

Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program

Research Brief

Road Test 4 | December 2021

Lizeth Ortega Luna and Jordan Engel



Sacramento's Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) received a digital marketing grant from the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of the grant, which OCSE awarded to 14 child support programs around the country, is to research how digital marketing strategies may help child support programs reach and serve families more effectively.

DCSS proposed four sequential tests, each examining the effects of a different digital marketing approach on enrollment in the child support program. The aim of the tests is to increase applications and voluntary case openings among custodial parents who are eligible for child support but who are not participating in the program.¹ This report details methods and descriptive findings from the fourth test. More information about the project and the previous tests can be found in the project's [first](#),² [second](#),³ and [third brief](#).

Each of the tests involve deploying a video advertisement via different communication channels. The video highlights how DCSS can help busy parents apply for child support services

Key Findings

1. Social media campaigns can reach large audiences but may not be as well-suited to get users to sign up for services.
2. Link clicks best capture the audience's engagement with the advertisement.
3. Designing a campaign to track the relationship between engagement with the advertisement and voluntary enrollment in child support services may produce a more accurate analysis of the marketing efforts.

¹ Parents receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are mandated to enroll in child support services. DCSS has focused their interventions on voluntary participants who are not required to participate in the child support program as a condition of their public benefit receipt.

² Stepleton, Kate, Jordan Engel, and Asaph Glosser. "Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program," February 2020.

³ Engel, Jordan, and Kate Stepleton. "Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program," March 2021.

through TurboCourt, a step-by-step online service that guides people through the child support application process, from the comfort of their homes.

Test 1: Paid Social Media Advertising

DCSS conducted its first digital marketing test in July 2019. DCSS placed the video as a paid advertisement on Facebook and YouTube, targeting parents with low incomes in Sacramento County. Key findings include:

- DCSS's advertisement was widely viewed in Sacramento County.
- The advertisement performed differently on the two platforms, with YouTube garnering far more views than Facebook; the Facebook advertisement had a higher click rate.
- We do not know conclusively whether the placement of the advertisement drove viewers to submit child support applications and voluntarily open child support cases.

Test 2: Targeted Email Campaign

DCSS conducted its second digital marketing test in February 2020. DCSS partnered with the Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance to email parents with children under 18 who were receiving food and health benefits with the email containing links to the second test's video advertisement, to DCSS's website, and to the online child support application. Key findings include:

- A targeted email campaign can successfully reach potential child support clients.
- Impressions from an email campaign are largely observed in the first few days following delivery.
- Of the people who opened the message from DCSS, a small percentage went on to click any of the three links in the email related to the child support program.
- The email campaign was a low-cost method of marketing child support services.

Test 3: Hulu Advertisement

DCSS conducted its third digital marketing test in December 2020. DCSS placed a video advertisement on Hulu using Hulu's small-business self-service advertising manager. The advertisement ran from December 15, 2020 to January 15, 2021 and featured the use of TurboCourt as a new option to apply for child support services. Key findings include:

- Agencies should consider the capabilities of an advertising platform to influence their desired outcome.
- The context of an advertisement's run may have implications for its success.
- A self-service advertisement manager can offer a low-cost way to reach thousands of potential customers, but it may limit functionality and available data.

This brief describes DCSS's efforts to use Instagram to increase voluntary child support enrollments. For the fourth test, DCSS drew from the experiences of the Indiana Child Support Bureau to craft a digital marketing campaign on Instagram Stories. Instagram Stories is a slideshow of photos or videos, or both. When an Instagram user watches other users' stories, paid advertisements—such as DCSS's advertisement—appear periodically between those stories.

