Unlocking the "Trust Premium": A Canadian News Effectiveness Study

Overview of Study

In 2024, one of Plus Company's media agencies, Cossette Media, partnered with Think Tank, Vox Pop Labs and the Google News Initiative to field a study to examine the effects of Trust on advertising effectiveness in Canada. The study was conducted in French and English, with the aim of examining whether and to what extent advertiser brands are impacted as a result of the information contexts in which they are observed. This study contributes novel empirical evidence as to the business benefits of advertising within high quality content including News and Local News. There will be a second phase of this research fielded in 2025 to further explore the "Trust Effects" that were uncovered in this first phase of research.

Who is Vox Pop Labs?

Vox Pop Labs is a certified social enterprise founded and operated by academics since 2010. Best known for developing Vote Compass, Vox Pop Labs maintains one of the largest, most diverse respondent panels in Canada and provides research services for governments, civil society organisations, and academics. For more information visit www.voxpoplabs.com

What is the Google News Initiative?

The Google News Initiative works with publishers and journalists to fight misinformation, share resources and build a diverse and innovative news ecosystem. For more information visit https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com

Who is Cosette Media?

Cossette Media is a media agency within the Plus Company network with a mission to Make Media Matter. Cossette Media is committed to making lasting change in the Canadian media marketplace. Make Media Matter builds a sustainable future through three pillars: our people, our clients and our industry. For more information visit www.cossette.com

Overview of Findings

One of the central features that motivates news audiences is trust. People implicitly or explicitly assess new information that they encounter based on their level of trust in the source. In this collaboration between the Google News Initiative, Cossette Media and Vox Pop Labs, the influence of trust and its impact on advertiser brand perception is quantified. This report presents findings from a pan-Canadian, bilingual study that was conducted in 2024. The report's goal is to examine whether and to what extent advertiser brands are impacted as a result of the contexts in which they are observed.

The findings from the study suggest the existence of a phenomenon we call "The Trust Premium", wherein the perception of advertiser brands whose ads were displayed by trustworthy publishers received a demonstrable boost. Trusted publishers appear to exhibit a halo effect that extends to commercial brands that advertise within their properties.

Key Findings

The key findings that led to the observation of "The Trust Premium" are as follows:

1. Trust is fundamental to creating brand affinity: the more trusted a publisher, the higher the observed brand rating.

2. Trustworthy environments lead to a 25% lift in brand rating: ads associated with trusted publishers inherit publisher credibility and in turn boost brand trust.

3. News publishers in aggregate are seen as 35% above the baseline level of trust across information environments. Local news publishers see an additional 16% gain in perceived trustworthiness among local audiences and this effect is particularly pronounced in Quebec.

4. Hard news has strong positive brand ratings that are statistically equivalent to soft news (e.g.: entertainment). Intuition that soft news is preferable to hard news in terms of brand impact is unsupported by study findings. Hard news and soft news produce the same outcomes for brand rating.

5. Ideological slant of a publication does not influence brand perception, even when the stance was different from the reader's personal beliefs
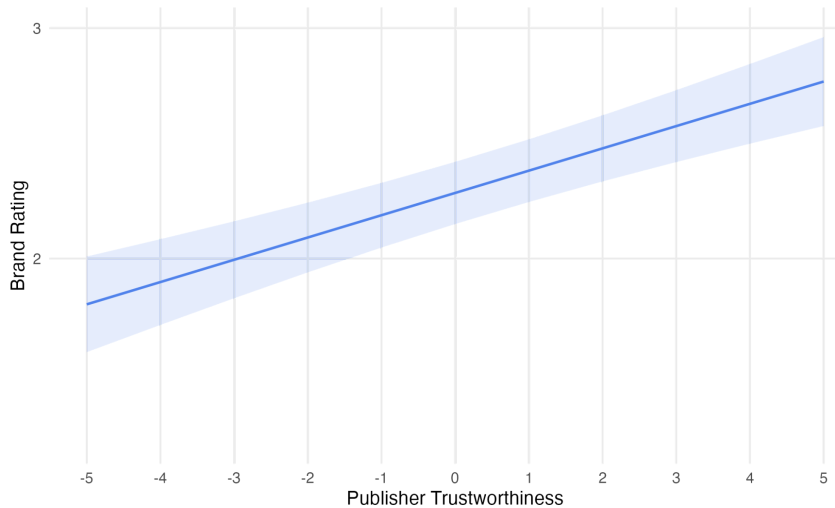
Finding # 1: Trust & Brand Affinity

Trust is fundamental to creating brand affinity

The more trusted a publisher, the higher the observed brand rating

The most consistent and prominent finding in the analysis of the data was the strength of the relationship between brand rating and publisher trust. Brand rating increases by 58% as we move from one end of the scale to the other. This leads us to infer that there is a trust premium that brands glean from the credibility associated with the publisher in which their ads are featured.

