TCR 2025 TRACK 3 PROPOSAL:

A 'WISER' INTERVENTION TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA:

A FIELD STUDY

Track Participants (alphabetical):

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Introduction

In this Track 3 project, we aim to work with FoolProof Foundation to develop and experimentally validate an interactive and scalable curriculum based on the WISER Framework (a consumer-facing intervention designed to reduce the spread and influence of misinformation that originated from a Track 2 TCR project). We aim to deploy this curriculum across the U.S. through FoolProof's web-based educational platform and to gather field data from this launch that will facilitate testing of and further improvements to the curriculum. Ultimately, we hope to be able to provide middle and high school teachers across the country with a scientifically validated curriculum, free of charge, so that students can develop the skills necessary to detect and deflect misinformation found online.

Background

While misinformation has always existed, it spreads further and faster on social media. For example, a "deepfake" video of U.S. Presidential candidate Kamala Harris that distorts her policies and slings insults has received nearly 135 million views and 932,000 likes after being retweeted by Twitter/X CEO Elon Musk (Tenbarge, 2024). Meanwhile, following the tragic murder of three small children in the United Kingdom by a UK citizen born in Wales, violent riots targeting Muslim immigrants erupted across the UK. The violence was sparked after far-right groups made false allegations on social media that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker (Zlady, 2024).

These recent incidents represent only a small sample of the ways in which misinformation influences consumers. Statista (2021, 2024) reports that 74% of Americans have been exposed to fake news, and as of 2020, over 38% of people in the U.S. had reported having accidentally shared fake news or information on social media. The misinformation that we all confront on a daily basis compromises our ability to make well-reasoned decisions, manage personal and organizational relationships, and live in a stable, free society. All of these factors compromise our well-being. As marketing researchers who study persuasion, information processing, and emotions, we want to help.

Many interventions have been proposed to combat social media misinformation (e.g., Guay et al., 2023; Kozyreva et al., 2022). For example, accuracy prompts have been shown to increase users' ability to detect misinformation (e.g., Pennycook & Rand 2022). However, the scope and complexity of the misinformation problem demands a range of possible solutions. Thus, it is important to consider a holistic approach that incorporates both cognitive and affective inputs to decision-making. Our prior work at the 2021 and 2023 TCR conferences focused on defining the paradoxical ways social media informs and misinforms consumers (Schneider et al., 2022) and on proposing societal, organizational, and individual strategies to combat misinformation (Schneider et al., in progress).

One strategy generated via the 2023 TCR conference was the WISER Framework, an intervention designed for individual social media consumers. We collaboratively developed the

WISER Framework following discussions with an expert panel of advertising and social media professionals and refined it with high school and college student audiences. Our goal with the framework is to (1) improve digital literacy by teaching users about the technology behind the platforms, (2) increase user self-awareness by highlighting how platforms exploit cognitive biases, and (3) enhance skill development by guiding users on protecting themselves and others.

The WISER Framework integrates 5 components: **W**ait, **I**nformation gathering, **S**ource credibility, **E**motion regulation, and **R**eflection. In addition, we developed a short educational intervention, website, and flier to accompany and disseminate the framework. While initial reactions to the WISER framework from users, educators, and industry professionals have been positive, we have not yet experimentally tested it at scale. Such rigorous testing is a critical step toward demonstrating efficacy and adoption likelihood.

Track Theme

In our Track 3 project, we aim to refine and experimentally test the WISER Framework, create a curriculum to teach the framework, disseminate the curriculum on a large scale, and gather data to test the efficacy of the curriculum in reducing the influence and spread of misinformation.

Over the past four months, we have been cultivating a relationship with FoolProof Foundation, and they are interested in working with our team to facilitate this Track 3 project. Co-founded by the late Walter Cronkite and supported by his Foundation, FoolProof "encourages all consumers to make healthy skepticism a habit" when it comes to anything that could impact their well-being, including their activities on social media. FoolProof's resources are intended to help kids—who often start looking at screens at four months of age—avoid the detrimental effects of screen time such as depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and obesity. FoolProof has developed a national hub for creating and distributing expertly-vetted, no-cost teaching resources to schools across the United States, particularly those that enroll underserved populations. The Foundation's efforts reach over 90,000 students per year across 10,000 schools with 15,000 teachers. Five major consumer groups—The National Association of Consumer Advocates (NACA), Fairplay for Kids, Consumer Federation of America, Public Citizen, and The Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC)—endorsed FoolProof's middle and high school curricula at a national press conference in Washington, D.C. in 2018.

