), and [Young Canadians Pushing Back Against Hate Online](#).

¹⁴ We had initially planned to speak with youth ages 13 to 29, but unfortunately – and despite best efforts – we could not recruit enough participants in the youngest age bracket (ages 13-15) for a focus group session.

¹⁵ French language support was available and provided to all participants who indicated a need.

¹⁶ We sent Letters of Information and additional recruitment materials to various academic, community, and civil society organization partners who agreed to offer their support for this project.

- In total, 36 youth participated in this project over the course of three focus group sessions:
 - 16- to 18-year-olds: 8 participants
 - 19- to 22-year-olds: 11 participants
 - 23- to 29-year-olds: 17 participants

Each focus group began by introducing the facilitators and providing an overview of the information from the project's consent form (which participants read and signed before attending the session). Then, we gave participants an opportunity to complete a voluntary demographic survey (see [Appendix A](#) for survey questions and results). A total of 33 participants completed the survey, which the research team will use to reflect on our capacity to reach a diverse group of participants and highlight the needs of equity-deserving communities. After completing the survey, participants then watched a brief primer video that covered the following:

- What is the online information ecosystem, and how does it work?
- Examples of how information travels online to help participants understand how users, and their personal information, are part of infinite networks of online connections and the implications of these networks and connections for when we need to authenticate information online or recognize a source's bias or point of view.
- What do we mean by misinformation and disinformation?
- Examples of existing processes for countering misinformation and disinformation online.

After participants watched this primer video, a facilitator offered a recap of the main concepts and opened space for any clarifying questions. We also provided participants with a text-based summary of the primer video they could refer to throughout the focus group session.

Following the primer, we facilitated an opening discussion to help us gauge participants' knowledge of and encounters with misinformation and disinformation online. Our discussion prompts included the following:

- Have you encountered misinformation or disinformation online in the last couple of weeks? If so, where have you seen it and in what form?
- If you see misinformation or disinformation online, what do you usually do about it?
- Do you think it's important for platforms to flag misinformation and disinformation for users? Why or why not?

This opening discussion set the stage for the breakout group activity in which participants broke into smaller groups to evaluate one social platform's policies and procedures for countering misinformation and disinformation online. We facilitated this evaluation exercise for each of the following platforms: Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube.¹⁷

¹⁷ Our recent research with [young Canadians](#) established that these platforms were amongst the top six favourite platforms of Canadian youth.

First, facilitators walked participants through the existing mechanisms, processes, and approaches for reporting or combatting misinformation and disinformation on the platform they were assigned to evaluate. Then, using a virtual whiteboard called [Miro](#) to record responses, facilitators guided participants through the evaluation activity using the following prompts:

- Have you seen these tools on this platform before?
- Does this tool provide you with a clear definition or understanding of what misinformation or disinformation is? Why or why not?
- Is this tool or process easy to use or navigate? Why or why not?
- Do you think this tool or process gives users a meaningful process for combatting misinformation and disinformation? Why or why not?
- Is there anything missing from this approach for combatting misinformation and disinformation? If so, can you provide examples?
- What would make it easier for you to recognize and flag or report misinformation and disinformation on this platform? What tools, designs, processes, or explanations would be helpful? What would you change about this platform's approach to combatting misinformation and disinformation?

Each breakout group worked together to answer these questions and identified recommendations based on their responses to the prompts. Participants then returned to the larger group, and facilitators shared a summary of their group's evaluation exercise. After listening to what other groups highlighted about other platforms and their processes for identifying and reporting misinformation and disinformation, we left space for participants to share additional insights or concerns.

With participant permission, the focus groups were audio-recorded and made available to members of the MediaSmarts research team for analysis. We do not include any identifying information in any analysis or reporting; participants are referred to only by age group in this report.

After we finished the focus groups, the facilitators met to engage in a collaborative analysis process. This meeting allowed us to share [reflections](#) on the opening discussion and breakout sessions, highlight key findings, and identify recommendations. Insights shared during this meeting gave the research team additional direction for structuring this final report and mobilizing the key findings and recommendations.

We want to thank everyone who took the time to participate in this research project. Your experiences, concerns, and recommendations are summarized in the report and serve to strengthen the evidence base from which policymakers and platforms can draw to build and implement solutions to better prevent and address the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Evaluating Platforms

In this section, we summarize findings from the focus group sessions, including the evaluation activity we completed in breakout groups with participants. We have structured this section into three parts:

- 1. Reflections from facilitators:** Here, we include preliminary analysis from members of the research and education teams at MediaSmarts who facilitated the evaluation activity.
- 2. Summary of reporting processes:** We added this section to the report in response to the experiences, insights, and concerns shared by participants regarding the reporting processes across the platforms they evaluated. Our initial analysis revealed some key similarities and differences across these platforms, and we wanted to visualize this to inform additional analysis and recommendations.
- 3. Reporting platforms – what we heard:** In this final section, we summarize the key findings from our conversations with young Canadians ages 16 to 29 who participated in this project. This summary includes what they shared during focus group discussions and the results of their evaluation exercise in the breakout groups.

Reflections from Facilitators

What follows is a summary of reflections and analyses from facilitators that they recorded after completing the focus group sessions. Each facilitator was responsible for one platform (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, or YouTube) throughout the project, so we thought it important to include these reflections from the team members who had become most familiar with the specific reporting process for their assigned platform.

Instagram

EFFORT VS. VALUE

Certain expressions came up in this theme, such as “we don’t use Instagram to report people.” This comment, and the general agreement from other participants about their reluctance to report content from other users, paved the way for a solution. Participants proposed a type of reward system (like boosts or a points system) for reporting misinformation or disinformation. The *effort* it took to report content was tied to the *value* of the incentive, especially among younger participants.

Participants wanted a process (and certain options and features within that process) to make it more *desirable* to report misinformation or disinformation. Again, this could include a type of reward – but also different ways to track the report or a more visually pleasing way of flagging content and submitting reports. In other words, young people want the platforms to ‘make it worth their while’ to report harmful content. While participants discussed both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for reporting misinformation and disinformation, they also understood the potential for more extrinsic rewards could be ‘weaponized’ and impact the value of the reports.

This reflection from Marc Alexandre Ladouceur (Media Education Specialist at MediaSmarts) focuses on specific language and expressions used by participants to evaluate how Instagram combats misinformation and disinformation.

ACCESS VS. RESPONSIBILITY

Access also played a role in questioning personal responsibility among youth ages 19 to 22. Not only did they express that information about how to report misinformation and disinformation is somewhat tricky to find, but they also agree that the process puts the responsibility for assessing, verifying, and reporting in the hands of the users. A new tension arose through a series of questions:

- Why do users have to do all the work?
- Why can’t the companies in question invest more money in a fact-checking process?
- Should decisions about ‘good information’ be solely left to the companies in question? What if they make mistakes?

Participants felt that users should have some responsibility for verifying, especially as they cannot be sure of the platform’s motives.

