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Concern about misinformation: Connections to trust in media, confidence in institutions, civic engagement, and hopefulness

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Overview of the study

This study uses data from the Survey Series on People and their Communities (SSPC) to explore how Canadians are navigating the complexities of today's information environment. Specifically, it examines the characteristics of those who reported having high levels of concern about misinformation online and how this concern may relate to perceptions of media trustworthiness, confidence in institutions, hopefulness about national unity and democracy, as well as voting behaviour (as a measure of civic participation).

- In 2023, nearly 6 in 10 Canadians (59%) reported that they had a very high or extreme level of concern over the presence of misinformation online, while 14% reported that they were not very or not at all concerned.
- People with higher levels of education were more likely to be concerned about misinformation.
- People who reported higher levels of concern over online misinformation were also more likely to report that they regularly fact-check their news from a secondary source (69%), compared to 22% of those who were somewhat concerned about misinformation, or 10% of those who were not very or not at all concerned.
- Regardless of their level of concern about online misinformation, less than half of Canadians (47%) reported high levels of trust in the media.
- Canadians reporting lower levels of concern about misinformation online were more likely to report higher levels of confidence in various institutions, such as the justice system and courts, compared to those who were more concerned about misinformation.
- Concern about misinformation was associated with lower levels of hopefulness about national unity—40% of those with high concern reported that they were somewhat or very hopeful about unity among Canadians. This compares to 55% among those who reported that they were somewhat concerned about misinformation.

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Introduction

The information landscape has changed dramatically in the past twenty years, with news and information readily available at our fingertips. Research has shown that many Canadians now rely on online platforms as their main source of information. A recent study¹ found that close to 6 in 10 Canadians got their news and information from the Internet (33%) or social media (24%), with the remainder relying on more traditional sources such as television (28%), the radio (8%), print media (5%) or other sources of information (2%).

With an increased convenience and volume of online information in our current digital era come greater opportunities for the spread of misinformation,² which refers to news or information that is verifiably false or inaccurate. Indeed, awareness of and concern about misinformation are growing, but its impacts on Canadian society are still being explored. In 2023, 59% of Canadians reported being very or extremely concerned about misinformation online and 43% of Canadians found it harder to distinguish between true and false news or information compared to three years prior.³ As some research has shown that misinformation can affect overall well-being by increasing polarization in society and eroding public trust,⁴ this study examines public concern about misinformation, and considers how it may be associated with attitudes and behaviours related to civic engagement.

Using data from the 2023-24 Survey Series on People and their Communities, this study provides new insights about Canadians who express greater concern over

misinformation online, which can be helpful for understanding the broader landscape of information literacy and public trust in democratic institutions. The first section of this article examines how having high levels of concern over misinformation differs across population groups. As some studies suggest that misinformation can reduce trust in the media, erode public confidence in institutions, and potentially undermine social cohesion and other indicators of well-being,⁵ the second section considers how concern over misinformation is correlated with trust in the media, attitudes and behaviours related to civic engagement, as well as views about unity and democracy in Canada.

Greater concern over misinformation was more prevalent among Canadians with higher levels of education

In 2023, nearly 6 in 10 Canadians (59%) reported that they were very or extremely concerned about the presence of misinformation online. Another 27% reported that they were somewhat concerned, while 14% of Canadians said that they were not very or not at all concerned about online misinformation.

While men and women reported similar levels of unease with regard to online misinformation (59%), the degree of concern about misinformation varied according to sociodemographic group (Table 1). Canadians with greater educational achievement were more likely to report high levels of concern over misinformation. Specifically, 46% of those with less than a high school diploma reported being extremely or very concerned about

misinformation online, compared with 66% of those with at least a bachelor's degree.

Similarly, people with higher income tended to express higher levels of concern over misinformation than those with lower income. People with higher personal income were more likely to report concern about misinformation (71% among those making \$70,000 to \$89,999; 67% among those making \$90,000 or more) than those making \$29,999 or less (56%). However, this association weakened after accounting for other sociodemographic characteristics, with the top earners (61%) similarly likely to express concern over misinformation as those earning the least (59%).