Additionally, we have developed a unique relationship with the Colorado State Legislature (via Senator Lisa Cutter) and the Colorado Attorney General's Office who are commencing a project with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to develop curricular materials that will equip students with the skills needed to protect themselves from being manipulated, thereby combating the spread of misinformation. While this relationship is preliminary, Colorado state officials have expressed interest in collaborating to disseminate the WISER Framework (potentially via the modules created in collaboration with FoolProof) in schools across the state.

We anticipate generating significant impact by:

- Developing engaging, interactive, high-quality teaching modules with professional actors and advanced educational technology so that we have a scalable and easily adoptable deliverable
- Experimentally testing and refining the WISER Framework and its associated materials in the field and in the laboratory
- Disseminating the framework via FoolProof Foundation's network of 10,000 schools and potentially as part of the Colorado state public school curriculum
- Equipping a large subset of the population that is the most impressionable and teachable with the skills to detect and deflect misinformation on social media
- Creating a research-backed and scientifically tested solution that can be given to educators free of charge so that they can rely on curricular materials created with a motivation to protect users by stakeholders who have no financial interest in the spread or creation of misinformation.
- Demonstrating value in research-based, marketing strategies to combat misinformation and other problems that compromise well-being. Often marketers are seen as an adversary by organizations like FoolProof and policymakers due to the actions of social media platforms, advertisers, etc. We aim to advance an understanding that marketers can also be valuable allies.

Team and Organization

Pre-conference activities (already in progress)

We have already generated an initial version of the WISER Framework in collaboration with stakeholders. We also have made significant progress securing external collaborators (FoolProof Foundation and the Colorado State Legislature/Attorney General's Office).

We anticipate that we will achieve the following outcomes in the coming months.

First, we will experimentally test the WISER Framework in the lab so that we can understand the underlying mechanism. We aim to show the strength of an integrated framework in reducing the influence and spread of misinformation online.

Second, we will collaborate with FoolProof Foundation to create collateral to communicate the framework (e.g., videos, teaching materials, an interactive teaching platform, etc.). We also anticipate splitting the framework into smaller modules that can be delivered individually for shorter communication opportunities, such as for social media content.

At the same time, we will work with FoolProof to develop effective measurement instruments to experimentally test the collateral in multiple ways. We intend to test both efficacy (does the collateral facilitate well-being outcomes such as the ability to detect misinformation, process it effectively, act in ways that stop its spread, regulate emotions, etc.) along with liking, memory, and intentions to adopt its components.

In early 2025, we will deploy the collateral across multiple states using FoolProof's platform and collect data on the efficacy and internalization of the collateral. We will analyze this data in time for the conference in June of 2025.

In parallel, we will continue to cultivate the relationship with the Colorado state government to facilitate possible rollout of the materials as part of the school curriculum via the Colorado Department of Education.

Pre-Conference Timeline (Already in Progress)	
Date	**Activity**
Aug - Sept 2024	Experimentally test WISER Framework in lab setting to understand underlying mechanism Continue to cultivate the relationship with FoolProof Foundation and the Colorado state government
Oct 2024 - Jan 2025	(1) Develop collateral (e.g., videos, teaching materials, interactive teaching platform) with FoolProof foundation, and (2) Design measurement instruments with FoolProof foundation to collect data on efficacy of collateral
Feb - April 2025	(1) Large scale deployment of collateral across multiple states using FoolProof's platform, and (2) Collect data on efficacy of collateral
May 2025	Analyze data from FoolProof deployment

Conference activities

The conference will be an opportunity to evaluate the testing results and collaborate on the next iteration of collateral given the feedback from the launch on the FoolProof platform. Additionally, we anticipate that the relationship with the Colorado state government will continue to evolve, so the conference will be an opportunity to formulate strategies to adapt and distribute the framework via those channels.

Our academic team will also use the conference time to move forward on preparing a manuscript for publication in the TCR special issue in *Journal of Marketing* or *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

Post-conference activities

The team will continue with data collection, analysis, and writing for the key projects identified during the conference with the goal of finalizing a manuscript for submission.

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