

User Research Report

Desirability study on new illustrations

Sponsor 09

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Introduction

In May 2024, we ran a desirability study on new illustrations for the homepage of <https://torproject.org/>.

The goal of the study was to analyze:

- **Understanding**
How do people understand these illustrations in the context of what they are illustrating?
- **Desirability**
How do people perceive these illustrations and whether this perception aligns with the brand perception that Tor is aiming for?

The study was designed to be conducted in a distributed fashion by the partners of Tor in East Africa who conducted training as part of the Privacy Resilience Grants.

After their training, partners were asked to get their trainees to fill up a 30-minute online survey.

We received 54 full responses to the survey.

The survey structure is [archived on GitLab](#).

Demographics

All demographics questions were optional, so not all answers sum up to 100% or 54 participants.

Gender

- Woman 69%
- Man 22%
- Non-binary 4%
- Transgender 2%

Age

- Less than 20 years old 2%
- Between 20 and 29 years old 65%
- Between 30 and 39 years old 26%
- Between 40 and 49 years old 4%

Country

- Kenya 56%
- Uganda 28%

Tor Browser usage

- Sometimes 26%
- Weekly 9%
- Daily 17%

The top 3 profiles

- Digital security or IT professional 23
- Academic researcher or student 20
- Journalist or blogger 17

Understanding

We gathered *qualitative* feedback on the understanding of each illustration.

For each participant, the survey platform picked randomly 2 out of the 7 illustrations, displayed them with the text snippet that would appear along the illustration on the homepage, and asked respondents for each illustration:

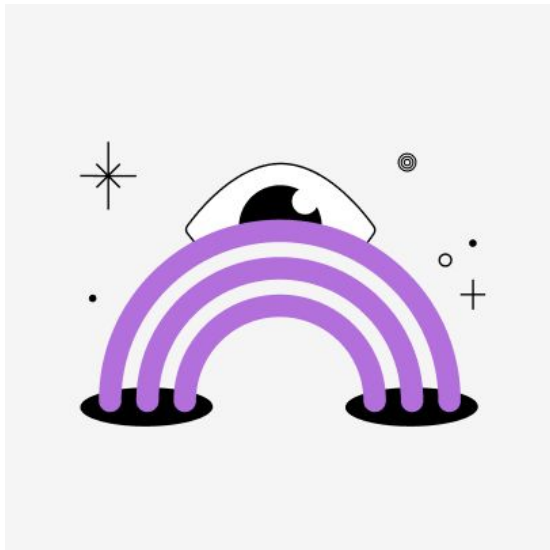
- *How do you understand the illustration below in this context?*
- *If you could change anything about this illustration, what would it be?*

Challenge

Most of the answers to these qualitative questions were too short to be useful or merely repeated elements of the help text. So these responses are hard to interpret and turn into practical insights.

Understanding

Snub trackers and snoopers



Help text

Tor Browser isolates each website you visit so third-party trackers and ads can't follow you. All anyone monitoring your browsing habits can see is that you're using Tor.

Intent

Blocking the eye of surveillance. The onion rings through the portal offering that protection from surveillance.

Understanding

Snub trackers and snoopers

Correct understanding

“

Tor has three security gates it goes through to enable you browse safely.

Participant 34

“

An eye watching what I am doing online.

Participant 11

“

It is a wall of protection between the Tor Browser user and the third-party trackers.

Participant 50

Possible misunderstanding

“

I am completely anonymous (my activity).

Participant 5

“

Uses isolated segmented sections to show site isolation, blocking outside ads, concealing specific sites from monitors, and incorporating Tor's encryption and anonymity principles

Participant 42

Ideas for change

“

I sometimes think it is layered like the purple onion that signifies depth and access through multiple layers.

Participant 34

“

I would cover the eye to represent total privacy.

Participant 50

Understanding

Circumvent censorship



Help text

Your traffic is relayed and encrypted three times as it passes over the Tor network. The network is comprised of thousands of volunteer-run servers known as Tor relays.

Intent

Key pressing down on the onion ring. Both the key and the onion ring have 3 different layers. Together demonstrate encryption and protection.

Understanding

Circumvent censorship

Correct understanding

“

Decryption key for bypassing Internet censorship and accessing restricted content.

Participant 43

“

It is like a key opening a lock with a lot of information.

Participant 44

“

That the technology is the gateway to the world of today.

Participant 37

Possible misunderstanding

“

Internet server

Participant 38

“

Traffic relays and encryption

Participant 27

“

These show different connections of relays.

Participant 53

Ideas for change

“

I'd use locks between two users A and B.