DEMOCRACY OF INFORMATION VS. INCOME

Accessing information and determining its value should be an easily accessible button, according to different participants. These participants, however, did not trust that the platforms would act in the interest of their users. Instead, young people wondered why a platform would even want to fact-check the most popular sources of misinformation and disinformation as this content brings views, clicks, and more users.

DOING GOOD VS. DOING RIGHT

One participant expressed concerns over whether reporting posts and users for misinformation or disinformation, while always right based on the content, was always the right thing to do, especially if the person reporting has a grudge against the reported user. This led to a parallel discussion of the incentives for reporting. Here, motivation in the selfish sense ('What good does it do me to report?') clashed with the ethical value of reporting ('What good does it do to report?').

This final question on the ethical value led to matters of transparency in the review process. If reporting does not lead to any (significant) changes or only gives the users an update at the end of the process, it does not feel like a meaningful action. Participants want more detailed follow-ups on the reporting action. One participant said it would help with feeling like they were contributing to some form of change.

A final note on vocabulary themes: Participants in the first session on Instagram created a word bank revolving around aesthetics. Reporting must look good; it must be visually framed within the posts users already like exploring; and it has to appear easily. The second session's word bank revolved around matters of trust and agency. In both cases, the action posed (reporting) was only as important as the feelings associated with that action. In other words, 'knowing how' to report took a back seat to 'how I feel' about reporting.



TikTok

Regarding the reporting options on TikTok, most participants were aware of the presence of the tool but questioned whether it offered a meaningful process for combatting misinformation or disinformation. Across the three focus groups, discussions at first mimicked what we might find in a strengths-based evaluation, where youth were quick to highlight what they liked, or what they think works, about TikTok's reporting functions. For example, participants thought that, generally, TikTok:

- provides clear definitions or descriptions of misinformation and disinformation;
- has created a reporting process that is easy to use and navigate (it is straightforward, quick, uses clear language, and is visible); and
- users do not need to provide additional documentation or evidence to support or justify their report.

But, after identifying these strengths, participants admitted that despite (in their assessment) TikTok providing a clear and simple reporting process, they rarely make use of it – and there were several reasons for this.

First, participants were skeptical about whether reporting content actually resulted in anything happening. Even if they thought something was harmful misinformation or disinformation, it didn't mean TikTok would interpret it as such according to community guidelines. Some participants discussed that even if TikTok removes some misinformation and disinformation, plenty remains, negatively impacting their experience on the app.

Next, most participants said they preferred to use the 'not interested' function on TikTok when they see content they don't like. They found this a more efficient way to curate their 'For You Page' – a space they use to escape and unwind. A couple of participants expressed that they want TikTok to remain a 'nice' experience, a 'funny' experience, or a place where they can engage with content that doesn't increase their stress or anxiety. By using the 'not interested' function, they can maintain these nice and funny experiences without going through a longer and more uncertain reporting process.

This reflection from Samantha McAleese (Research and Evaluation Associate at MediaSmarts) focuses on what participants saw as the strengths and weaknesses of TikTok's reporting process, and their desire for improvement so they can create and curate a more pleasant experience on this app.

By the end of the evaluation exercise, most participants indicated that they would try to make more use of the reporting process moving forward so that misinformation and disinformation aren't just removed for them but for *all* other users. However, they did want the reporting process to be just as simple as the 'not interested' feature, and they wanted assurances that their reports would have an impact – with one participant expressing explicitly that they wished TikTok would start 'taking reporting more seriously.'

There were similar recommendations provided by participants across all age groups, including:

- a stronger verification process and a more rigorous account creation process to address the presence of spam accounts;
- better content moderation and monitoring;
- re-write community guidelines to make them more accessible; and
- implement more severe consequences for accounts that violate the community guidelines (like preventing people from making a new account).

Older participants offered more specific solutions, including:

- implementing an extra step asking users 'Why?' after clicking the 'not interested' button to prompt a more detailed report;
- providing more detailed follow-ups to users after they submit reports;
- employ more experts to verify content that has been posted; and
- adding a prompt at the bottom of videos that are under review.

Overall, participants were aware of the problem of misinformation and disinformation on TikTok and wanted more options to keep it a 'nice' and 'funny' space.



Twitter

Due to lower attendance during the first focus group session (with youth ages 16 to 18), we did not conduct the evaluation exercise with Twitter. We chose not to include Twitter during this session because the number of participants in this group was too small to hold four breakout groups and [data available](#) suggests the adoption of this platform is low among this age group relative to the other platforms.

Youth ages 19 to 22 were avid Twitter users but were unfamiliar with the reporting tool. When introduced to the process, their response was generally positive, finding it clear and easy to use. The attention to detail within the tool's design inspired confidence among participants that complaints would be heard and acted on by Twitter. However, the same design elements they appreciated about the tool – notably the series of radio-button menus – were seen as a drawback if the content they wished to report did not fall into one of those pre-set categories.

Participants in this age group felt that the tool and process could be improved by:

- educating users about it or making people more aware of it;
- making misinformation or disinformation explicitly available as options; and
- increasing the penalty of having an account suspended or removed by (1) making account creation more rigorous, (2) blocking inactive accounts (to limit the use of 'backup' accounts), and (3) suspending accounts that have features frequently associated with spam accounts (like not having a profile picture).

By contrast, all participants ages 23 to 29 who used Twitter were aware of the reporting tool, and several had used it themselves. However, none of them used it to report misinformation. While they felt it helped respond to harassment or abuse, they were not confident it would be as effective for misinformation. (Indeed, the fact that the tool was clearly designed with reporting *interpersonal* issues in mind made participants skeptical that people would think to use it to report misinformation and disinformation or that they would find it helpful in doing so).

This reflection from Matthew Johnson (Director of Education at MediaSmarts) focuses on the differences in the assessment or evaluation of Twitter's reporting tools – including recommendations for improvements – between age groups.

Older youth did find the tool easy to use and navigate, but one participant noted that its focus on reporting *individual* tweets was at odds with how misinformation and disinformation spread on the platform.

While some participants reported positive experiences using this tool to report abuse, they also felt that the opacity of the process after reporting a tweet made it challenging to determine whether the process was meaningful. Transparency was at the heart of this group's recommendations, along with making the process more flexible (for instance, by adding a textbox for issues not included in the list or allowing users to provide additional context). Some participants, however, felt the tool was poorly suited to responding to misinformation and disinformation overall and felt that Twitter should implement a new and more prominent tool. There was a general feeling that this should not use the term 'report,' which they felt was too closely tied to abuse and harassment, but there was no consensus on what alternate term should replace it.



Finally, this group suggested that Twitter's current approach, even if their other recommendations were implemented, placed too much of the burden of responding to misinformation and disinformation on users rather than on the platform itself. Suggestions for remedying this included:

- collaborating with fact-checkers to identify and respond to misinformation and disinformation; and
- employing algorithmic tools to identify tweets that contain known misinformation or disinformation and flag it for human moderator review.