Takeaway for Advertisers

Trust is what makes advertising influential. Engaging topics, high quality content environments, and effective advertising creative generates greater contribution for advertisers. This is where media planners and buyers can help you be present in environments that are both congruent with your brand values and will help you benefit from a halo of trust the publication has with its readers. Advertisers and agencies can leverage the concept of the trust premium and structured experimentation to maximize campaign ROI within current measurement frameworks.

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Finding # 2: Trustworthy environments lift brand rating

Trustworthy environments lead to a 25% lift in brand rating

Ads associated with trusted publishers inherit publisher credibility and in turn boost brand trust
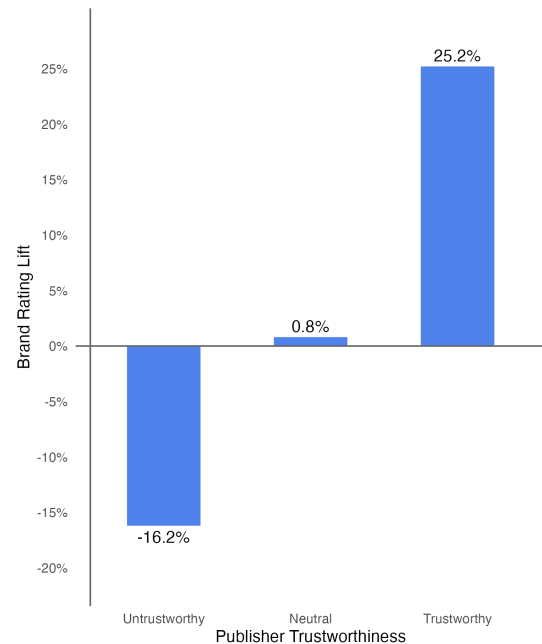
Ads that are featured alongside sites that are seen as neutral on trustworthiness do not exhibit a statistically significant shift from the baseline ad rating. Finally, ads that appear in untrustworthy sites actually see brands take a hit of 16% below the baseline. Again, these findings further substantiate the idea that the trustworthiness of the publication in which an ad is placed has an effect on brand affinity.

So what we're saying is that there is a halo effect, which is fundamental to all branding activities that transfers to the brand and is correlated to the degree of trust in the publication.

Takeaway for Advertisers

Given the impact both positive and negative of trust in a platform or publication, brands should ask their media planning agencies to consider this dimension in campaign planning, activation and optimization. Questions to consider for your campaigns: 1) are certain environments driving negative implications for specific audiences? 2) do we have the right guardrails in place to avoid untrustworthy environments 3) are we measuring impact of our campaigns with this in mind?

Finding #3: Local news is highly trusted, especially in Quebec

Local news is trusted news

News publishers in aggregate are seen as **35%** above the baseline level of trust across information environments. Local news publishers see an **additional 16%** gain in perceived trustworthiness among local audiences

In Quebec, trust in news is more robust than the rest of Canada

Average trust ratings are higher in Quebec than in English Canada for all publications. However, distrust of social media sources is more pronounced in Quebec vs the rest of Canada. Regionality has an effect on local Quebec audiences that manifests as the trust premium, irrespective of whether or not the publication is located in the reader's community

Takeaway for Advertisers

Know the role of each element in your plan. Balance reach and relevance. Some channels are about mass and reaching as many people as possible. Those are usually about cost-efficiency and scale. Other channels are about relevance. We look to reach a smaller, more leaned in and captive audience. While the scale is smaller, impact can be immense and well worth the premium. Keep in mind the specific role of each channel in your media symphony and consider the value of contribution. If the trust premium can allow you to achieve a 10x ROI on your end conversion goal, it may be worth the 30% premium on the CPM.

Finding #4: hard news produces the same positive brand ratings as soft news

Hard News has strong positive brand ratings that are equal to soft news

Intuition that soft news is preferable to hard news in terms of brand impact is unsupported by study findings. Hard news and soft news produce the same outcomes for brand rating.

Finding #5: Political trust overpowers ideology

Political trust overpowers ideological slant

There are no systematic differences in brand perception if ads are shown by publishers next to politically charged content. The positive effects of trust prevail in news contexts.