Approach

Instagram Advertisement

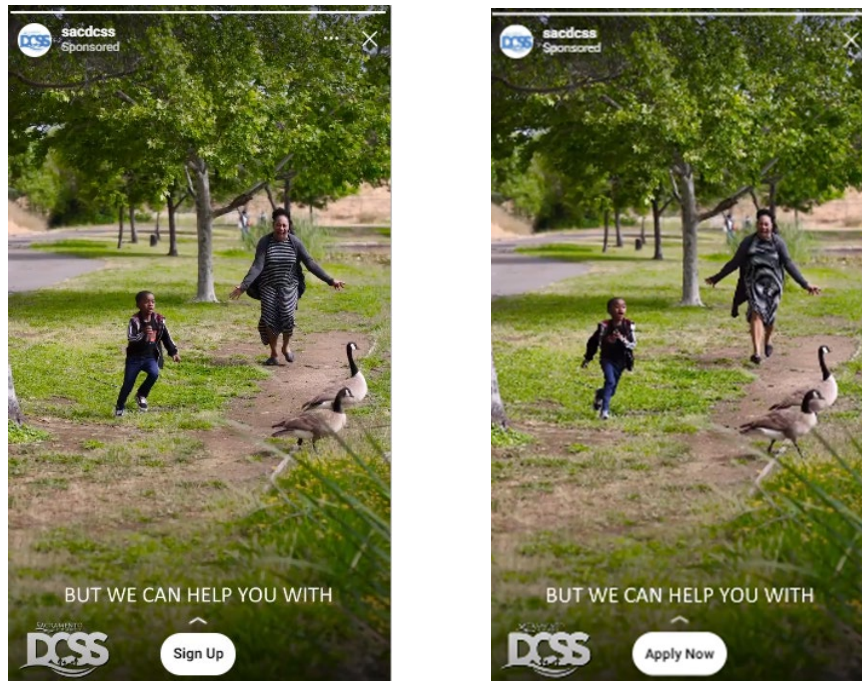
DCSS tested two different messages as a prompt to engage with the ad: “Apply Now” or “Sign Up.” Swiping up on DCSS’S Instagram story would direct viewers to the TurboCourt application. The two campaigns targeted Instagram users in Sacramento County using the same Instagram video and TurboCourt link. The Instagram story campaign was active throughout June 2021.

DCSS split its \$3,000 per intervention budget evenly across the two versions of the test. In the 15-second videos, adapted from previous DCSS marketing advertisements,⁴ a mother and young son happily run through a park while the narrator delivered the following short message:

As a parent, you want only the very best for your children. We can’t help you with everything, but we can help you with your child support. Apply online anytime of the day from the privacy of your own home.

Both videos displayed a screenshot of TurboCourt’s homepage at the nine-second mark. The only variation between the campaign stories were the phrases displayed at the bottom of the story for Campaign A and Campaign B (see Figure 1). An Instagram user was shown either the “Sign Up” (Campaign A) or “Apply Now” (Campaign B) story, not both, upon viewing the advertisement in Instagram Stories.

Figure 1: Screenshots of Campaign A and Campaign B Instagram Stories



A/B Campaign

DCSS ran an A/B test comparing “Sign Up” and “Apply Now” to assess whether changing the wording in advertisements to apply for child support services was related to the number of link clicks. DCSS ran an

⁴ In the first three interventions, DCSS’s video advertisement was 30-seconds long and horizontal. Instagram story advertisements are limited to 15-seconds and must be displayed vertically. DCSS reshot a similar video to the previous tests with these parameters. The fourth advertisement, like the third, featured TurboCourt.

A/B test to compare the same video advertisement, target audience, and billing strategy with two different calls-to-action. The goal was to test which prompt resonated more with the advertisement's viewers. For both versions of the advertisement, Facebook Analytics⁵ tracked reach, impressions, clicks, and video plays (see Indicators Box on page 5).

Audience Targeting

DCSS's target audience for the intervention was parents who were potentially eligible for child support services without active cases in Sacramento County. DCSS targeted Instagram users ages 18 to 64⁶ of all genders in Sacramento County. DCSS targeted the story advertisement toward users with interests in family or parents, which Instagram assesses through a user's activity on Instagram and Facebook, such as who they follow and posts they like, as well as users' activity on third-party sites and apps.⁷ DCSS excluded parents with graduate degrees as a proxy for limiting the sample to low-income parents.

TurboCourt

TurboCourt is a web-based interface that guides applicants through the child support submission process by posing "simple, easy-to-understand" questions and subsequently filling in application forms based on applicants' responses to those questions.⁸ DCSS contracted with TurboCourt in July 2020 to provide a user-friendly way for potentially eligible parents to submit new child support applications online. DCSS wanted to highlight TurboCourt in the advertisement to present parents with an easier to use alternative to the traditional Online Application (OLA). Instagram tracked how many users swiped up on the story advertisement and navigated to DCSS's application page on TurboCourt. However, we were not able to know who applied for child support services through TurboCourt and whether those TurboCourt applicants were directed to the page by the Instagram story advertisement.

Research Questions

The evaluation of this test focuses on the following four research questions:

Research Question 1: How did the Instagram stories perform overall?

Facebook Analytics provided insight on the performance of the Instagram stories. This includes the stories' total views, the average watch time of the video, and how many Instagram users clicked on the link to navigate to TurboCourt's website (see Indicators Box on page 5).

Research Question 2: How does Campaign A compare to Campaign B?

Having two different calls-to action allowed DCSS to elevate the differential effects of the two prompts.

