

Tips for Preventing & Identifying Online Survey Fraud

Online surveys are a convenient way to collect research data, but they can also attract fraudulent responses. Some responses may come from bots (automated computer programs) or from people who misrepresent themselves to qualify for a study. These responses can reduce data quality, affect study results, and lead to inappropriate compensation payments.

Researchers should think about how they will prevent, detect, and manage fraudulent responses before collecting data. No single strategy works for every study, and several strategies may need to be used together.

1. Use Caution When Sharing Survey Links

Be careful about sharing survey links on public websites, especially social media. If you do, anyone can access the survey, including bots that may submit fake responses.

2. Be Careful with Survey Incentives

Think carefully before offering or advertising payments, gift cards, or other incentives for completing a survey. Surveys that offer money or rewards are more likely to attract bots and fake responses.

3. Use survey features to detect bots

To prevent spam and bots, include a Captcha verification question, especially if using [Qualtrics](#).

Use fraud detection features offered by [Qualtrics](#).

4. Ask Questions That Only Eligible Participants Can Answer

Include one or more questions that are specific to your target population. These questions can help identify responses from people who are not eligible for the study or who may be providing inaccurate information.

Examples:

A study of first-year college students could ask about first-year orientation experiences.

A study of K–12 teachers could ask about grade levels currently taught.

5. Check for Multiple Entries

Implement an IP address check to flag duplicate or potentially fraudulent responses from the same or similar IP addresses.

Note: IP addresses are considered identifiers, so datasets with IP addresses are not considered anonymous.

6. Capture Survey Completion Time

Record the time taken by participants to complete the survey and analyze it for inconsistencies or rushed responses.

7. Update Your Informed Consent Language

In your informed consent, be sure to address the accuracy of participant information directly. This ensures that participants understand the consequences of providing false information and clarifies that the study team is not liable to compensate those who falsify their information.

Examples:

“Participants who fail two or more attention-check questions may be withdrawn from the study, have their survey responses excluded from analysis, and may not receive compensation.”

“If the research team discovers that participants falsified their identity to meet eligibility criteria, the team reserves the right to dismiss the participant from the study and to not pay them for participation.”

8. Include Open-Ended Questions

Add one or more questions that require participants to type a response in their own words. Open-ended responses can help identify nonsensical answers, copied responses, or automated submissions.

Example:

"Please briefly describe your experience with online learning."

Review responses for answers that are unrelated to the question, repetitive, or appear to be computer-generated.

9. Repeat Questions with Different Wording

Ask the same question in different ways or at different points in the survey. Comparing responses can help identify inconsistent or potentially fraudulent responses.

Example: Student Engagement Study

Early in the survey:

"How many hours per week do you typically spend studying outside of class?"

Later in the survey:

"During a typical week, how much time do you spend preparing for classes, including studying, reading, and completing assignments?"

The responses should be reasonably consistent. Responses that differ substantially may warrant additional review.

10. Review Responses for Reasonableness

Review survey responses for answers that do not make sense, conflict with other answers, or appear unlikely based on the study population.

Examples of responses that may require further review:

A participant reports being 18 years old but indicates they have 20 years of full-time work experience.

A participant indicates they have never used social media but later answers detailed questions about their daily use of Instagram and TikTok.

Several participants provide nearly identical responses to open-ended questions.

A participant enters impossible values, such as: Age = 150

11. Attention Checks

Include one or more attention check questions in surveys that may be at risk for fraudulent or automated responses.

Examples of attention check questions include:

“To show that you are paying attention, please select ‘Strongly Agree’ for this question.”

“Please select ‘Option C’ below.”

“This question is included to ensure quality responses. Please choose ‘Somewhat Disagree’.”

“Regardless of the question prompt, please type BRISK in all caps in the response below.”

12. End a Survey Early

If you use attention-check questions, consider configuring the survey to end automatically when a participant fails a pre-determined number of checks. This approach helps prevent the collection of low-quality data and avoids wasting a participant's time completing a survey that may later be excluded from analysis.

13. Randomize Question Order

Mix up the order of questions for each participant. This helps reduce guessing, prevents people from copying answers, and encourages more honest and independent responses.

Example:

Instead of showing all participants the same survey questions in the same order, Survey Respondent A might see Questions 1–5 in one sequence, while Survey Respondent B sees them in a different sequence.

Key Takeaway

The purpose of these strategies is to improve data quality, not to trick participants. Attention checks, validation questions, and response reviews should be fair and appropriate for the study population. Use them to assess whether participants are responding thoughtfully and appear eligible for the study. Unusual or inconsistent responses may require review but do not automatically indicate fraud. Establish clear criteria for reviewing questionable responses before data collection and apply them consistently to all participants.