Takeaway for Advertisers

Understand the opportunity and ensure your brand safety controls are aligned with your risk tolerance and ROI goals.This should be adapting in real time with cultural responses and news stories. Even if your brand is comfortable with hard news, or politically charged content there may be certain issues or keywords you don't want
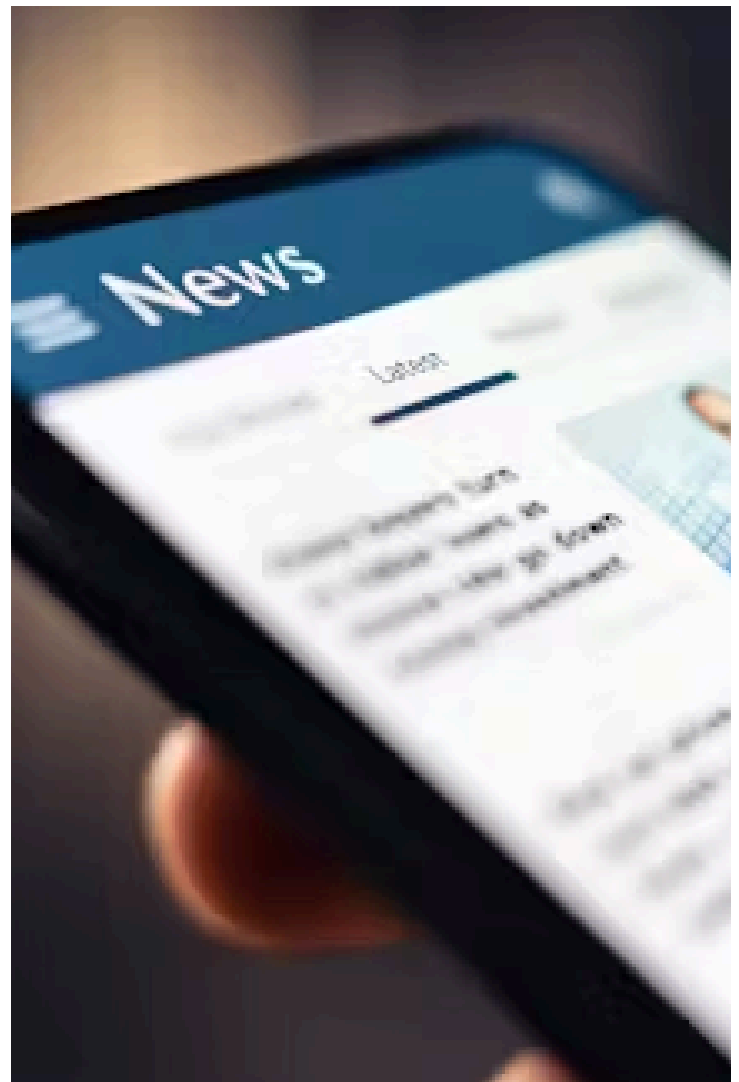
to be around. When you are making brand safety choices, ensure you ask your agency to evaluate the ROI impact, and ensure you are not optimizing your investments away from high quality and influential environments.

Ask your programmatic buying teams to closely examine their approach to brand safety and ensure that they are:

1. Not applying a one-size-fits-all strategy for all content - as editorial and premium content is very different than the open web content,

2. Relying on higher quality publisher data wherever possible, and

3. Not unnecessarily overfiltering audiences, using broad blocking techniques

Implementing an effective brand safety strategy can significantly increase your ROI.

Overview of the Research Methodology

To establish the existence of these findings, we designed and ran a survey experiment. In it, respondents were shown a total of five websites, where each was formed from a combination of editorial content, publisher layout elements, and advertising assets. These items were combined randomly. This approach allows us to determine a clear causal relationship of what-causes-which, where the "which" in this case is the main outcome variable: advertiser brand rating.

Measures and Outcome

Explained Variable: The Target

The outcome variable is measured through two distinct questions after the respondent's exposure to the online contents:

"How would you rate [advertiser brand X], where -5 is poor and +5 is excellent?"

and

"How trustworthy would you say [advertiser brand X] is, where -5 is not at all trustworthy and +5 is very trustworthy?"

The first, of course, assesses general feelings towards an advertiser overall, while the second specifically taps into the level of trust extended towards an advertiser brand. Either are important precursors to purchasing decisions, and ultimately, the lever on which advertising tries to pull. To reduce the risk of confounding influences in the outcome, these two questions are only asked if a respondent answered "Yes" to a previous question:

"Are you familiar with [advertiser brand X]?"

This study flow and randomization ensures that the outcome only captures the impact on pre-existing perceptions, and not effects caused by short-term influences like ad design, colors, or animation while mirroring how brand-focused advertising outside of the experimental setting affects consumer attitudes.

Treatment Variable

To measure effects, we compare respondents who received treatment with those who did not. The treatment in this case is exposure to an ad in any editorial context. From this, we compare outcomes to advertiser brand ratings that have been given by individuals who did not see ads for brands they were asked to rate. Assignment of treatments was pre-stratified into groups based on publisher contexts: of the five websites in total, every respondent saw two designed to look like publisher content, two were made up to look like "typical" online content (social media/ an unbranded blog website), and one that resembled content from low-quality online media. Ad assets served on them were always five chosen from the same set of seven, while leaving two unseen advertiser brands in each respondents case.