⁵ Facebook is the parent company of Instagram and the performance of online advertisements posted on Instagram has been assessed through Facebook Analytics. Facebook Analytics is no longer available to use as of July 1, 2021. The new digital marketing tool for Facebook is Page Insights. Instagram now has an independent tool, Instagram Insights.

⁶ DCSS excluded users 65 and older as they expected those parents to be less likely to use Instagram and wanted to focus their funds to the younger demographic of parents.

⁷ "How Does Instagram Decide Which Ads to Show Me? | Instagram Help Center." Accessed October 15, 2021. <https://help.instagram.com/173081309564229>.

⁸ TurboCourt. "File Child Support Application Online." *TurboCourt* (blog). Accessed May 14, 2021. <https://info.turbocourt.com/childsupport/>.

Indicators

Facebook Analytics

Results: The total number of times Instagram users clicked the link.

Reach: The total number of unique Instagram users who saw the story at least once.

Impressions: The number of times the story appeared on Instagram users' screens.

Unique Link Clicks: The number of times a unique Instagram user clicked the link.

Video Plays: The number of times the Instagram story started to play. Video plays include each impression and exclude replays.

Video Plays at 100 Percent: The number of times the Instagram story was played at 100 percent of its length, including plays that skipped to the end of the story.

DCSS Administrative Data

Case Openings: New voluntary DCSS enrollments. Includes online and paper applications.

Demographics: Descriptive information about DCSS enrollees. Includes gender, age, and race of the custodial parent and the number of unemancipated children on the case. This also includes information about the custodial parent at the time of enrollment, including whether the parent had a child support case before, whether there was a court order prior to opening the case, and whether the custodial parent had an existing Medi-Cal or CalFresh case.

Research Question 3: Who is applying for child support services in Sacramento County during the study period?

In addition to the performance of the Instagram advertisement, we provide descriptive information about voluntary DCSS enrollees during the study period. Specifically, we present data on custodial and noncustodial parent demographics based on the application source (i.e., paper, online, or TurboCourt).

Research Question 4: Compared to the year before, did engagement with DCSS differ during the intervention period?

The aim of the Instagram campaign was to encourage eligible custodial and noncustodial parents to apply for child support services. Software and data limitations do not allow us to answer such causal questions with certainty.

Findings

We conducted descriptive analyses of data and statistical significance tests using Facebook Analytics. DCSS administrative data provides information about new cases. The text box on the left defines key analytic indicators.

How did the Instagram stories perform overall?

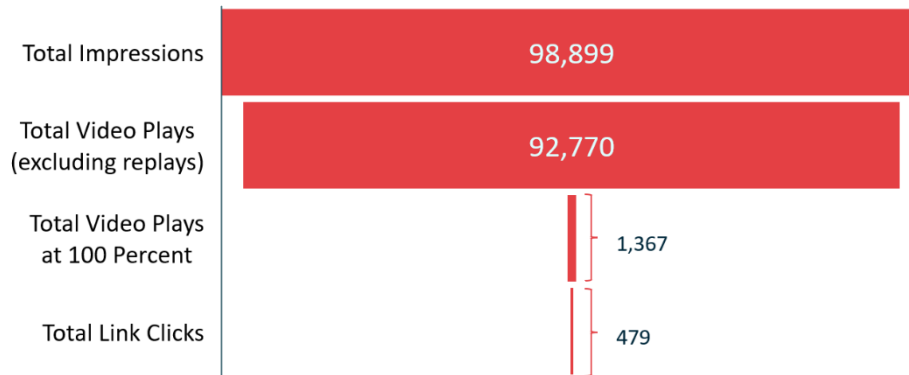
DCSS launched the Instagram stories from June 1, 2021 to June 30, 2021. The Instagram stories reached a total of 16,315 unique Instagram accounts. Users were randomly shown either Campaign A or Campaign B, not both. Campaign A prompted Instagram users to "Sign Up" whereas Campaign B directed users to "Apply Now."

Users experienced different levels of engagement with posts or stories (see Figure 3). Throughout the month, the Instagram stories generated 98,899 impressions. Impressions include replays and stories that were not watched at 100 percent of its length. In other words, if an Instagram story played for one second, that interaction counted as an impression. Excluding replays, the Instagram stories played 92,770 times. Users viewed the full fifteen-second video 1,367 times.

Additionally, the data show how many times Instagram users swiped up on the story directing them to the online TurboCourt application. Over the month of the campaign, the advertisement garnered 479 total link clicks (see Figure 2). Less than three percent of viewers clicked on the TurboCourt link. All of the users who clicked on the link used mobile devices. This metric suggests that online campaigns designed to be mobile-friendly may reach large audiences.