One participant, however, also felt that on a broader scale, Twitter's content algorithms need to be redesigned so that they are no longer optimized to favour the most engaging content.

YouTube

Most participants in all three focus groups said they were aware of YouTube’s reporting tools and found them easy to use. One participant in the 23- to 29-year-old group noted that the reporting tools became more apparent to them since the increased need for flagging misinformation and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the ease of use, most participants stated that YouTube’s reporting process does not provide a clear understanding of misinformation and disinformation because no definition is provided when using the ‘report’ button. Some participants were confused about what counts as misinformation or disinformation on YouTube even after reading the definition provided in YouTube’s [community guidelines](#). They stated that language like “content that may pose a serious risk of egregious harm” leads them to believe that something must be extreme to warrant reporting, which is not true for all misinformation.

This reflection from Vanessa Turyatunga (Research Assistant at MediaSmarts) focuses on the importance of clarity and transparency for a meaningful reporting process on YouTube.

Participants expressed similar confusion while discussing whether YouTube’s reporting tools provide a meaningful process for combatting misinformation and disinformation. In addition to restating their confusion about what counts as misinformation, many participants in each age group felt there is a lack of transparency on what happens *after* a user reports a video. The 16- to 18-year-old and 19- to 22-year-old groups stated that there had been instances where the reporting tool seemed inconsistent because they had seen videos taken down without good reason, while videos they thought should be removed remained on YouTube despite reporting. Participants were also unsure whether bots or real people review reported content, questioned why reporting is unavailable to people who do not have a YouTube account, and wondered what they should expect after reporting a video. In all groups, this led to a discussion of how much it seems users are left to rely on their own interpretations and to navigate the reporting process with little guidance from YouTube. Although some participants stated that the users and the platform should share some responsibility in reporting misinformation and disinformation, the general consensus was that the onus is placed mainly on users.

When asked what they would change, all suggestions from participants were about providing more clarity, consistency, and transparency. Below are some suggestions:

- Provide a brief explanation of misinformation and disinformation within the reporting tool and have more accessible and clear language that provides additional explanation in the community guidelines. (It is worth noting that some participants worried that if extra information is added to the reporting tool, users might ignore it.)
- Have more transparency around the reporting process, including describing why something has been flagged or taken down and letting users know if real people are reviewing reported content.
- Use independent fact-checkers to review flagged or reported content. Users should also be able to comment on flagged content.
- Address misinformation proactively – monitor trends, auto-flag specific keywords or topics, and use bots to check videos before posting them.
- Have a separate tab for fact-checked trending videos to encourage content that does not include misinformation or have a rating scale (similar to movies) that guides users on videos that are likely to include misinformation.
- Have more consistency in the reporting tool, for instance, by allowing users to report without an account and having the same reporting options for all aspects of YouTube (for example, participants noticed fewer options available for reporting a thumbnail versus a video).

These reflections from facilitators, and the conversations during our collaborative analysis session, prompted the research team to engage in some additional analysis comparing the reporting processes for each platform. The results of this brief comparative analysis are presented in the following section.



Summary of Platform Reporting Processes

	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube
Does the reporting process take you out of the app (e.g., into a web browser?)	No	No	No	No
Is there an option to specifically report misinformation or disinformation?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Does the platform provide a definition of misinformation or disinformation?	No	Yes	No	No
Does the process at any point direct you toward the platform’s community guidelines?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Does the platform inform users about what will happen after they report content?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

As we note in more detail in the following section, the presence of any or all these elements does not necessarily translate into a *meaningful* process for users who wish to report misinformation or disinformation. For example, while a few platforms provide a definition for misinformation or disinformation, these definitions are not necessarily clear or comprehensive enough for all users to be sure of what it is they should be reporting under this option. Also, while TikTok makes mention of their community guidelines after you submit a report, there is no link provided that will take you directly to this document – as is the case with other platforms like Instagram or YouTube.

Finally, while all platforms inform users about what will happen *after* they report content, each platform provides varying details about this process and varying degrees of follow-up after a report is filed. For example, Twitter offers a

step-by-step explanation of how the report will be reviewed, while Instagram simply provides a message to users that says: “Thank you for letting us know. Your feedback is important in helping us keep the Instagram community safe.” YouTube is the only platform that sends an email directly to users after they submit a report that includes more detailed information about the review process, while Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok seem to opt for in-app notifications.¹ Platforms will also notify users when a report is assessed and a decision is made (again, sometimes this arrives via email and other times it is an in-app notification). However, as we highlight in the next section, participants are usually left wanting more information about how reports are assessed and how decisions are made by platforms.

¹ This comparative analysis exercise was completed by a member of the research team who answered these questions after reporting misinformation or disinformation on each of the platforms. This exercise was completed in March 2023, and we note this with the understanding that platforms regularly make updates and changes to their reporting processes and community guidelines.

Reporting Platforms: What We Heard

In this section, we centre the experiences, concerns, and insights of youth ages 16 to 29 who participated in focus group discussions and the evaluation exercise.

Opening Discussion

First, in our opening discussions with participants, we asked questions to understand whether they had recently encountered misinformation or disinformation online, where they had seen it, what they usually do about it, and whether they think it is important for platforms to flag this content. Across all three groups, every participant who responded said they had encountered misinformation or disinformation online within a couple of weeks of our session. Throughout their responses, youth identified each platform we evaluated in this project (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube) as well as other sources of misinformation and disinformation including Facebook, WhatsApp, news sites, and video games.

- “I feel like I see it all the time, and I have to be careful, especially on TikTok.” (16- to 18-year-old)
- “There’s a lot of misinformation on Twitter... in the comments section... people posting things that are very misleading.” (16- to 18-year-old)
- “WhatsApp is a huge source of misinformation among family.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Some participants expressed specific concern about content creators whom they felt had the sole purpose of posting false or misleading information.

- “I see lots of misinformation on Instagram and TikTok. Not only that, but there is a lot of fake content creators.” (16- to 18-year-old)

One participant suggested that social media influencers can play a role in spreading misinformation, specifically when they review and promote products for which they are receiving payment.

- “Social media influencers try to sell us products without trying them. They give their promo codes, but I don’t know if these products have been tested.” (19- to 22-year-old)
- “On Facebook, there is a sports page I’m a part of, and I see misinformation with people selling false t-shirts with the sports logo. They sometimes use disabilities to make you feel like you should buy the shirt. For example, ‘my six-year-old with autism designed this shirt’ - but it’s clearly not true.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Others highlighted that political news, or content about elections, can often be very “skewed and misleading.” Older participants pointed explicitly to concerns about health information, including content related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, it was clear that encountering misinformation and disinformation has become a normal and frequent part of the online experience for youth across Canada.