Independent Variable: The Explainer

The main piece we are interested in is the role of trust in publisher brands. Effects of mere exposure to advertisements is not what motivated this study. To be certain of the causal chain requires knowledge of the individuals' perceptions before any exposure to any content (dependent on treatment & control conditions). Hence the survey began with a battery of three questions about each publisher in the set:

"How familiar are you with [publisher A]?"
[Not at all familiar; Slightly familiar; Somewhat familiar; Very familiar]

"On average, how often would you say you get information from [publisher A]?"
[Less than once a year; At least once a year; At least once a month;
At least once a week; At least once a day; More than once a day]

"How trustworthy do you generally find information from [publisher A], where -5 is very untrustworthy and +5 is very trustworthy?
[-5; -4; -3; -2; -1; 0; 1; 2; 3; 4; 5]

Covariate: Ad Recall

To investigate the mechanisms at play, we measure advertiser brand ad recall in our study and consider it as a side inquiry to the mainline of trust context. The setup of the study allows us to test if respondents correctly recall seeing/not seeing an ad by asking them

"Thinking back on the content you've just viewed, did you see an ad by [advertiser brand X]?"

Survey Design and Experimental Setup

Survey Sample

Our investigation estimates effect sizes with three specific groups: Canada as a whole, French speaking Quebec and English speaking Canada. Where we present aggregate numbers (e.g. "*x % of people think this.*") in any of these groups, we make sure the composition of the underlying sample corresponds to population characteristics on a number of sociodemographic attributes. Where we present differences between treatment and control groups (e.g. "*The lift for advertiser brand is x%*") we rely on the random assignment of treatment/control within our sample to avoid any issue of bias.

Overall, we analyze surveys from 8 807 respondents across Canada. The size of this sample allows us to both robustly estimate small effect sizes and do so for two groups within Canada. One is respondents from English speaking Canada, from which we have analyzed 3 049 responses. The second is French speaking Quebec, from which 5 758 responses are included in our analyses.

	English Canada	Quebec
Major Publishers	The Globe and Mail The National Post	Le Devoir La Presse Le Journal de Montréal
Regional Publishers	The Province (BC) Toronto Star (GTA)	Le Soleil (Ville de Québec)
Non-publishers	Facebook Reddit Unbranded Blog Low-quality Content	Facebook Reddit Unbranded Blog Low-quality Content

Table 1: *Publishers included in the study design*

The difference in sample sizes is a conscious design in our study, since we assumed that the more coherent media landscape in Quebec necessitated a larger number of respondents to determine if different kinds of publishers lead to different outcomes for advertiser brands. Since *Le Soleil* is more likely to be known across Quebec than British Columbia's *The Province* and the Greater Toronto Area's *Toronto Star*, we boosted sample collection across the province of Quebec to arrive at robust local estimates.

	Ideol. Slant	EN	FR
"Hard" News	Left	Alberta Premier Proposes Regressive Policies Targeting Transgender Youth	Le Premier ministre de l'Alberta propose des politiques régressives ciblant les jeunes transgenres
	Neutral	The Liberals' Federal Budget is Lots of Spending, Lots of Saving	Le budget libéral : beaucoup de dépenses, beaucoup d'économies
	Right	Federal Court Blasts Ottawa's Emergencies Act Move as Tyrannical Overreach	La Cour fédérale qualifie la Loi sur les mesures d'urgence de tyrannie et d'abus de pouvoir
"Soft" News		Invictus Games training camp, visited by Prince Harry and Meghan in Whistler	Le camp d'entraînement des Jeux Invictus, visité par le prince Harry et Meghan à Whistler
		Former teammates, coaches reflect on Jagr with Penguins set to retire No. 68 jersey	Anciens coéquipiers et entraîneurs se remémorent Jagr alors que les Penguins s'apprêtent à retirer le chandail du numéro 68

Table 2: *Table of contents presented in the survey experiment*

Each user was asked to rate familiarity and trustworthiness of a total of six publishers: Four news media outlets, of which three (FR)/two (EN) major ones have national focus, and one (FR) / two (EN) with regional focus; and two were major social media brands.

Then in the main part of the survey instrument, users saw five websites in no particular order. The selection of these always comprised the combination of:

1. A low quality website about funny boat names
2. Two articles by publishers
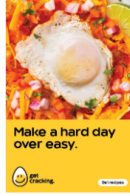3. Two articles by non-publishers/unbranded

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Make a hard day over easy.
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News

Federal Court Blasts Ottawa's Emergencies Act Move as Tyrannical Overreach

The Province Staff
Published Mon Aug 19 2024

OTTAWA — In a stunning blow to the Liberal government's heavy-handed tactics during the 2022 freedom convoy protests, a federal court has delivered a scathing rebuke of its use of the Emergencies Act, painting a picture of government tyranny trampling on the rights of Canadian citizens.

The protests, a legitimate demonstration against COVID-19 health restrictions, attracted people with a long list of grievances against the overreach and power-obsessions of Prime

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News

Former teammates, coaches reflect on Jagr with Penguins set to retire No. 68 jersey

Toronto Star Staff
Published Tue Oct 08 2024

PITTSBURG — Rick Tocchet remembers the kid with a flowing mullet, who would usually emerge victorious with puck from any one-on-one drill. The mullet's name? Jaromir Jagr.

