

Participant Misrepresentation in Research: Ethically Acceptable Mitigation Strategies

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This resource describes some ethically acceptable strategies for preventing participant misrepresentation in research as well as mitigation strategies for situations in which researchers suspect that participants have misrepresented their eligibility for a research study.

Researchers may find themselves engaged with participants who have misrepresented their eligibility for a research study, often motivated by remuneration for research participation. Researchers may also have cause to suspect that some responses to their surveys have been generated by a non-participant such as a bot.

When a research participant's identity or authenticity is called into question, ethical as well as operational issues arise. The integrity of the data is called into question, and the researcher loses data and time and may incur costs associated with remunerating falsified participants. Social media recruitment and online participation options seem to increase the likelihood of fraudulent participation.

The purpose of this document is to raise researcher awareness of this increasingly common challenge and to provide potential solutions that would be acceptable from a research ethics perspective. Researchers and research ethics boards must continue to apply the core research ethics principles of respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice when navigating this research challenge.

Signs of participant misrepresentation

Your study may be the target of participant misrepresentation if you notice one or more of the following signs:

- There is a mismatch between the participant's eligibility or demographic responses and information provided in an interview, or illogical or inconsistent responses to questions.
- Multiple participants are communicating using the same messaging or who provide unusually brief or vague responses to interview questions or who complete surveys more quickly than plausible.
- Reluctance or refusal to turn the camera on without reason.

- Unusually high participation rates from populations that are usually hard to reach.
- More than usual interest in monetary incentives.
- Receiving a high number of responses in a short period of time.
- Multiple email addresses that are formatted similarly or are from unknown email domains.

Mitigation strategies

The Dalhousie University research ethics boards are open to considering mitigation strategies proposed by researchers related to their specific projects and to providing an ethical review. The strategies proposed below are meant as helpful examples rather than requirements.

Although there are multiple reasons for potential participants to misrepresent their identities, including malicious intent to corrupt data, since the offer of remuneration seems to be the most common reason, the strategies provided below focus on changing how identities are validated, and how remuneration is offered. The approaches will not guarantee that participants don't continue to misrepresent their identities, but they will hopefully dissuade some and allow for earlier detection of others. These should be described in the consent form so prospective participants have the necessary details to make an informed decision about consent.

- Recruitment. Where applicable, avoid sharing survey links on publicly accessible platforms (such as social media) unless your aim is to generate a very large number of responses.
- Where possible, avoid using gift cards that have worldwide usage, e.g., use gift cards from a Canadian retailer when you are seeking Canadian participants, and specify the source of remuneration in the consent form.
- Screen carefully. Include screening questions and/or embed questions about the participant's demographic information to confirm eligibility, whereby those who do not answer correctly are removed.
- For online interviews or focus groups, ask that participants start the session with their video turned on (so the interviewer can verify identifying details), but do not record or document the identifying details, just note that they have been verified (to mitigate privacy risks of documenting and/or retention of personally identifiable information). For focus groups in particular, this should be done in a "waiting room" privately prior to joining other participants. Where video will be used to confirm the

participant's identity, describe in the consent form how a participant's identity will be verified, e.g., by asking to see (without recording) their driver's license or other identification; or just through informal facial recognition (to mitigate repeat participation).

- Where the current residence of the participant is an inclusion criterion, state that the gift card/remuneration will be mailed to participants and ask for their mailing address. Addresses should be stored separately from participant data, and destroyed after remuneration is complete.
- Where possible, limit the number of responses a single participant can submit.
- Limit the timeframe that the survey is active.
- If survey access is shared via email, configure the survey link to only allow invited participants to access the survey and ensure the link is set to expire after a specified amount of time.
- Use branching or skip logic that directs participants to skip certain questions that are not applicable.
- Use a captcha, a program that protects websites against bots.
- Have a plan for dealing with participants who have falsified their identities and disclose the plan in the consent form. For example, "Due to the unfortunate increase in participants misrepresenting their eligibility, we will ask you to confirm your eligibility. Before the interview begins, you will be asked to turn on your video and provide a piece of identification (such as x, y or z). This information will not be documented in the study records and is only for the purpose of confirming your eligibility. If you are unwilling or unable to do so, you will not be included in the study and will not be compensated." When legitimacy of identification cannot be confirmed either way, and the participant has otherwise met participation criteria for compensation, then the participant should be compensated.
- Training. Ensure that the research team staff are oriented to the possibility of participants falsifying their identity and provide instructions for discontinuing an interaction if necessary and for discarding data. Provide training to research staff on how to answer questions from potential participants that are purely about method of payment and how to address suspected misrepresentation diplomatically.

Foreign interference

In recent years there have been numerous examples of foreign governments and entities putting undue pressure on researchers to change, manipulate, or fabricate research data

for political or ideological reasons. If you have reasonable grounds to suspect that your research project may be, or has been, subject to foreign influence or interference please contact Michael Sullivan, Director of Research Security (michael.sullivan@dal.ca) for advice and mitigation.

Resources

Garrett, B. M., Musoke, R. M., Lam, J. S., & Tang, X., (2023). *Surveying risk-taking behaviours in alternative healthcare: methodological considerations in the use of commercial survey panel services*. In Sage Research Methods: Doing Research Online. SAGE Publications, Ltd., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529629361>. (Includes specific advice in respect to using Qualtrics and panel services, such as Mechanical Turk and others.)

Pullen Sansfaçon, A., Gravel, E., & Gelly, M. A. (2024). *Dealing With Scam in Online Qualitative Research: Strategies and Ethical Considerations*. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231224610>

Adapted from:

Office of Research Services. (2023). *Participants (and Bots) Falsifying Their Identity*. University of British Columbia.

Maritime SPOR Support Unit. (2024). *Tips to suppress bots from sabotaging your research!*