When we asked what participants do when they see misinformation or disinformation online, we heard a variety of responses. Some indicated that they tend to ignore the posts or content:

“I’ve seen a lot of misinformation and disinformation, specifically on Instagram. I have to be careful. I try to ignore it.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“Generally, I ignore it... unless it’s something that is harmful.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“If I know something is wrong, I don’t comment. I am more of a passive user. If it is something I’m curious about or it’s valuable information, I go to Google to see how many sources support it.” (19- to 22-year-old)

“I ignore it [when its posted] in a public group because it’s a hassle to argue with people.” (23- to 29-year-old)

“Misinformation or disinformation that strikes the biggest chord with me is encouraging bigotry – anything racial, sexuality, transphobic, religious stereotypes. [It] takes so much energy, so I try to disengage and distance.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Many young people shared that they ignore the content either because it takes up too much time and energy or because they do not want to draw more attention to the post or the account:

“Engagement breeds more engagement and saps your time and energy.” (23- to 29-year-old)

“Those people want that engagement – that’s why they do it, they want clout. They act that way because they know what kind of reaction will occur.” (23- to 29-year-old)

While others make attempts to verify the information because they want to know if it is ‘propaganda’ or ‘fake’:

“I always have to look things up after to make sure they’re actually true or not.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“I would definitely try to verify the information and take a step towards it if it is just propaganda or fake.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“I try to dig out the truth and know what’s going on. I believe some disinformation is trying to find out the truth or know what’s really happening, so I can’t just ignore the information. If it’s in my control, I try to find the truth because maybe there’s a reason.” (23- to 29-year-old)

One verification strategy included relying on the comments section to determine whether a post is sharing accurate information:

“I head to comments to see what people are saying. Sometimes, even if you know something is not true, you tend to trust the comments. Other people’s perceptions change my own.” (19- to 22-year-old)

Some youth said they like to have a conversation with their friends when they encounter information that they are not sure about:

“When things go viral really quickly it can be hard to know – I talk to friends about what is true and what isn’t” (19- to 22-year-old)

Although, others shared that sometimes their friends were the source of false information. One participant expressed this in relation to stories about weather balloons that were circulating around the time we conducted these focus groups:

“My friend sent it to me and said they found an alien in the balloon. I believed it at first then went to check the internet.” (19- to 22-year-old)

Older participants said that they are more likely to engage with misleading or false posts if it originates from someone close to them:

“I try to let [my family] know it’s misinformation. Give them a counterpoint to what they send.” (23- to 29-year-old)

“If it is shared by people I personally know, I talk to them and explain that it’s false.” (23- to 29-year-old)

“For someone in my personal circle, I’ll talk to them in real life, not on platforms.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Finally, some participants did say that they report misinformation and disinformation, especially when it includes inappropriate content or scams, and while they see value in doing so, they are uncertain about the impact. A few participants said that they do not always submit ‘formal’ reports, but instead comment on the post to flag for other users that the content is misleading.

“People are constantly posting, and you don’t know what’s going to pop up. There tends to be a lot of mature content that isn’t caught. I joined [social media] when I was eleven, and it is scary to think that I could have seen those sorts of things.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“I think people publish bad information to get views and followers. Sometimes that misinformation can put people in terrible situations. We have to signal misinformation, and if we have it, share the right information.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Youth explained that their motivation for reporting is sometimes a personal one. For instance, one participant (16- to 18-year-old) shared an example of how someone in their feed posted about the death of a friend who was not dead. Others were clear that they chose to report misinformation that targeted them, or people close to them.

“If it [misinformation] is saying something bad about me or other people, I report it.” (16- to 18-year-old)

To wrap up these opening discussions and in preparation for the evaluation activity, we asked youth whether they think it is important for platforms to be more active in flagging misinformation and disinformation for users. Most said, ‘yes’ and explained that it is important for platforms to take on this role because of the potential impacts of misleading and false information and the need to ‘protect users’.

“It’s important for platforms to flag the information to stop the spread.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“In my opinion, it is important for platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation because of how misleading this information has been to people that are not sufficiently informed.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“Anybody can be impacted [by misinformation and disinformation], but it’s especially important for vulnerable populations. Like, the elderly may be susceptible to thinking something is real information... Not only elders, but especially children. Young children use platforms where misinformation spreads fast – teaching them how to navigate this is important.” (23- to 29-year-old)

While youth expressed a desire to see platforms play a more prominent role in countering misinformation and disinformation, even in these early discussions, they were doubtful that platforms would do so:

“Yes, they should [flag content]. However, controversial content gets clout and engagement, so why would platforms try to steer users away?” (23- to 29-year-old)

And some questioned how *well* they were flagging information or whether platforms flag and remove the *right* content:

“Yes, but how well do they do it [flag information]? That is the issue. I don’t think they do a good job because they sometimes flag things that aren’t inappropriate. For example, Instagram takes down factual information on my business account but leaves misinformation on my personal account.” (19- to 22-year-old)

“Yes, but it’s also important to understand how algorithms are affecting the flagging. Who is deciding what is misinformation or disinformation for each user?” (23- to 29-year-old)

In response to this, some emphasized the desire to have ‘actual people’ monitoring, moderating, and flagging content on social media platforms.

“If I had these billion-dollar companies, it would be worthwhile to hire people to make sure the content is safe and appropriate before they post it.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“Actual people should review content – put it in the hands of people.” (19- to 22-year-old)

During the breakout sessions, youth elaborated on all these experiences, concerns, and potential solutions in their evaluations of specific platform reporting mechanisms—the results of this evaluation are summarized in the following section.

Evaluation Activity

After the opening discussion, participants broke into smaller groups to evaluate one social platform’s policies and procedures for countering misinformation and disinformation online. We facilitated this evaluation exercise for each of the following platforms: Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. The tables below summarize the results of this collaborative evaluation activity.

1. Have you seen these tools for reporting or flagging mis/disinformation on this platform before?

Age group	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube
Ages 16-18	Most said no.	Most said no.	n/a**	All said yes.
Ages 19-22	Most said yes.	Most said yes.	All said no.	All said yes.
Ages 23-29	n/a*	Most said yes.	All who had used Twitter said yes.	Most said yes.

2. Does this tool provide you with a clear definition or understanding of what mis/disinformation is?

Age group	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube
Ages 16-18	Most said no—you have to look for it; needs more clear language; tend to avoid instead of report.	All said yes—it is helpful and makes you stop and read.	n/a**	Most said yes but—not clear or consistent and doesn’t explain what misinformation is
Ages 19-22	Most said no—Instagram doesn’t define it and people are unlikely to seek definitions before opening accounts.	Most said yes but—it takes multiple steps and not everyone would go through them.	Most said yes—gives information on why you’re reporting and examples to choose from.	Most said no—no clear definition and reporting categories are not clear.
Ages 23-29	n/a*	All said yes—it gives lots of description.	Half split between yes and no—only clear to someone who already knows the concepts; doesn’t seem to be built for reporting mis/disinformation.	Most said no—language is confusing, makes you unsure about what you should/shouldn’t report.

*We did not include Instagram in the 23-29 age group because we ran a bilingual YouTube group that required two facilitators during that session.