"I don't know if there's many guys that can beat him," said Tocchet, who played alongside the ageless forward for parts of three seasons with the Pittsburgh Penguins. "He's that good. I marvel at it."

Set to turn 52 on Thursday, Jagr is still going.

Despite Jagr continuing to play professional hockey for the team he owns in his native

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Boat Names That Will Leave You Laughing

The owner of this boat must have some experience under his belt. Not a lot of boating experience, if the name Uh-oh! gives us any indication, but he at least has experience of his own history out on the water, which may be why he chose to paint this name upside-down.

That's not the kind of name you forget, especially if you see it right-side-up. Hopefully, the owner has a couple of life jackets, a flare gun, and an inflatable raft stashed away in there.

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BRING CARE FOR IDENTITY
TO CARE FOR DEMENTIA
Egale

Canadian
Today

A federal judge gave his opinion on Trudeau invoking the Emergencies Act during the Trucker convoy. That seems both so long ago and as if it was just yesterday. Judge says it was a dumb idea. What do you guys think?

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↗ Share

Sanjay White
if you can't truck it, you should chuck it! that's what we say in the industry.

Deborah Nkosi
hahaha, that's what we say in my industry too, and i am an oyster fisher!

Tendai Tanaka
Sorry this doesn't change the fact that this was a failure by the ottawa po-po

Jennifer Gonzalez
What was OPS supposed to do?? Enforce the law as written against people who were recording themselves committing crime, just because that footage also showed the police casually watching them commit crimes from 10 feet away?
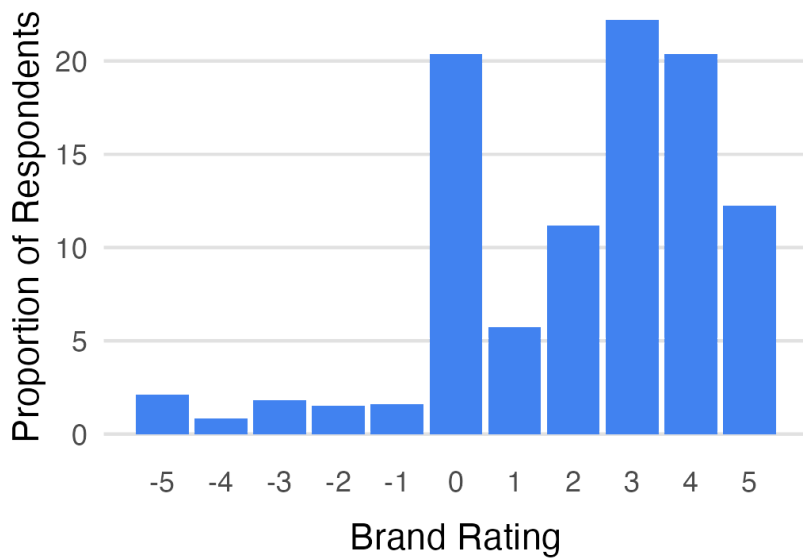
Examples: Combination of publisher branding, advertising assets, and editorial content presented in the survey instrument

Treatment & Control: Ad Exposure vs Baseline Ratings

To produce estimates of effect magnitudes we compare ratings by individuals of advertiser brands they were exposed to (treatment condition) and ratings by individuals of the same advertiser brands when they were not exposed to any ads (control condition). Since we control the assignment to either group, we can make sure group sizes and group attributes are comparable, to isolate the true causal effect of exposure versus non-exposure, with publisher trust.

Results

Describing the Measures Brand Rating and Publisher Trustworthiness

n(respondents) = 7 535; all respondents across Canada.
Weighted by age, education, gender, income, region.

Figure 1: Distribution of advertiser brand ratings

Meaningful results in this study depend on the distributions of both advertiser brand and publisher ratings in our treatment versus control conditions. For these measures to meaningfully differ, they have to vary across a range of choices.

Respondents do have varying feelings about the advertiser brands they were asked about, even though they were overall positive on average (Figure 1. Mean: 2.14). 20 % of respondents were indifferent (rating of 0), while most had a moderately favorable perception (42 % of respondents indicating "3" or "4"). 12% rate the highest (5).