Results also varied with age; for example, in 2023, around two-thirds of Canadians aged 55 to 64 (65%) and aged 65 to 74 (68%) reported being very concerned about misinformation, compared to 60% of those aged 25 to 34. This is consistent with the results of a recent study⁶ which showed that older adults tend to have a greater degree of cynicism about the information that they encounter online than younger adults; however, they continue to engage with misinformation online in the same way (e.g., by reading, sharing, or believing it) that they would engage with trustworthy content.

On the other hand, those in the youngest age group were the least likely to report that they had a high level of concern about misinformation online (46% among those aged 15 to 24). Relatedly, previous research has shown that this group is among the most likely to be vulnerable to misinformation, in that people of this age are less likely to be able to discern truth from not truth in a structured, standardized test.⁷

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Table 1
Percentage reporting being very or extremely concerned about online misinformation, by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, Canadians aged 15 and older, 2023

Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics	Proportion	95% confidence interval		Predicted Probability
		Lower bound	Upper bound	
		percentage		
Total	59.1	57.2	61.1	...
Gender				
Men (ref.)	59.1	56.2	61.9	59.4
Women	59.2	56.5	61.9	60.0
Age group				
15 to 24 years (ref.)	45.6	38.8	52.4	52.2
25 to 34 years	59.7	54.1	65.3	58.2*
35 to 44 years	56.8	52.0	61.6	54.8
45 to 54 years	60.5	55.6	65.4	58.8*
55 to 64 years	64.9	60.7	69.1	65.8*
65 to 74 years	67.9	63.7	72.0	68.6*
75 years and over	58.4	52.8	64.0	59.6*
Racialized status				
Non-racialized, non-Indigenous (ref.)	60.6	58.0	63.3	61.2
Racialized	55.7	54.1	57.4	55.5*
South Asian	61.1	57.0	65.2	59.8
Chinese	48.1	44.5	51.8	45.7*
Black	54.9	50.9	59.0	58.2*
Filipino	62.7	58.2	67.2	61.7
Arab	50.1	45.3	54.9	54.2*
Latin American	59.3	55.3	63.2	60.9
Southeast Asian	52.6	48.1	57.1	53.9*
West Asian	46.8	40.2	53.3	45.1*
Region				
Atlantic region (ref.)	55.2	48.7	61.7	54.4
Quebec	49.5	45.2	53.8	50.2*
Ontario	62.7	59.3	66.0	63.8*
Prairie region	62.8	58.5	67.1	62.6*
British Columbia	61.7	57.3	66.2	62.7*
Educational attainment				
Less than high school (ref.)	46.1	39.1	53.0	49.4
High school	54.8	50.4	59.3	56.0*
Trades certificate, college, or CEGEP	60.3	56.5	64.1	59.4*
University or above	66.1	63.5	68.7	65.8*
Total personal income - after tax				
\$0 to \$29,999 (ref.)	56.2	52.9	59.4	59.0
\$30,000 to \$49,999	59.1	55.2	63.0	59.0
\$50,000 to \$69,999	59.7	54.7	64.6	58.3
\$70,000 to \$89,999	70.6	64.7	76.4	66.9*
\$90,000 and over	66.5	60.2	72.8	60.6

... not applicable

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) after adjusting for all other variables in the logistic regression model ($p < 0.05$)

Notes: Predicted probabilities are the results from a logistic regression controlling for gender, age grouping, racialized status, region, education level, and income. High concern about misinformation refers to those who reported that they had a "very high" or "extreme" level of concern about misinformation.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey Series on People and their Communities (Panel 3), 2023.

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In addition, non-racialized, non-Indigenous Canadians (61%) were slightly more likely to report high levels of concern over misinformation compared to racialized Canadians (56%). Among racialized groups, Filipino (63%) and South Asian (61%) people were the most likely to report higher levels of concern over misinformation, while West Asian (47%) and Chinese (48%) Canadians were least likely to report high levels of concern.