Participant 10

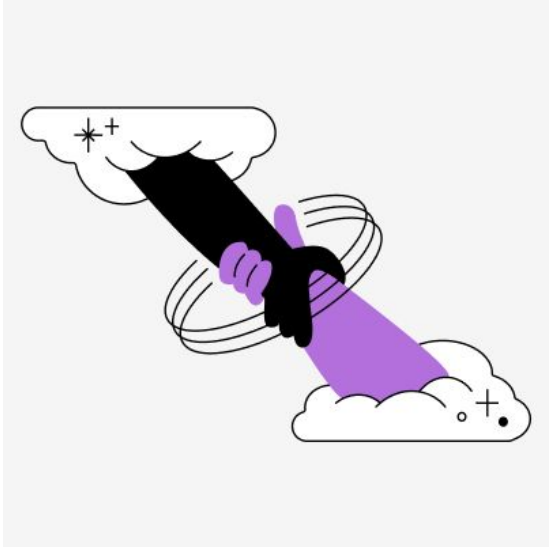
“

Maybe make it easy to understand by labeling the image.

Participant 44

Understanding

Get connected



Help text

When a website is blocked by your government or internet provider, Tor can help you connect by circumventing this censorship.

Intent

Arms reaching each other from the cloud to circumvent censorship. Working together, supporting each other. There are humans behind this network.

Understanding

Get connected

Correct understanding

“

I don't have to worry about government censorship. Tor has got my hand.

Participant 14

“

This demonstrates that tor volunteers from other countries can help you access browsers blocked by the local government.

Participant 7

Possible misunderstanding

“

I don't understand the illustration.

Participant 20

“

Interconnectivity between different services running on different clouds.

Participant 40

“

The colors of the clouds to be different, one demonstrating Tor and the other one, the government.

Participant 2

Ideas for change

“

The rings around the hands.

Participant 11

“

Purple hand to be up and black hand to be down.

Participant 30

“

Incorporate visual elements that depict internet censorship, such as blocking symbols or barriers. Also, emphasize the role of Tor in overcoming these barriers.

Participant 26

Understanding Localization



Help text

We want Tor to work for everyone in the world, which means our software must be translated into a lot of languages.

Intent

Demonstrate a feeling of global international translation.
Nod towards different accessibility needs.

Understanding

Localization

Correct understanding

“

Communication is multilingual and inclusive.

Participant 14

“

It depicts different mechanisms of different people understanding something.

Participant 2

“

Any person can use Tor despite their hearing, speaking, and seeing ability.

Participant 10

Possible misunderstanding

“

There are people looking for you, what you do and more disinformation, also those who have private websites or telecommunication companies are listening to you.

Participant 31

“

There's no privacy at all and above all some people do not even understand what Tor is.

Participant 50

Ideas for change

“

Include other languages. Make it less abstract and simple to understand.

Participant 14

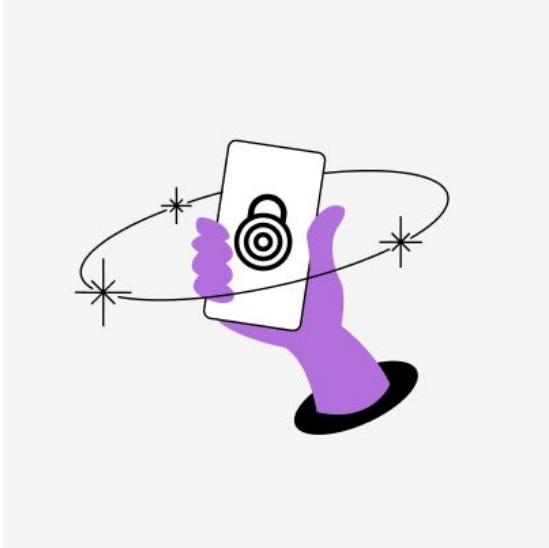
“

Include many language symbols.

Participant 53

Understanding

Tor on mobile



Help text

Browse freely and privately on mobile with Tor for Android.

Intent

Tor is available on mobile. Humanness with the hand. 3 hops with the 3 stars around the ring.

Understanding

Tor on mobile

Correct understanding

“

My connection traffic is protected by three Tor points.

Participant 8

“

The phone is locked which means the private data is safe.

Participant 21

“

Tor has blocked out any security and privacy threats that might want to access my browsing information.

Participant 47

Possible misunderstanding

“

Am not getting it.

Participant 53

Ideas for change

“

I would remove the vicious circle.

Participant 37

“

The circle and the three stars. Let it show things that I can access.

Participant 13

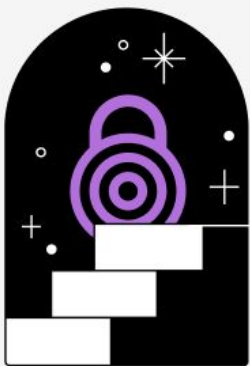
“

I'll put the Tor symbol around the mobile phone.