**We did not include Twitter in the 16-18 age group because the number of participants was too small to hold four breakout sessions, and the [data available](#) suggests that the adoption of this platform is low among this age group relative to other platforms.

3. Is this tool/process easy to use/navigate?

Age group	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube
Ages 16-18	Most said no—too long of a process, highly dependent on how much the user does.	All said yes but—difficult to know what counts as a violation; difficult to find; seems to take a long time; doesn't work at times.	n/a**	All said yes—it is simple, not much of a process.
Ages 19-22	Most said yes—but it is difficult to find the information initially.	Most said yes—uses clear, brief language; simple click of a button.	Split between yes and no—provided options are easy to identify but it's difficult if what you want to report doesn't fit the examples given	Most said yes but—it's not well-constructed; doesn't always work well; and doesn't have much information.
Ages 23-29	n/a*	All said yes—quick, accessible, good description, provides step-by-step guide.	Most said yes—looks easy to navigate, but only if the option is listed; may be limiting otherwise.	Some said yes, most felt unsure—it is easy to use but it difficult to understand what to report.

4. Do you think this tool/approach provides users with a meaningful process for combatting mis/disinformation on the platform?

Age group	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube
Ages 16-18	Most said no—unclear whether reporting will have any effect or consequences; need to seek more information from a verified source.	Most said yes—seen many videos reported and deleted although many remain; not used before but now will use more often.	n/a**	All said no—no clear/exact explanation; problematic that onus is on the user to report
Ages 19-22	Split between yes and no—'report it and forget it' isn't meaningful; it's a big platform with low moderation and unlikely to change.	Most said yes but—it is a temporary solution because there is still so much misinformation; TikTok needs more of a verification process.	Most said yes—feels likely you'll get a positive response to your report.	Most said no—too many potential problems; post-report process is not transparent; lack of consistency in reporting various features of YouTube.
Ages 23-29	n/a*	All said no—post-report process is unclear; often curate feeds using the 'not interested' option instead; likely to report only if an issue is personal.	Most said no—doesn't address the root cause of harm; not an instinctive process; post-report process is unclear.	All said no—onus is on users to report but should be on hired platform staff; post-report process is unclear.

*We did not include Instagram in the 23-29 age group because we ran a bilingual YouTube group that required two facilitators during that session.

**We did not include Twitter in the 16-18 age group because the number of participants was too small to hold four breakout sessions, and the [data available](#) suggests that the adoption of this platform is low among this age group relative to other platforms.

5. What do you think is missing from this approach/these processes for combatting mis/disinformation?

What would make it easier to recognize/flag/report?








What types of tools, designs, processes, or explanations would be helpful?

What would you change?

Age group	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube
Ages 16-18	Responses to this question are summarized in the recommendations section of this report.			
Ages 19-22				
Ages 23-29				

Closing Discussion

At the end of each focus group session, we asked participants to reflect on whether they think online platforms are doing enough to counter misinformation and disinformation and whether they trust platforms to keep them informed and safe online. The consensus was ‘no.’ None of the participants who responded think platforms are doing enough, and most do not trust platforms to keep them informed and safe online.

- 
“They do some things like deactivating accounts, but it is not enough because if you do not report, nothing is going to happen.” (16- to 18-year-old)
- 
“Platforms have so many ads and yet do not advertise the fact that they have reporting mechanisms.” (16- to 18-year-old)
- 
“I would hope that they [platforms] can do a bit more in the future so that I can trust them for safety online.”
 (16- to 18-year-old)
- 
“Platforms could do better.” (19- to 22-year-old)
- 
“I don’t think it’s moderated enough.” (19- to 22-year-old)
- 
“I do not believe that platforms are doing enough, and I think that most social media users are aware of how much misinformation can be spread on the internet, but not how to decipher exactly what is misinformation because of the inadequate screening processes.” (19- to 22-year-old)
- 
“No, I don’t trust them.” (19- to 22-year-old)

Youth repeated concerns about the values platforms prioritize. In particular, they emphasized how platforms are motivated by use and engagement, which negatively impacts whether a platform will moderate content (and, if so, how well).

“Keeping people on the platform is more important to them.” (19- to 22-year-old)

“I think online platforms will always be more interested in the profit of my data than my actual humanity, so no to both [trust and safety].” (23- to 29-year-old)

“It’s against social media’s brand. They want people to scroll through as much as possible to keep them engaged. So, they won’t add extra steps.” (23- to 29-year-old)

They also emphasized concerns about how much of the work of identifying and flagging or reporting misinformation and disinformation falls on users:

“It really depends on the users to report, and I feel like that can be the biggest problem with online platforms.” (16- to 18-year-old)

Young people wanted to trust the platforms they use and continued, in this final discussion, to offer more potential solutions.

“There should be a review on the information or content (video or audio) before it is allowed to go public on the platform.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“Platforms should do more to raise awareness about what is misinformation and how they [users] can report it if they find it.” (16- to 18-year-old)

“Perhaps platforms can offer incentives for people reporting misinformation, like using the gifts feature on TikTok or having a points system on Instagram. This would encourage reporting but can also be used for the wrong reasons.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Finally, some participants highlighted or supported a more decisive role for governments in combatting misinformation and disinformation in online spaces:

“No matter what the platform does, I feel like they can just tell us anything. I feel like the government needs to take a step in at this current moment in regulating platforms and forcing their hand in what they’re doing about misinformation. We’ve left it in the hands of the private sector for too long, and they have no public interest in quelling misinformation. It does nothing for them. It doesn’t help with profit. They have no incentive.” (23- to 29-year-old)

Overall, the lack of trust and confidence that participants expressed in the ability of platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation and to keep them informed and safe online was apparent throughout all three focus group sessions. While these remain online communities that participants choose and want to be in for various reasons (such as social connection, content creation, community engagement, and entertainment), they admit that a lack of human content moderation and meaningful tools for reporting misinformation and disinformation on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube negatively impacts their experiences.

Change the *Vibe*: The Impacts of Platform Design on Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation

In this study, participants wrestled with questions and evaluation exercises that asked them to consider whether an online platform could improve their efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation. In part, participants struggled because they could not see how this responsibility to combat misinformation and disinformation would fit the *vibe* of the platform. You will recall that participants emphasized how the *vibe* of these spaces encouraged what several called ‘passive use’ of social media. Authentication and verification seemed in direct opposition, requiring more active engagement on and *with* a platform. In other words, participants flagged what research has also found; that the *vibe* of a platform tilts users *away* rather than towards considerations of accuracy.¹⁸

Despite the general consensus that platform *vibes* encourage laid-back use, as outlined in the ‘[what we heard](#)’ section above, participants felt strongly that the work of authenticating and verifying information in these spaces fell primarily on users. Participants employed various verification practices, including those that align with [best practices](#), such as verifying the original source, checking other sources, and signalling, flagging, or reporting the content as false or misleading. However, older youth shared how they sometimes go to the comment section to gauge a reaction to the post and attempt to determine, based on the comments, whether the post is true or not.