Regional differences also played a role in whether Canadians reported high levels of concern over misinformation. In Quebec, half of people (50%) reported high concern over misinformation—significantly lower than the percentages in Ontario (63%), the Prairies (63%), or British Columbia (62%). Relatedly, always or often verifying news against an additional source (i.e. fact-checking) was less commonly reported in Quebec (44%) than in other regions. Similarly, fact-checking was less common among people who only had knowledge of French (32%) compared to those with knowledge of English (56%) or both English and French (57%).

This could be, in part, due to the unique sociodemographic make up of Quebec, including an older population profile and the small number of French-language news sources against which one could verify information or news. Moreover, efforts to automate the detection of misinformation have been language specific, with content in languages other than English less likely to be flagged or removed on social media sites.⁸ In addition to the lower levels of concern

about misinformation among those in Quebec, and the potential for increased exposure to sources that contain misinformation, this group was also less likely to report regularly fact-checking information against an additional source (44%) compared to other regions, such as the Prairies (58%) or Ontario and British Columbia (57%). Considered together, this suggests those living in Quebec could be more susceptible to misinformation.

Concern over misinformation and fact-checking go hand in hand

Previous research has examined strategies individuals employ to address their concerns about misinformation.⁹ These verification methods can range from using personal knowledge to assess accuracy, to engaging with family and friends, to visiting fact-checking sites and verifying the information with other news sources.

Self-reported fact-checking is an important behaviour to consider in the context of misinformation, as successful fact-checking can help stop the spread of false or misleading information. To that end, the SSPC asked Canadians about the frequency with which they used at least one additional information source to verify the accuracy of news stories they encounter.

In 2023, half of those surveyed (53%) reported that they always or often use at least one additional source to verify the accuracy of news stories. As might be expected, people who reported higher levels of concern over misinformation were also more likely to report that they regularly

fact-check (69%) compared to those who were somewhat concerned about misinformation (22%) or those who were not very or not at all concerned (10%). Among those who did not regularly fact-check, less than half (48%) reported high levels of concern about misinformation.

However, although fact-checking is a tool that can be used to address the spread of misinformation, self-reported fact-checking behaviours do not account for the accuracy of the secondary information source—in that individuals may be fact-checking using similarly unreliable sources. Further, people may not engage in fact-checking when they already source their news and information from outlets that they deem as reliable.

Concern about misinformation online was not associated with lower levels of trust in the media

While many Canadians had concerns about misinformation online, there was no evidence to suggest those concerns had an impact on their trust in the media in general.

In 2023, fewer than half of Canadians (47%) reported high levels of trust in the media. When broken down further, 47% of those with high levels of concern, and half (50%) of those who were somewhat concerned about misinformation reported high levels of trust in the media, whereas 40% of those with low levels of concern about misinformation were trusting of the media. However, this difference was not significantly different in a regression model adjusted for other sociodemographic characteristics.

