

## Fraudulent Participants Guidance

Imposter or fake participants compromise data integrity, cost research teams time and money, undermine research projects, and violate the privacy of real participants. Fraudulent participants in research are individuals who intentionally provide false responses or misrepresent their identity/qualifications to take part in a study, often to gain a personal benefit, such as a financial incentive. They compromise the data quality and integrity of the research, as their responses do not accurately reflect the population or experiences the study is intended to measure. This guidance contains strategies that researchers can implement to help reduce the incidence of fraudulent participants:

### *Examples of Fraudulent or Imposter Participants*

#### 1. Automated Bots Completing Surveys

- **Simple bots** that fill in every field with random text just to obtain an incentive code.
- **More advanced bots** that adaptively answer logic-based questions (e.g., skip patterns), making them harder to detect.
- **Bots using stolen demographic or IP data** to appear like legitimate participants (e.g., spoofing a geo-location to meet inclusion criteria).

#### 2. Participants Using Multiple Accounts / Duplicate Entries

- Individuals creating several accounts or identities to take the same survey repeatedly for compensation.
- Use of **VPNs or proxy servers** to bypass location restrictions or block duplicate IP detection.
- Re-entering with slight demographic variations to avoid detection.

### *Prevention and Mitigation*

#### Honouring Participation:

Consider alternatives to cash incentives, recognize participation in other ways (e.g., donations, vouchers, small gifts).

#### Recruitment Materials

- Do not advertise how payment will be offered.
- Describe that payment will be in the form of Canadian gift cards.
- State that eligibility will be verified.

#### Consent and Privacy

- State inclusion criteria( i.e., must reside in Canada).
- Directly address fraud and the value of research (i.e., include a statement about why it is important to protect the integrity of the research for all participants).
- Describe compensation as limited to once per participant.

- Indicate that the inclusion criteria and/or identities will be verified, and how this will be done (i.e., screening form, ReCAPTCHA, a free Google service that helps protect websites from spam by distinguishing between human users and bots, or other verification means).
- Describe what will be done with this information (i.e., if personal identifiers are part of verification, indicate that these will not be associated with collected data). Indicate if the data will be kept or destroyed upon verification. Ensure storage is in accordance with UofA guidelines.
- Describe what will happen if identities cannot be verified or if fraud is suspected (i.e., no compensation, removal from the study).

### **Methods**

Virtual interactions:

- Require the camera to be on at least to start.
- Conduct an initial screening interview.
- Limit participation geographically (e.g., Qualtrics permits this).

Surveys:

- Use regular mail, send surveys with postage-paid return envelopes.
- Mail gift cards to a physical address.
- Directly email survey links to participants, instead of posting/circulating links on social media.
- Use technical safeguards (e.g., bot detectors, Qualtrics offers this).
- Embed “fraud detector” or reliability questions in the survey.
- Lower participant payment amounts or use a lottery vs. individual payment.

### **After the Fact**

If imposter status is suspected, researchers may still need to pay the participant. This is in part dependent on what was described in the consent form relating to participant eligibility for payment, highlighting the importance of communicating the criteria clearly and unambiguously. When in doubt as to whether the participant is fake or real, they may need to be compensated. These situations need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, and in consultation with the REB.

In the event researchers identify imposter participants, they should report it to the REB using the Reportable Events Form. Be sure to describe the nature of the event and what actions were taken to rectify the event. This event should describe whether or not the incentive was paid, when in the research process, potential fraudulent participants were identified, and if data created were entered into the data analysis.

### **Additional Resources:**

For additional guidance on how to manage bots and imposter participants see the following Tip Sheet jointly developed by the Faculty of Nursing and the School of Public Health: [Tip Sheet: Managing Bots and Imposter Participants in Research](#).

NOTE: This guide was adapted from the University of Calgary’s guidance document “Preventing Fraudulent Participants”