This desire for ‘community’ or peer consensus is consistent with our [previous research](#), which found that social harmony or social cohesion (especially with friends and family) is significant for young adults. It is important to young people that they maintain their social capital with their peer groups and other platform users and that they are not noticeably ‘rocking the boat’ by directly challenging the perceived norms and values of the group. Similarly, participants in this study explained that they “didn’t want to argue with people” because misinformation and disinformation are often shared to cause controversy and intentionally disrupt social harmony — especially when it is connected to other harms like online hate



¹⁸ Pennycook, G., Epstein, Z., Mosleh, M., Arechar, A., Eckles, D., & Rand, D. (2020). Understanding and reducing the spread of misinformation online. In *Advances in Consumer Research Volume 48*. Eds. J. Argo, T. M., Lowrey, and H. J. Schau. Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 863-867.

and bigotry. Instead, participants tended to lean *into* the platform's *vibe*, which allowed them to ignore, disengage, and keep scrolling. This is also consistent with our [previous research](#), where social cohesion was a primary factor in young people's decisions not to engage when encountering hate online.

In this study, we once again heard young Canadians expressing fear or concern of escalating conflict in their observations that 'engagement breeds engagement,' as well as concerns that engaging with 'public or high-profile accounts' would make them a target or fuel recommendation algorithms - leading to more rather than less misinformation and disinformation on the platform. While participants felt considerably more comfortable addressing online misinformation and disinformation with known contacts (especially friends and family), they preferred relational approaches like talking offline or face-to-face with the person who shared it.¹⁹ In this case, and perhaps motivated by a sense of loyalty to family and friends, they actively chose to lean *away* from the platform's *vibe*, in many cases taking their exchanges off the platform altogether.

Another exception to the 'just keep scrolling' rule was when participants came across what they called "really questionable content or ideas," especially if they felt it could cause offline harm or death. In these cases, participants expressed a responsibility to share 'right,' 'true,' or 'trusted' information if they could. Again, in this case, they consciously chose to interrupt the *vibe*, get off the platform, and actively search the internet for other trusted sources of information, like mainstream news, where they thought the verification standards were higher.

At first, these instances of disruption were frustrating for participants because they wanted to stay within the *vibe* of a platform (in other words, they did not want their experience jarred by having to exit and re-enter the app). Participants explained that they often go to these platforms to 'unplug,' 'turn off,' and 'unwind.' However, as they moved through the evaluation exercise, they began to reflect on how their passivity was conditioned by the platform's *vibe*, communicated and transmitted to them using algorithms, platform design, and the values a platform espouses to uphold in their terms of service and community guidelines. On the one hand, participants began to understand that users have an important role in combatting misinformation and disinformation, especially because they worried that platforms could 'get it wrong.' On the other hand, they saw a critical need for platforms to build more meaningful tools and processes *into* the user experience, or the *vibe*, to nudge users towards verification.²⁰ In other words, to make accuracy a central value of these platforms.

While platform design is constantly being modified, participants emphasized that the choices presented to them by platforms, especially for reporting misinformation and disinformation, did not feel appropriately suited for flagging false, misleading, or questionable content and ideas. Instead, as participants who evaluated Twitter's reporting features highlighted, many of these tools were designed to address interpersonal conflict, which made participants doubtful that users would even consider using these tools to report misinformation and disinformation. As we have highlighted, while options to ignore or hide this content fits the *vibe* of these platforms,

¹⁹ Our previous research studies on [online hate](#) and [online meanness and cruelty](#) have found that in these instances young Canadians also prefer to take relational approaches, like talking offline or face-to-face, to combatting these online harms.

²⁰ Pennycook, G., Epstein, Z., Mosleh, M., Arechar, A., Eckles, D., & Rand, D. (2020). Understanding and reducing the spread of misinformation online. In *Advances in Consumer Research Volume 48*. Eds. J., Argo, T. M., Lowrey, and H. J. Schau. Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 863-867.

participants saw these design choices as ‘cop-outs,’ evidence that platforms were offloading their responsibility to prevent and address misinformation and disinformation while also significantly narrowing the user’s role in this process.²¹

Further, the tools and choices available to users felt more appropriate for preference management, not harm management. Users do not lack choice in personalization, personal curation, or selective avoidance mechanisms²²; instead, as participants emphasized, they want to see platforms commit to enacting values of trust, responsibility, transparency, and accuracy. By the end of these focus groups, participants were still sceptical that platforms would consider implementing responsible design changes that upheld these values because, as participants explained, these values are not ‘on brand’ for these platforms. However, despite their misgivings, participants offered insightful and valuable suggestions for change.

Participants considered the possibility of incentives for users (e.g., points, boosts, and rewards) and how these sorts of design features could be used to nudge users to engage in authentication and verification practices. Participants also understood that for users to become more proactive and invested in the problem of combatting misinformation and

disinformation, they needed to be made aware of the scope of the problem on the platform. This meant no more hidden comments or options to ignore, which participants felt buried the problem and made it difficult for users to recognize and respond to false and misleading content. Participants explained that seeing fact-checking at work, or how platforms make decisions about what ‘counts’ as misinformation and disinformation, would provide them with learning opportunities to inform their authentication and verification practices. These transparency measures would also help balance the visual aesthetics of social platforms, which can make it difficult for users to establish authenticity.²³

Ultimately, while participants understood the desire to maintain a *vibe* that allows users to ‘unplug’ and ‘unwind,’ they felt it was necessary to change or adjust the *vibe* so that users also have meaningful opportunities to engage with platforms to prevent and address misinformation and disinformation. While such a shift in the *vibe* might be ‘annoying’ initially, participants felt that platforms must make design changes that prioritize values of accuracy, transparency, trust, responsibility, and safety.

The following section provides a detailed account of the specific recommendations generated by participants in this study.

21 Scharlach, R., Hallinan, B., & Shifman, L. (2023). Governing principles: Articulating values in social media platform policies. *New Media & Society*, 14614448231156580.

22 Barnidge, M., Peacock, C., Kim, B., Kim, Y., & Xenos, M. A. (2022). Networks and selective avoidance: How social media networks influence unfriending and other avoidance behaviors. *Social Science Computer Review*, 08944393211069628.

23 Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji. *Communication research and practice*, 2(1), 47-62.

Recommendations

In the final part of the evaluation activity, and during our closing discussions, youth offered various solutions and recommendations in response to their own experiences and concerns with current reporting mechanisms on various platforms. We asked the following questions to prompt the development and discussion of these recommendations:

- What do you think is missing from this approach/ these processes for combatting misinformation and disinformation?
- What would make it easier to recognize, flag, or report misinformation and disinformation?
- What tools, designs, processes, or explanations would be helpful?
- What would you change?

Participants suggested recommendations specific to the platform they evaluated as well as some general recommendations for countering misinformation and disinformation online. We have listed these recommendations below and organized the general recommendations into four categories: (1) accessibility, awareness, and accuracy; (2) safety and responsibility; (3) trust; and (4) transparency.