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Context trustworthiness ratings show a difference in trustworthiness by publisher type. For publishers, the rating is considerably more favorable with a mean of 1.59 and a positive perception (1 and up) from close to two-thirds of respondents (65 %). Non-publishers fare worse, with an average of -1.10 and a positive rating (1 and up) from only 27 % of surveyed

Figure 2: Distribution of publisher trustworthiness ratings

n(respondents) = 7691; all respondents across Canada.
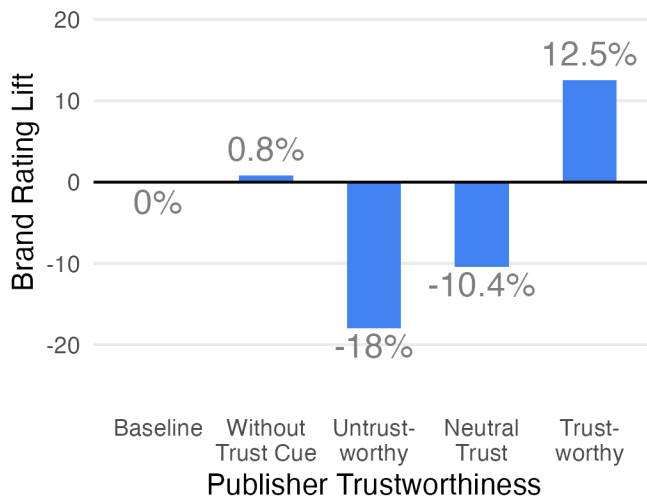Weighted by age, education, gender, income, region.

Brand Rating Effects

With this effective measure on publisher trustworthiness, we categorize all exposures to ad/publisher combinations ("treatments") into pools of trust. These pooled trials can be compared against ratings of brands which respondents were not previously exposed to - the control group or "baseline". In addition, we include another group to compare against, the "No Trust Cues" exposure, in which ads were presented in a neutral editorial context without any publisher design around it.

From the experimental setup we determine effect sizes. Advertisement assets placed in trusted editorial contexts directly lead to more positive ratings of the brands involved.

Canada

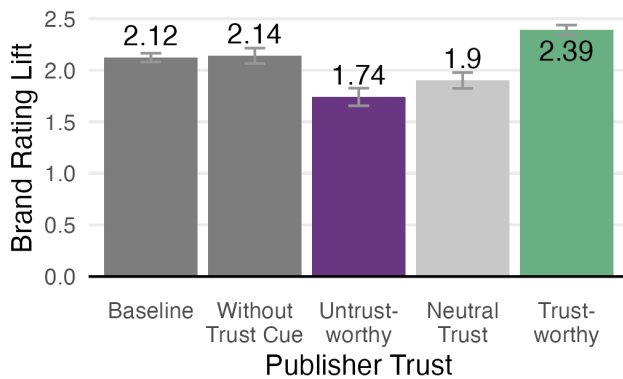**Figure 3:** *Relative effects of publisher trustworthiness on advertising brand ratings*

n(respondents) = 7 535; all respondents across Canada
Weighted by age, education, gender, income, region.

Figure 4: *Absolute effects of publisher trustworthiness on advertising brand ratings*

n(respondents) = 7 535; all respondents across Canada.
Weighted by age, education, gender, income, region.

Nationally, when ads are presented to Canadians, the average baseline rating of 2.14 on the trust scale (range -5 to +5) sees a boost to 2.39, which is a lift of about 11 %. The Trust Premium manifests as a solid halo effect

This is a direct result of the ad exposure from positively connotated settings. Two indicators confirm this: One, the ratings of brands presented without any trust cues are similar to baseline levels, there is no determinable difference in numbers (2.12 vs 2.14 without statistically significant difference). This rules out the presence of priming effects, which would be solely dependent on visibility of brands "reminding" (= priming) individuals and influencing ratings this way. Secondly, the systematic relationship only reveals itself for the high-trust contexts. For neutral and untrusted publishers, the confidence intervals around the estimates overlap, which means they do not meaningfully differ. Not only is there no brand boost in neutral contexts, there even is a penalty. The Trust Premium relies on the presence of trust to show its positive effect.

Francophone Quebec and Anglophone Canada

When we investigate how audiences in different parts of Canada are affected by the trust premium, the same dynamic emerges. In francophone Quebec, the Trust Premium appears where trust exists. Brands shown in high-trust contexts receive an average boost in perception of 9 %, or from 12.02 to 2.20 on a general rating scale. Untrusted and Neutral environments both have detrimental effects on brand ratings, with penalties of -13 % and -12 %.

For predominantly English speaking provinces, the effects of trust on brand ratings are more linearly arranged. Advertising with untrustworthy news brand contexts docks overall ratings by 13 %, down from 2.17 to 1.89 on average. Contexts that are neutral and without trust cues do not cause effects on brand ratings that are different from the baseline. The Trust Premium reveals itself in trustworthy publisher contexts, which lead to an 15% brand lift, to an average rating of 2.51.