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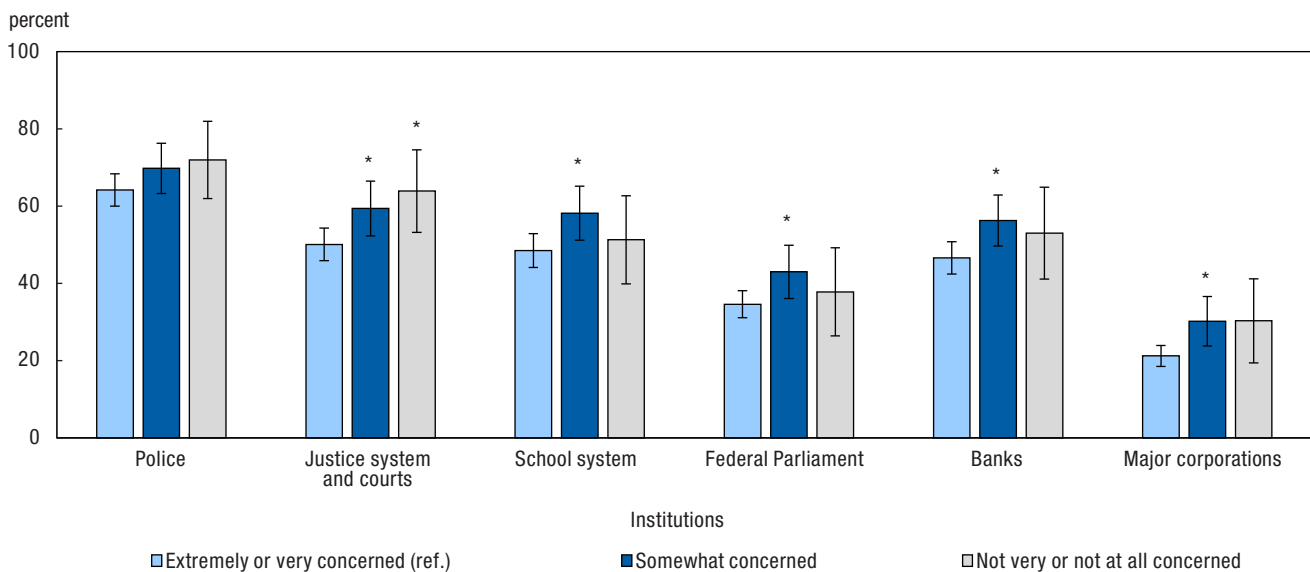
This finding could be related to previous studies that have shown that levels of trust in information vary based on the type of information source. Specifically, a recent study¹⁰ also using the SSPC illustrated that Canadians were generally less trusting of social media posts by accounts unaffiliated with government, scientific or news organizations as sources of information. Around two-thirds of Canadians reported low levels of trust in these sources. On the other hand, Canadians were more likely to report high levels of trust in scientific experts or peer-reviewed journals (68%), close contacts (56%), and the federal government (50%).

Concern over misinformation is associated with lower confidence in various institutions

Canadians with higher levels of concern about misinformation were less likely to report having a great deal of confidence in various institutions, such as banks, or the justice system and courts. Meanwhile, those who reported being somewhat, not very, or not at all concerned about online misinformation were often more likely to have higher levels of confidence in Canadian institutions. These insights were based on the group of SSPC respondents who answered all panels.

Among Canadians who reported high levels of concern over misinformation, half (50%) had high levels of confidence in the justice system and courts, compared to 59% of those who were somewhat concerned about misinformation, or 64% among Canadians with low levels of concern about misinformation. However, in the case of confidence in the school system or the Federal Parliament, those who were somewhat concerned about misinformation were the most likely to report having a great deal of confidence in these institutions (Chart 1). This relationship between greater concern about misinformation and an erosion of

Chart 1
Percent reporting a great deal of confidence in institutions, by level of concern over misinformation, Canadians aged 15 and older, 2023-2024



* significantly different from reference category (ref.) after adjusting for all other variables in the logistic regression model ($p < 0.05$)

Notes: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Owing in part to smaller samples of individuals responding that they were not concerned about misinformation, error bars in these groups were wider, leading to greater difficulty in interpreting differences among groups.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey Series on People and their Communities, 2023-2024.

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confidence in some public institutions among some Canadians suggests that misinformation may undermine trust in institutions and potentially impact social cohesion or civic engagement.

However, confidence in institutions varied among segments of the Canadian population, and in some cases opposite trends emerged when disaggregated at a lower level. For example, older Canadians—who tend to express higher levels of concern over misinformation than their younger counterparts—were more likely to report having a great deal of confidence in various institutions, including the Federal Parliament (41%), compared to younger Canadians (35%). Similarly, those with higher levels of education were more confident in the Federal Parliament than those with lower levels of education (42% among university-educated Canadians, compared to 35% among those with

high school or less) and were also more likely to express high levels of concern about misinformation.