Participant 47

Understanding

Onion services



Help text

Onion services are websites that can only be accessed over Tor, and allow people to browse but to also publish anonymously.

Intent

Stepping into this portal of protection. Should feel a bit like magic: hidden but not invisible or scary.

Understanding

Onion services

Correct understanding

“

Only accessible on Tor. Onion services cannot be accessed through normal web browsers, only through the Tor Browser, which routes traffic through an encrypted network.

Participant 42

“

It's like a staircase with three layers taking you to a locked cabinet.

Participant 46

Misunderstanding?

“

It shows that there are multiple layers to protect my identity.

Participant 8

“

While browsing, one goes through different steps to activate Tor and can only browse after completing access through the various gates.

Participant 34

Ideas for change

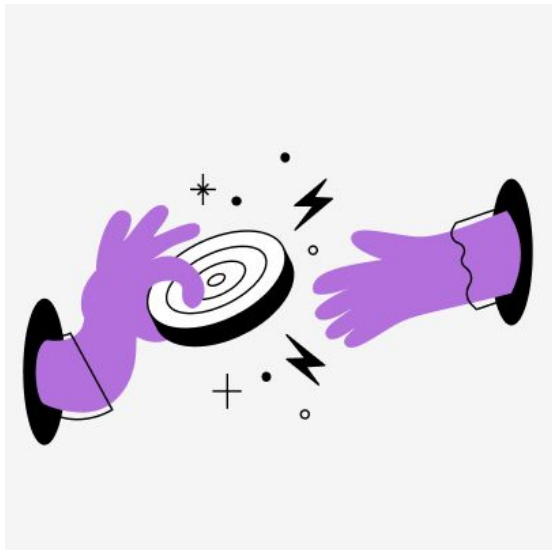
“

I would add multiple layers, multiple staircases, each with a lock, representing the layers of encryption used by Tor.

Participant 44

Understanding

Relay operations



Help text

Relays are the backbone of the Tor network made possible by volunteers, providing strength and bandwidth for our millions of users worldwide.

Intent

The relay race handing out a baton, but an onion ring in this case: collaboration and teamwork.

Understanding

Relay operations

Correct understanding

“

Interdependence and sharing responsibility.

Participant 14

“

People keying in to get information and there is a person helping the viewer get the information being searched.

Participant 44

“

It is showing connections reaching out globally and anyone can use it.

Participant 13

Possible misunderstanding

“

When Tor users send information one to one it's more reliable to use Tor.

Participant 32

Ideas for change

“

Emphasize the collaborative and decentralized nature of the Tor network. For example, include more diverse representations of the volunteers who operate the relays to highlight the global community contributing to Tor's operation.

Participant 26

Desirability

We used the [Microsoft Desirability Toolkit](#), developed in 2002 by [Joey Benedeck and Trish Miner](#) to measure *quantitatively* how participants perceived the 2 illustrations that they commented on.

We selected 25 words (16 positive and 9 negative).

After the understanding questions, we asked participants:

- *Select the 5 words that best describe these illustrations.*
- *Why did you use the following words to describe these illustrations?*
- *Why did you use the following words to describe these illustrations?*
- *What did you like or dislike in these illustrations?*

Challenges

With only 54 responses, we cannot get strong statistical confidence in the number.

Since we asked these questions *after* participants had to comment about their understanding and after receiving a Tor training, it seems that comments were biased towards their **perception of the Tor brand in general**, and not only about their perception of the illustrations themselves.

Desirability

Words and their score

Participants selected **85% of positive words**, while the list included only 64% of positive words.

We are indicating in parenthesis how many times each word was selected.

Negative words

- Complicated	11	- Busy	2
- Confusing	8	- Frustrating	2
- Intimidating	6	- Patronizing	2
- Unreliable	5	- Boring	1
- Fragile	3		

Positive words

- Advanced	27	- Motivating	12
- Helpful	25	- Serious	10
- Convenient	22	- Intuitive	10
- Effective	22	- Approachable	9
- Trustworthy	21	- Empowering	7
- Powerful	20	- Simplistic	7
- Clear	16	- Calm	4
- Friendly	14	- Playful	4

We identified 3 of these words as quite ambiguous but rather on the positive side in our context: Advanced, Simplistic, and Serious.

Desirability

Word cloud



Desirability

Top positive words

Our target vs. participants selection

Target	Participants
Trustworthy	Trustworthy
Helpful	Helpful
Empowering	Advanced
Approachable	Convenient
Friendly	Effective

2 of the words that we deem more important to the Tor brand perception overlap with what participants chose.

Trustworthy

“

The illustrations suggest that they are credible and can be trusted.

Helpful

“

Because I see that part of the two hands meaning and the way it's shaped.