Instagram

- The reporting process should have an upfront and visual element to fit Instagram’s focus on graphics, perhaps by having a ‘report’ icon similar to the ‘like’ and ‘comment’ icons on posts.
- Reporting should be as clear, easy and accessible as other processes on Instagram; for example, ‘double tapping’ to like a post.
- The reporting tool should be at the right hand of every page, so users always have access to it.
- Pin Instagram posts or have pop-ups to remind people not to take anyone at their word and to think critically about the content they are consuming.
- Hackers usually send DM’s (directed messages) asking users to ‘click this link.’ There should be an option to report underneath, which says “do you think this is a scam?”
- Invest more in fact-checking and human content moderation.



TikTok

- There should be an extra step after clicking ‘not interested’ on a TikTok post, asking ‘why?’ to help identify instances of misinformation and disinformation.
- TikTok should prompt users with videos on how to navigate misinformation and disinformation to promote user education and awareness, similar to the ‘you should take a break’ prompts.





Twitter

- Platforms should tweet to all new users about the reporting tools and tweet regularly about the negative impact of misinformation and disinformation to educate users.
- Include misinformation and disinformation as options within the reporting tool.
- Add a textbox in the reporting tool to allow users to write in their reason for reporting if none of the provided options fit their reason.
- Collaborate with fact-checkers to identify and respond to misinformation and disinformation.
- Employing algorithmic tools to identify tweets that contain known misinformation or disinformation and flag it for human moderator review.
- Redesign recommendation algorithms so they no longer optimize primarily for engagement.

YouTube

- Allow users to report videos when they do not have a YouTube account. If people can use YouTube without an account, they should be able to report without an account.
- Have consistency in the reporting tools. For example, there are fewer options for reporting a comment or thumbnail than a video, and reporting a YouTube video embedded on another site is more complicated.
- YouTube should use independent fact-checkers like Instagram does.
- Have a separate section on YouTube for fact-checked trending videos to encourage content without misinformation.
- Address misinformation proactively – monitor trends, auto-flag specific keywords or topics, and use bots to check videos before posting them.



General Recommendations

Accessibility, Awareness, and Accuracy:

- Reporting tools should be upfront, visible, easy to use and accessible to users.
- Reporting tools should include a brief explanation of what is considered misinformation and disinformation on the platform, utilizing expert-approved, clear and simple language.
- Reporting tools should provide users with examples of reportable content to guide users who might be unsure of what should be reported.
- Platforms should prompt users regularly about reporting tools and how misinformation and disinformation spread to build awareness and accurately represent the scope of the problem.

Safety and Responsibility:

- Efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation should be increased for topics like health and elections that have potentially wide-spread social impact.
- There should be more serious consequences for violating community guidelines such as spreading misinformation. For example, people should not be allowed to make another account.

Trust:

- Platforms should invest in hiring people (experts, independent fact-checkers or content moderators) to combat misinformation and disinformation.
- There should be more checks and approval processes before content is posted publicly, especially with accounts that have a large following, accounts that regularly spread misinformation and disinformation, or content that uses key topics, words or trends that are especially susceptible to misinformation and disinformation.
 - Artificial intelligence can be used to flag known or common misinformation and disinformation for human content moderators to review, especially when content goes viral.
 - The account creation process for platforms should be more rigorous and add extra steps for verification to reduce spam accounts.

Transparency:

- Platforms can encourage users to authenticate information by including a content rating or ranking (similar to movie rating scales), determined either by professional fact-checkers or in accordance with standards (similar to those mainstream news media are expected to follow).
- There should be more transparency about the post-report process:
 - Include more information to explain what happens *after* a report is submitted and how reports are handled.
 - Include a prompt at the bottom of reported content notifying users that the content is under review.
 - Allow users to read why content was flagged so they can better understand the reporting process.
 - Provide users with a detailed explanation of the assessment process (including when and how artificial intelligence and human content moderation occurs) so that users are aware of how a decision regarding a specific topic, piece of content or comment, was made and the actions that will follow.
- There should be greater transparency regarding how many reports of misinformation and disinformation have been made on the platform so that users have an accurate understanding of the scope of the problem.



Next Steps

This qualitative research project intentionally positioned youth as experts to be actively involved in assessing current approaches and designing new policies, interventions, and tools to mitigate the spread of misinformation and disinformation in online spaces. Experiences and insights collected through focus group discussions and evaluation activities told us more about:

- where and how young Canadians encounter misinformation and disinformation online and how they typically react to this content;
- how aware youth are of reporting mechanisms or other approaches that online platforms currently take to counter misinformation and disinformation;
- whether youth think that online platforms are doing enough to counter these harms; and
- the recommendations youth want to see platforms implement moving forward.

This project builds on our previous research ([2019](#); [2020](#)) and confirms young Canadians' frustrations with a lack of opportunities to learn about and engage in best practices for countering misinformation and disinformation online. Our findings demonstrate how the persistence of this online harm makes it difficult for youth to navigate online information ecosystems and erodes their trust in platforms to mitigate harmful content and keep them informed and safe. Despite their frustrations, youth continue to hold platforms responsible for removing misinformation and disinformation.

They argue that young people should have a voice in the design and regulation of online platforms as the policies and procedures created by adults directly impact their quality of life and opportunities.

Engaging with youth from across the country in online focus groups ensured that we reflected a diverse range of experiences and worked collectively on recommendations for platforms. Centering the voices and experiences of young Canadians guarantees that their insights are included in conversations about and decision-making regarding how best to mitigate against the potential impacts of misinformation and disinformation. As with our [previous qualitative projects](#), we once again confirmed that when youth have clear and accessible descriptions of the online processes that impact their lives and the things they see and share online, they are eager to engage in the development of solutions that will help others build awareness – allowing everyone to more meaningfully, and safely, engage with digital media and technology.

This project contributes to academic knowledge on countering misinformation and disinformation and strengthens the evidence base upon which policymakers and platforms develop models and procedures to prevent and address these online harms. To increase the reach and impact of this work within the research community, we will present the findings from this study at conferences and within our expanding network of digital sociology researchers.²⁴

24 Dr. Brisson-Boivin and Dr. McAleese will present the findings from this study at the 2023 Canadian Sociological Association conference (in June 2023) as part of the Internet, Technology, and Digital Sociology cluster.

We will also mobilize the recommendations generated from this project directly with social platforms including through our ongoing partnerships with the four platforms evaluated by participants (Meta-Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Google-YouTube).