Those who are less concerned about misinformation are less hopeful about democracy and national unity

Given the increasing ubiquity of misinformation in the digital age and its potential impacts on democracy, it is worth considering the possible relationship between concern over misinformation and feelings of hopefulness about Canadian unity and democracy.

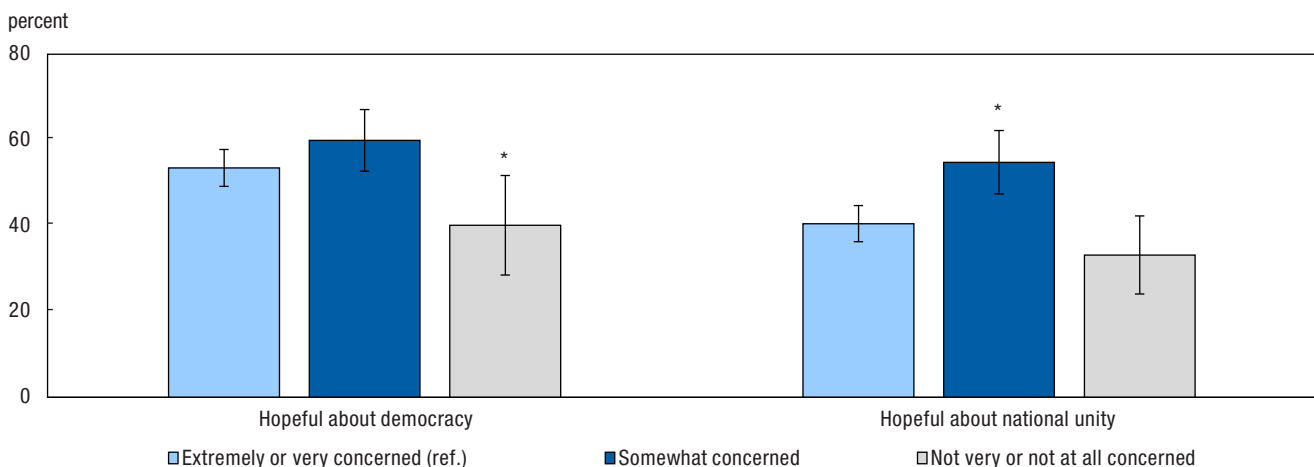
In total, 4 in 10 Canadians who were not very or not at all concerned about misinformation were hopeful about democracy. While results are mixed, there were indicators that some groups who have lower levels of concern about online misinformation, namely younger or

less educated Canadians, are feeling less hopeful about democracy in Canada. Meanwhile, more than half of Canadians (54%) with high levels of concern about misinformation remained hopeful about the way democracy works in Canada (Chart 2).

Similar trends were observed when looking at how hopeful Canadians are about national unity. Overall, a third (33%) of those who were not very concerned or not at all concerned about misinformation reported feeling hopeful about unity among Canadians. It should be noted that this figure is not significantly different from the reference category. Feelings about unity were strongest among those who reported that they were somewhat concerned about misinformation, with 55% expressing optimism about unity, compared to 40% of those with high levels of concern about online misinformation.

Chart 2

Percent reporting feeling somewhat or very hopeful about the way democracy works in Canada and unity among Canadians, by level of concern over misinformation, Canadians aged 15 and older, 2023



* significantly different from reference category (ref.) after adjusting for all other variables in the logistic regression model ($p < 0.05$)

Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey Series on People and their Communities, 2023.

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Those with lower levels of concern about misinformation were less likely to have voted in the 2021 federal election

Beyond confidence in institutions, misinformation has the potential to threaten civic engagement—including possible impacts on voting behaviours.¹¹ Across all waves of the SSPC, Canadians who were less concerned about online misinformation were less engaged in the democratic process, as shown by their lower likelihood to report having voted in the 2021 federal election (68% for both somewhat concerned and not very/not at all concerned groups). In comparison, 8 in 10 Canadians who expressed greater concern over misinformation reported having cast their vote in the 2021 federal election.