Total Canada	13 %
French Speaking Quebec	9 %
English Speaking Canada	15 %
Table 3: The Trust Premium: advertiser brand rating lifts	

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The Local Good

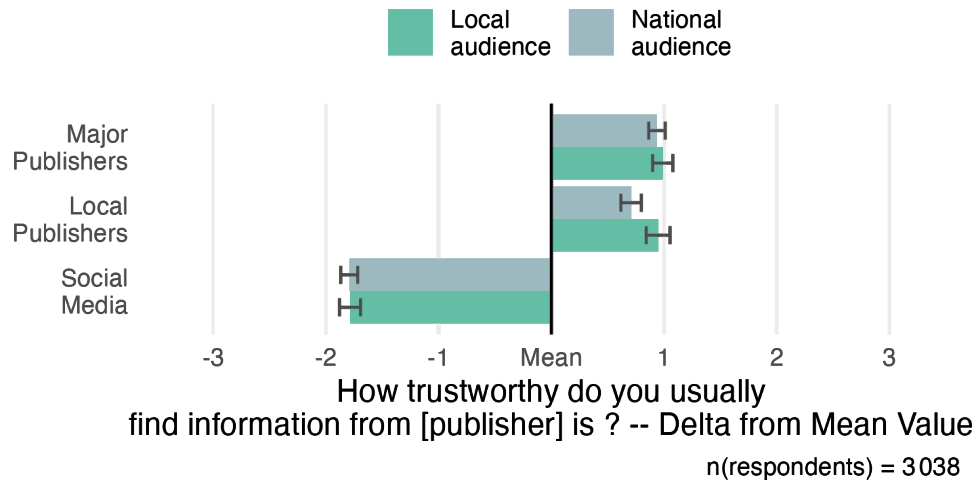## English Speaking Canada: Trust in Publishers by Publisher Category and Residency Location

Figure 5: *Trustworthiness ratings for different types of audiences in English Speaking Canada*

Beyond the results at the national level, the Trust Premium has a decidedly local element to it. We establish this by investigating the effects that major local publishers have on local audiences. Given the specific role of regional contexts, we explore the connection between both within their realms.

In predominantly English speaking provinces, local audiences do perceive a fine differentiation between local and national, major news publishers. Trust ratings for local news brands are comparable to trust in major publications. Differences emerge when we take out the local bonus, however, and consider regionally specific news brands as perceived by a national audience. Comparing between both groups shows a statistically significant 17 % trust boost of local publishers for local audiences, which brings them to comparable levels with national publisher brands within the same audience. From the eyes of nation-wide recipients, there is a penalty applied to news brands that are from different parts of the country. The local anchoring of publisher brands matters to audiences. Taken together with our findings on advertisement boosts by trust ratings, this local anchoring becomes a central consideration for advertisers. Social media news contexts see comparable levels of trust penalties, both in local and national audiences.

Quebec: Trust in Publishers
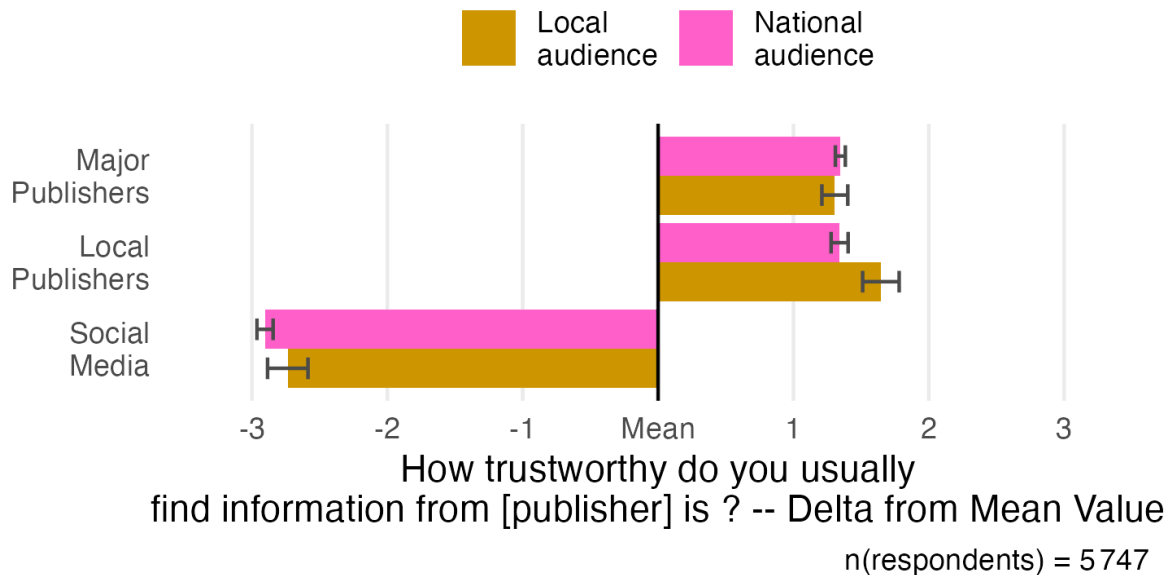## by Publisher Category and Residency Location

Figure 6: *Trustworthiness ratings for different types of audiences in Quebec*

In French speaking Quebec, in a news market that is closely integrated with spillover effects between regions, the local Trust Premium manifests twofold: One is in absence of differences. Both local as well as province-wide audiences appreciate news publishers and put equal amounts of trust bonus into their brands. The average trust ratings are comparatively high above the overall mean and do not differ between audiences and news publisher categories. Second is a boost for major local publishers among local consumers. Comparison between local and national audiences reveals a 10 % boost of local recipients considering local news publishers. Again, this represents the Trust Premium.

