

Preventing Fraudulent Participants - Guidance

Imposter or fake participants compromise data integrity, cost the research team time and money, undermine research projects, and violate the privacy of real participants. Here are some strategies researchers can implement to help reduce the incidence of fraudulent participants:

Prevention and Mitigation

Honoring participation

- consider alternatives to cash incentives, recognize participation in other ways (e.g., donations, vouchers, events)

Recruitment Materials

- do not advertise how payment will be offered
- describe that payment will be in the form of Canadian gift cards
- state that identities will be verified

Consent and Privacy

- state inclusion criteria
- directly address fraud and the value of research,
- describe compensation as limited to once per participant
- describe that inclusion criteria and/or identities will be verified and how this will be done
 - describe what will be done with this information
- 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 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” 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. Resolution needs to be considered cases-by-case.

In the event researchers identify imposter participants, please report to the REB using the reportable events form.