

Countering Misinformation Among Canadian Young Adults: Insights from Focus Groups

The Public Health Agency of Canada's Behavioural Science Office (BeSciO) and a policy area with expertise in trust and health misinformation, with the Privy Council Office's Impact and Innovation Unit (IIU)



Public Health
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Young Adults Focus Groups Overview

Young adults (YAs) are an important audience for public health communications as current and future decision makers. Thus, it is valuable for the Government of Canada to understand and gain trust with this cohort.

- Earlier waves of the [Privy Council Office's Impact and Innovation Unit's COSMO Survey](#) showed that **trust is lowest among younger cohorts of people living in Canada.**
- A **literature review** conducted by BeSciO revealed a knowledge gap that affects trust in and adherence to public health guidance – with little known about YAs in this space.
- The research team conducted **exploratory qualitative research (focus groups)** to better understand how YAs encounter and assess misinformation, and how their “information diet” informs their attitudes, beliefs, and actions regarding public health.

Focus Group Methodology

Line of Inquiry	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Sources of Information (2022-09)2. Belief in Misinformation (2022-11)3. Trust in Public Health Authorities (2023-01)
Data Collection Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3 sessions per theme (9 sessions total)• 63 YAs across Canada (Atlantic + ON; QC; BC, AB, SK, MB)• English 18–24; English 25–30; French 18–30
Analysis	Conducted by BeSciO (transcription, data-cleaning, thematic coding)

Key Findings

Theme	Insights from Young Adult Participants
Engaging with Online Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preference for online media (social and web-based media) over traditional media (e.g., television, radio, print).• Health information was most often sought when needed to answer specific questions.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• YAs also encounter health information passively.
Information Assessment	<p>Use of “Mental Shortcuts” to quickly assess whether online (health) information is potentially accurate or not.</p> <p>Trusted Sources: Science and Medicine</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High trust: General Practitioners (GPs) and other health care professionals were described as the preferred (and most trusted) source of health information.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yet, many were unable to easily access a family doctor or GP at a clinic.• Low trust: People who are perceived to gain politically or financially from sharing (mis)information were the least trusted health messengers.
Credible Health Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Three criteria flagged as important for any messenger/message:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• transparency of information• scientific/medical expertise• motivation for sharing (which may bolster/undermine other signs of credibility)

Key Insights: Dimensions of Trustworthiness

Dimension	Insights	Implications
Information Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAs generally express strong general skepticism of online information, an awareness of misinformation, and high confidence in their own information literacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaborate on the rationale for advice (e.g., own up to perceived “mistakes,” explain why advice may change in rapidly changing health contexts) to amplify operational transparency
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAs express high levels of trust in science and medicine. YAs do not have a robust understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different levels of government – but generally trust GoC and P/T Public Health authorities/officials for public health advice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure Public Health Officials (PHOs) demonstrate their credentials, experience, and motivation for the role Adapt messaging based on scientific evidence consistently across levels of government to maintain trust in public health institutions, and avoid conflicting advice that drives YAs away from PHAC/GoC as go-to sources
Benevolence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAs desire transparent motivations supporting the public good behind digestible public health information/advice in public health communications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize PHOs as providers of politically impartial public health advice aligned with their medical expertise/experience

Lessons Learned



➤ Young adults sometimes trust mindfully

- YAs are usually **aware of misinformation** and strategies to mitigate its effects.
 - They typically seek concrete evidence/rationale to convince them of following certain advice.
- Despite that, their **values and perceptions influence their trust** in sources of information. This strategy is not always reliable in identifying misinformation.

➤ Use of mental shortcuts

- YAs use a variety of mental shortcuts to **quickly assess** the trustworthiness of messengers/messages.

➤ Usefulness of qualitative methods in BeSci research

- Qualitative methods provide **useful context** and **valuable information** that might be missing or difficult to obtain using quantitative methods.

Thank you!

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions!



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