But, we're missing the mark on words about **humane qualities** in favor of words about **technical competence**.

Advanced

“

The illustrations are sophisticated.

Convenient

“

It helps me understand what is going on.

Effective

“

The illustrations have the ability to achieve their intended purpose.

Desirability

Top negative words

Confusing

“

A bit confusing from the pictures, but with the bit of explanation on the side, it is easy to explain.

Participant 43

Complicated

“

They were simple to understand but complicated in terms of finding the correct words to relate them to Tor and online privacy.

Participant 41

Intimidating

“

It might be a little difficult to get a grasp of it if not well informed about Tor.

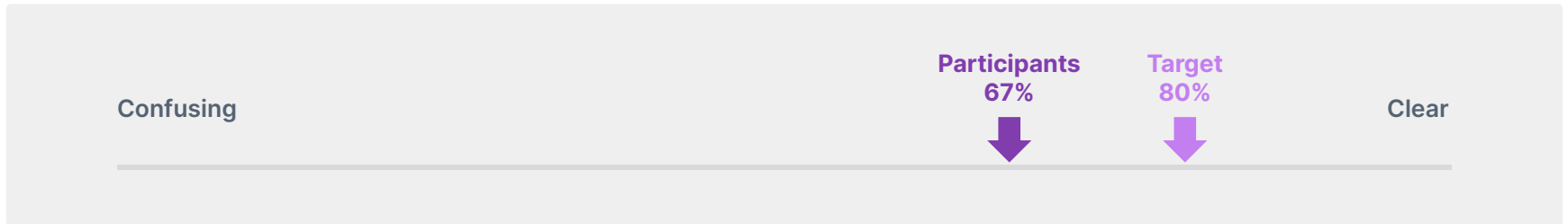
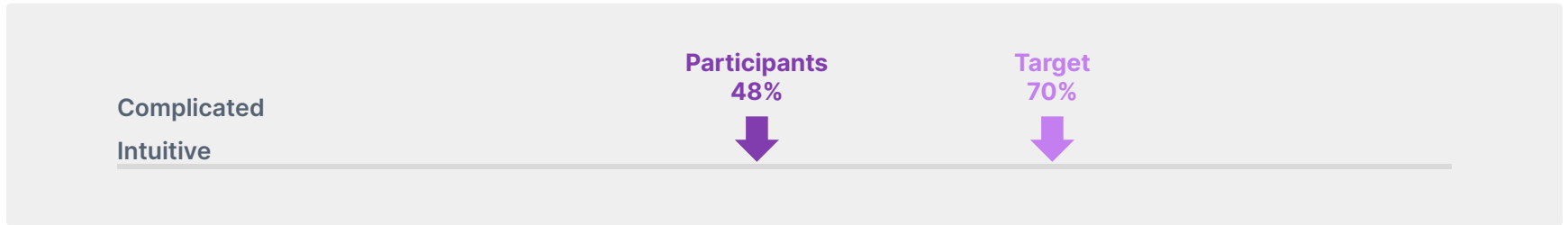
Participant 47

Desirability

Spectrums

No technology can ever be 100% intuitive or clear, so we discussed with our Brand Designer, what is a realistic target for Tor.

We are also missing the mark on **simplicity** and **clarity** on these 2 spectrums (n=21 for both).



Desirability

Likes

“

I liked the illustration because I like privacy and they clearly depict that.

Participant 20

“

I like the creativity and playfulness.

Participant 14

“

I liked the funny and engaging vibe involved.

Participant 2

“

They are simple to understand especially after being taken through the training.

Participant 54

Dislikes

“

They are a bit ambiguous.

Participant 16

“

Somehow complicated.

Participant 15

“

It has some symbols I don't understand.

Participant 51

“

Illustration 2 (localization) was a bit complicated. You have to think through.

Participant 46

Retrospective

What worked well

- Getting training participants to answer a survey went well. We got 54 responses in 1 month.
- The quantitative aspect of the desirability study seems strong enough to draw general conclusions.
- We learned new powerful tricks in LimeSurvey like displaying random groups of questions and feeding the results of a question into a follow up.

What didn't work so well

- Mixing comments on images and desirability words led many people to comment on the tool rather than the images themselves.
- Sending the survey to people who just finished a Tor training, rather than to people who were discovering Tor from the homepage, probably biased the results towards better understanding.
- Asking for qualitative feedback in survey comments led to answers that lacked depth, made it impossible to ask follow-up questions, and was time-consuming to process for little practical insights.

Summary

The new illustrations were described positively by participants overall.

Tor was perceived as **advanced technology** that is helpful, effective, and trustworthy, but **not as approachable** as we want to be.

To improve, we should focus on **simplicity** and **clarity**.