With DCSS’s maximum budget of \$3,000, Instagram spent \$2,883.30, split evenly between Campaign A and Campaign B. The average cost per click on the story advertisement was \$6.01.

Figure 2: Campaign A and Campaign B Metrics

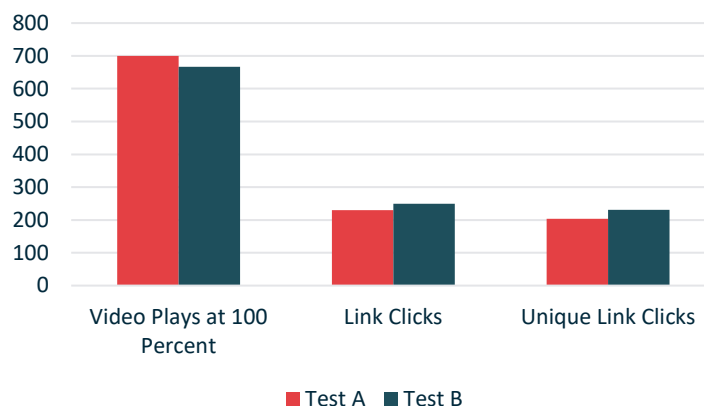


DCSS is unable to report how effective Instagram targeting is as the data analytics do not show if the 16,315 users who engaged with the campaign have children or are potentially eligible for child support. The data also do not convey how many of these viewers were DCSS enrollees. Furthermore, it is possible that Instagram users could have viewed the advertisement then applied to TurboCourt at a later time, but DCSS does not have the data to support or reject the possibility. The advertisement may have increased the salience of DCSS even though the campaign may not have produced the immediate desired behavior from viewers.

How does Campaign A compare to Campaign B?

We compared Campaigns A and B to understand whether the different phrases used in the advertisement affected the likelihood of users clicking on the TurboCourt link (see Figure 3). Overall, there was not a significant difference in user behavior based on the different campaign phrase.⁹

Figure 3: Campaign A and Campaign B Metrics



⁹ When testing for significant differences, we assume there is random sampling, the sampling distribution is normal, and that the level of measurement is nominal. The difference in the number of unique link clicks generated by Campaign A and Campaign B is not large enough to observe an association between the number of unique link clicks and phrase used.

Figure 4 shows that although the “Sign Up” story produced more video plays played at 100 percent than the “Apply Now” story, Campaign B generated the most link clicks and unique link clicks.

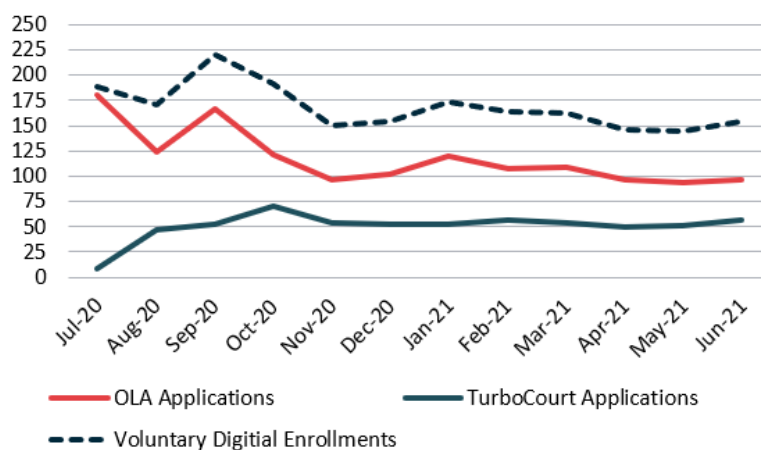
Who is applying for child support services in Sacramento County?

To learn more about the voluntary enrollees during the intervention period, we compared the enrollees’ demographics and descriptive information to the same month of the previous year. There were a few differences between DCSS enrollees in June 2020 and June 2021.

Most voluntary enrollees identified as female in June 2020 (88 percent) and June 2021 (85 percent).¹⁰ Custodial parents in both years were an average of 34 years and had 1.5 unemancipated children, on average. In both June 2020 and June 2021, most enrollees who disclosed their racial background identified as Hispanic, Black, or White.¹¹ In June 2020, 42 percent of enrollees received Medi-Cal or CalFresh.¹² This figure rose to 55 percent of enrollees in June 2021.

DCSS hoped the advertisement would encourage people to apply for child support services through TurboCourt as an alternative to the traditional OLA and paper applications. In June 2021, 37 percent of applications were submitted through TurboCourt, the highest submission rate since TurboCourt’s launch in July 2020. Moreover, in June 2021, DCSS recorded the lowest rate of OLA applicants (63 percent) in the year since offering TurboCourt. DCSS has experienced an increase in TurboCourt applications throughout the past year (see Figure 4). However, there is not enough evidence to conclude that the Instagram campaign affected the TurboCourt application activity.