Social Media, on the other hand, is clearly more negatively connotated, as respondents indicate trust rating differences from the mean of -2.7 and -2.9. In Quebec, trust in news is robust.

The local Trust Premium manifests in two distinct varieties within Canada: Outside of Quebec, local publishers take a hit on trust from out-of-region, national readers, whereas their local readers consider them equal to major publishers.

In French speaking Quebec, however, local publishers are rated equally to major ones by external, out-of-region readers, and local readers appreciate the locally rooted publisher brands more.

Content Types and Brand Boosts

Figure 7: *Advertiser brand rating and type of editorial text*

The setup of the experiment allows us to dig into two other determinants of how brand ratings relate to publisher context: ad brand recall and the editorial type of content the ad is embedded in.

We start with considering content type. Each from the set of the five articles falls into two distinct categories for the articles that make up the publisher context. There are three 'hard' news articles, items which report on current political issues of objective interest and with general news value for the public at large. The second category is "soft" news, so two articles which appeal to a niche audience and have primarily an entertainment value. Are there penalties for advertising brands when ads are placed next to controversial, difficult, or low-engagement editorial content?
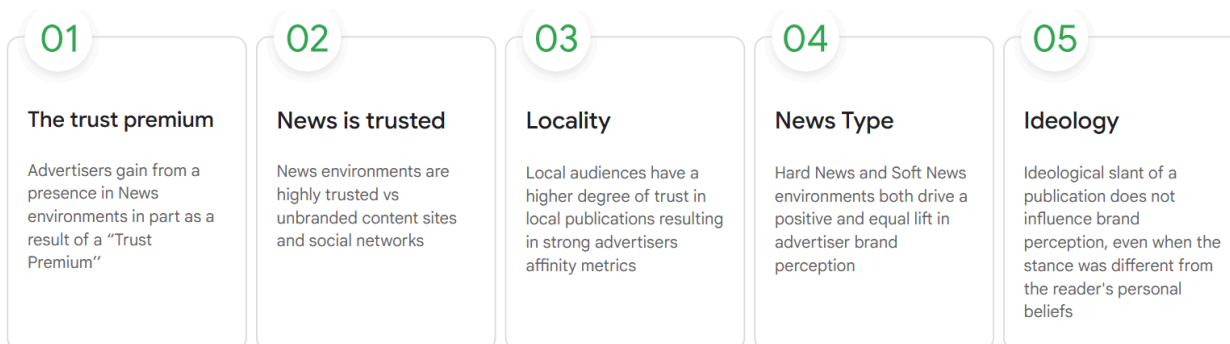
From our study, we deduce that the answer to this question is no. There are **no discernible differences** in brand perception between the two categories of news items we test here. In aggregate, brand ratings in both cases land in comparable average values. Any reservations of advertisement clients to occupy spaces adjacent to controversial content are unfounded, **when brands are presented in news publisher contexts**.

In a similar vein, we evaluate a second kind of category to segment content by: Ideological slant. Each of the three news pieces used for this study was designed to feature strong ideological cues for a reader. Through combination of each piece of content with the different kinds of publisher layouts we can isolate potential effects that strong political positioning has around ad brand perception. This tests if polarizing content, potentially at odds with recipients' own political socialization, negatively impacts brand perception.

Our findings suggest that the answer is no. There are no systematic differences in brand perception if ads are shown by publishers next to politically charged contents. The positive effects of trust prevail in news contexts. **Publisher trust overpowers ideological slant within article texts**. According to these results, reluctance to display brand ads adjacent to opinionated contents is unfounded.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates there is a clear and measurable lift in brand affinity when advertising is placed within trusted news environments. This "Trust Premium" is a powerful force that can be leveraged by advertisers to enhance brand perception and build stronger connections with consumers. As trust becomes increasingly important in today's media landscape, partnering with reputable news publishers is a valuable opportunity for brands to benefit from the halo effect and establish greater credibility with their target audiences.

01	02	03	04	05
The trust premium	**News is trusted**	**Locality**	**News Type**	**Ideology**
Advertisers gain from a presence in News environments in part as a result of a "Trust Premium"	News environments are highly trusted vs unbranded content sites and social networks	Local audiences have a higher degree of trust in local publications resulting in strong advertisers affinity metrics	Hard News and Soft News environments both drive a positive and equal lift in advertiser brand perception	Ideological slant of a publication does not influence brand perception, even when the stance was different from the reader's personal beliefs

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