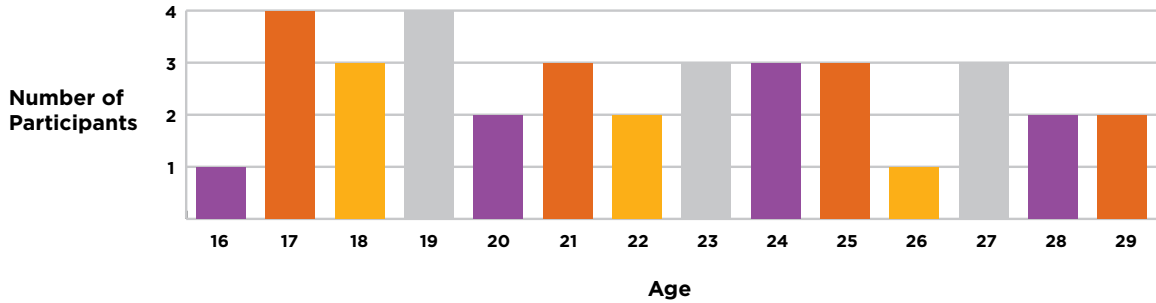
In our own efforts to enhance collective resilience and empower young Canadians—and the families, educators, and communities who support them—to take steps to mitigate the spread of misinformation and disinformation, MediaSmarts has the following free resources available on our website:

- [Break the Fake](#). A suite of fact-checking tips, workshops, and lesson plans for determining whether something is true online and sharing good information.
- [Reality Check: The Game](#). Fast, fun, and engaging activities that provide teens and adults with the opportunity to test their skills and learn new authentication techniques.
- [Authentication 101](#). Essential information on how to search and authenticate information.
- [Finding and Evaluating Science and Health Information](#). Information about health and science topics, types of misinformation that are particularly common in those subjects, and steps we can take to determine how reliable a source or claim is.
- [Impact of Misinformation on the Democratic Process](#). Information about how to read election and political news critically, recognize misinformation and disinformation, and be a more active and engaged consumer of political news.
- [Verifying Online News](#). Information about how Canadians get their news, how to recognize fact from fiction in news media, and how to identify reliable and unreliable news sources.

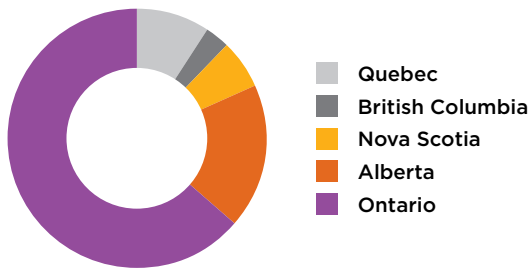
This project and its recommendations add to the growing knowledge base from which MediaSmarts continues to work with community partners, policymakers, and platforms to counter misinformation and disinformation and prevent and address various online harms. This ongoing work will include future [research studies](#) and inform our ongoing public awareness campaigns (including [Break the Fake](#) and [Check First, Share After](#)). Most importantly, we will continue advocating for digital media literacy in policy, practice, and procedure with online platforms, industry, and government that will empower (especially young) Canadians and increase their agency, control, safety, and well-being as they navigate always-already changing online information ecosystems.

Appendices

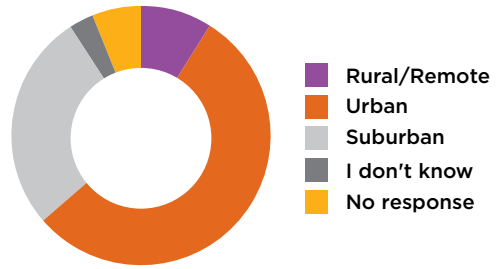
Appendix A: Demographics



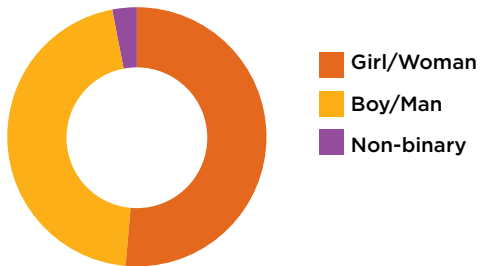
What province or territory do you live in?



How would you describe the community you live in?



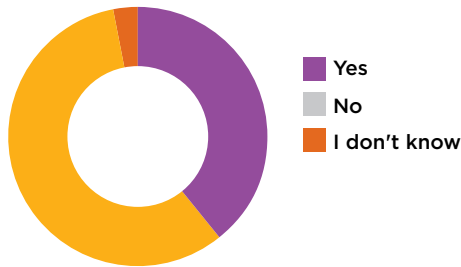
Which of the following best describes your gender?



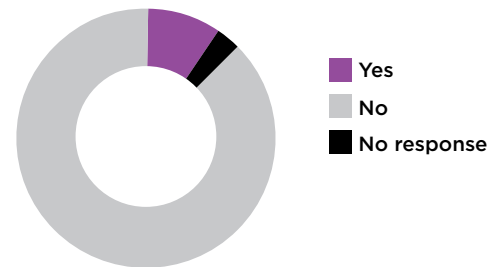
Do you identify as a member of the trans, non-binary and gender diverse community?



Do you identify as a member of the 2SLGBTQA+ community?

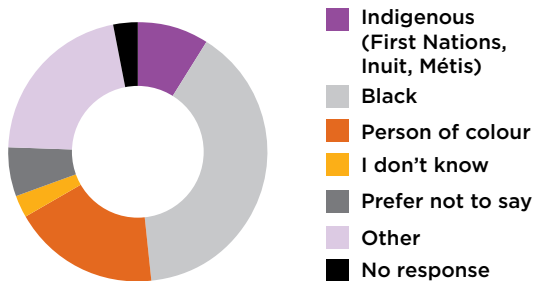


Do you identify as as Two Spirit?



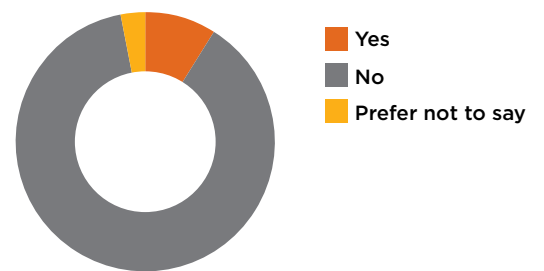
People sometimes think about themselves in terms of race or skin colour.

If you feel comfortable identifying yourself in this way, please do so below.



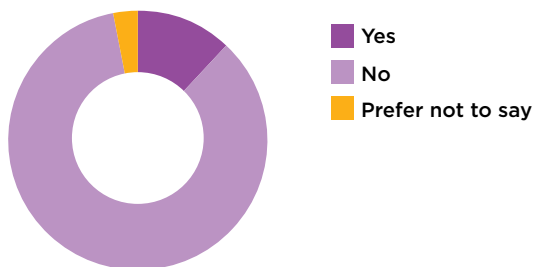
People sometimes identify as having a physical disability (for example: wheelchair user, vision impairment, hearing impairment, etc.).

If you feel comfortable identifying yourself in this way, please do so below.



People sometimes identify as having an intellectual, cognitive, or learning disability (for example: dyslexia, autism or autism spectrum, etc.).

If you feel comfortable identifying yourself in this way, please do so below.



People sometimes identify as having a mental illness (for example: bipolar, anxiety disorder, major depression, etc.).

If you feel comfortable identifying yourself in this way, please do so below.