Figure 4: New Voluntary Digital Enrollments by Source – TurboCourt and Online (OLA) Applications July 2020 – January 2021



¹⁰ DCSS provides enrollees with the option to identify as male, female, or non-binary. During June 2021, enrollees identified as male or female.

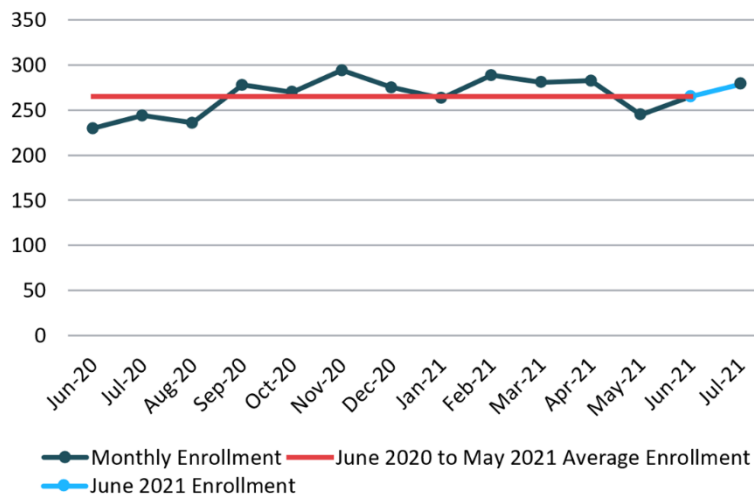
¹¹ Enrollees have the option to select more than one race when applying for child support services. DCSS indicated few parents provide an additional race. We analyze only the primary racial identity of enrollees for this report.

¹² DCSS’s target audience has been potentially eligible parents with low incomes without active child support cases during the intervention period. One proxy that DCSS uses to identify parents with low incomes is to look at customers’ participation in food assistance or Medicaid. DCSS’s application system tracks whether new customers participate in Medi-Cal, California’s Medicaid program, or CalFresh, California’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Compared to the year before, how does engagement with DCSS differ during the intervention period?

Although the data analytics from the campaign cannot inform DCSS if the advertisement caused more parents to apply for child support services, case openings data from June 2020 to June 2021 provide DCSS with information on how many families have enrolled throughout a year (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: June 2020 to June 2021 Enrollment



DCSS is closed to applicants on the weekends and holidays. DCSS accepted applications for 22 days in June 2020 and 21 days in June 2021. From June 2020 to May 2021, an average of 265 families enrolled in DCSS services. The enrollment in June 2021 is the same as the average enrollment per month over the preceding year.

Lessons Learned

DCSS's Instagram campaign may further inform digital marketing efforts aimed at disseminating information about child support services to large online audiences:

- **Social media campaigns can reach large audiences but may be less effective in getting users to sign up for services.** Since one hundred percent of users engaged with the advertisement on their mobile devices, the results suggest that online campaigns designed with mobile users in mind have the potential to reach large audiences. The Instagram stories reached 16,315 people yet less than three percent of users clicked on the campaign advertisement directing them to the TurboCourt application. The campaign reached thousands of users, but the small number of link clicks suggests users may not be as likely to click on the TurboCourt link while viewing other Instagram content.
- **Link clicks best capture the audience's engagement with the advertisement.** Both versions of the advertisement produced tens of thousands of views, impressions, and video plays. However, the total number of link clicks is the best available indicator of whether the advertisement content resulted in the desired user behavior, encouraging the audience to sign up for child support services.
- **Designing a campaign to track the relationship between engagement with the advertisement and voluntary enrollment in child support services may produce a more accurate analysis of**

the marketing efforts. Child support programs cannot fully understand the impact of the digital campaign on new voluntary case openings without tracking how many users viewed the advertisement, applied for services, and enrolled in the child support program. A campaign designed to track the relationship between users who watch the advertisement and then apply for child support services would provide a comprehensive analysis of the social media campaign and provide insight on whether the advertisement affected voluntary child support applications or enrollments in Sacramento County. A question on the TurboCourt child support application asking customers how they heard about TurboCourt could help understand the association between the advertisement and new case openings during the campaign period.

This is the fourth in a series of briefs describing DCSS's digital marketing efforts. Other briefs have described advertising efforts on other platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, targeted email campaigns, and a Hulu advertisement. Collectively, the briefs document new approaches to increasing applications for child support services and the potential role digital communication and advertising can play.