These findings may be related in part to the socioeconomic factors that are associated with voting. For example, 65% of those with a high school diploma or less reported that they voted in the 2021 federal election, compared to 82% of those

with a trades certificate or college diploma and 79% of those with some education at the university level.

In the same way that those who are less concerned about misinformation show lower levels of hopefulness about democracy and unity in Canada, it is also this group who have demonstrated lower levels of democratic participation in terms of voting behaviours. This may suggest a broader pattern of disengagement or skepticism, with this group taking a more passive approach to civic engagement.

Conclusion

Given the speed at which content is now shared online, it is nearly impossible to avoid encountering misinformation online. In navigating our quickly evolving media landscape, concern over misinformation online is an emerging area, with nearly 6 in 10 Canadians (59%) reporting a high level of concern. The data from the SSPC demonstrate that certain socio-demographic groups show

greater levels of concern than others, and that many use fact-checking as a method to verify the accuracy of the information they see online. The study further illustrates that while concern over misinformation is not currently associated with levels of trust in the media in general, there is evidence to suggest it is associated with skepticism towards many Canadian institutions and national unity, but with higher levels of civic engagement in terms of voting habits.

Going beyond concern over misinformation, future studies could seek to quantify the levels of media literacy of different segments of the Canadian population, particularly in evaluating the accuracy of information coming from different sources.

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Data sources, methods and definitions

Data sources

The [Survey Series on People and their Communities](#) (SSPC) is a series of social surveys that began in 2022, which involved creating a panel of people who agreed to complete a series of short surveys. This article used data from the third panel of the Survey Series on People and their Communities (SSPC): Quality of Life, Sources of Information and Trust. Additionally, this article used the SSPC Longitudinal Weights file to include data from the fourth and fifth panels of the SSPC focused on Social Cohesion and Experiences with Discrimination, and Sport, Workplace Culture, Political Engagement and Shared Values. The Longitudinal Weights file was calculated for respondents who participated in all five panels of the SSPC, where different content was asked. The sample size across the longitudinal file is 3,910 and the response rate is 5.7%.

These surveys were administered in 2022, 2023 and 2024 and covered topics on racism and discrimination, satisfaction with relationships, and wellbeing, among other topics. The reference period for this survey is: Oct 14, 2022 to Apr 22, 2024 (1st panel Oct 14, 2022 - Jan 3, 2023; 2nd panel May 5, 2023 - July 25, 2023; 3rd panel Oct 2, 2023 - Oct 22, 2023; 4th panel: Nov 27, 2023 - Dec 17, 2023; 5th panel Apr 2, 2024 - Apr 22, 2024). Although the same respondents were approached for each panel, cohorts differ between each panel of the SSPC, due to varying response rates.

The SSPC is part of Statistics Canada's Disaggregated Data Action Plan (DDAP), which aims to produce detailed statistical information to highlight the lived experiences of specific population groups, such as women, Indigenous peoples, racialized groups, and people living with disabilities. Using the 2021 Census survey frame, the sample for the SSPC included an oversampling of immigrants, and Canadians self-declaring as being part of racialized groups. This enabled the production of more reliable statistics for diverse racialized groups and immigrant populations.

The target population for the SSPC is those aged 15 years and older living in the ten provinces of Canada. Excluded from the SSPC's coverage are: residents of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut; full-time residents of institutions (e.g., inmates, patients living in nursing homes); and residents of reserves and other Indigenous settlements. These groups together represent an exclusion of less than 2.5% of the Canadian population aged 15 and over. Since the survey frame is based on the respondents to the 2021 long-form Census, the observed population does not include individuals who immigrated to Canada after the census reference date on May 11, 2021.

The survey series target sample consisted of a total of 70,000 individuals, with response rates of 27.2% for Panel 3, 24.4% for Panel 4, and 24.1% for Panel 5. Survey weighting procedures were undertaken, including non-response adjustment and calibration, to align the sample with the target population. More information on SSPC sampling procedures can be found here: [Surveys and statistical programs - Survey Series on People and their Communities](#).

Respondents were contacted through mail, email, or telephone

for their first survey of the SSPC, and through email or telephone for subsequent surveys in the series. Data were collected directly from survey respondents either through an electronic questionnaire (EQ) or through computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

Methods

To examine concern with misinformation online, SSPC panel 3 was used. This panel contains detailed information on concerns with misinformation and trust in the media. The SSPC Longitudinal Weights file, which contained questions on confidence in institutions, future outlook, and political engagement was leveraged to examine issues pertaining to confidence in Canada's institutions, levels of hopefulness regarding democracy and unity, as well as voting behaviours. The sample size of the merged file is smaller because only respondents who answered all panels are included.

All estimates were produced using survey weights, which are adjusted to account for non-response and calibrate to population totals, to make the results representative of the Canadian population.

A logistic regression model was used to assess whether the relationship between concern about misinformation and various individual characteristics still exists when accounting for other characteristic variables such as gender, age grouping, racialized status, region, education level, and income.

Definitions

In the SSPC, misinformation is defined as "news or information that is verifiably false or inaccurate. The sharer of misinformation may or may not be aware that it is misinformation. When they are aware, it is often referred to as disinformation."

Concern about misinformation was assessed using the following question: "How concerned are you about the presence of misinformation online?" Respondents answering "extremely concerned" or "very concerned" were considered to have a high level of concern, as opposed to those who responded that they are "somewhat concerned". Those with a low level of concern were grouped based on answering "not very concerned", or "not at all concerned".

Fact-checking was assessed using the following question: "How often do you use at least one additional information source to verify the accuracy of news stories about current issues you encounter?" Respondents answering "always" or "often" were considered to regularly fact-check, as compared to those who answered "sometimes", "rarely" or "never".

Trust in media is asked via the following question: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Not at all' and 10 means 'Completely', to what extent do you generally trust the news or information you receive from the media?" To highlight those with a lower level of trust, individuals who stated that their level of trust is 5 or less are considered to have a low level of trust in news or information from the media, while those with 6 or more were considered to have a higher level of trust.

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Confidence in institutions was assessed using the following question: “Using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 means “No confidence at all” and 5 means “A great deal of confidence”, please answer the following questions. How much confidence do you have in the following institutions (the police, the justice system and courts, the school system, the Federal Parliament, banks, major corporations)?”

While related, confidence and trust are distinct concepts: [confidence in institutions refers to perceptions of their performance and effectiveness, whereas trust in the media focuses on expectations and perceptions regarding the truthfulness and impartiality of reporting.](#)¹²

Voting behaviour was assessed based on the following question: “Did you vote in the last federal election?” [It is important to note that voting rates estimated by surveys are typically higher than official turnout rates. This is likely because non-voters are less likely to answer survey questions about voting, while those who do respond may be influenced by “social desirability bias,” which is when respondents answer in a way that they feel would be viewed favourably by others.](#)¹³

Hopefulness about Canada was assessed using the following question: “Thinking about the future in Canada, how hopeful are you about each of the following topics (the way democracy works in Canada, unity among Canadians)?”

Limitations

As mentioned, some sections of the article (on confidence in institutions and voting behaviour) used a longitudinal survey weights file that included respondents who had participated in all five panels of the SSPC. Accordingly, the sample size for those sections was smaller (n=3,910) and the response rate was 5.7%.

An important limitation of the SSPC is that it focused on self-reported fact-checking behaviours. This could have led some respondents to report how they wanted to be perceived, rather than how they behaved. Additionally, while the SSPC did allow for the examination of the relationship between the use of particular information sources and the decision to fact-check, it also did not ask Canadians which sources they used for fact-checking, or the reputation or accuracy of such sources.

Notes

1. Statistics Canada, 2023.
2. In the SSPC, misinformation is defined as “news or information that is verifiably false or inaccurate. The sharer of misinformation may or may not be aware that it is misinformation. When they are aware, it is often referred to as disinformation.”
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