

Ethics guidance on non-genuine participation in online research

University of the West of England, Bristol

1. Background

- Online research provides valuable opportunities for inclusive, efficient data collection. However, recent UWE-led case studies and broader sector evidence show a marked increase in fraudulent responses in online research. These include bots, duplicate responders, individuals misrepresenting themselves, and non-genuine participants attempting to enter online interviews or focus groups. Fraudulent participation undermines data integrity, misdirects incentives and staff time, and poses methodological and ethical risks. In some studies, 20–100% of online responses have been identified as non-genuine. Common indicators include unusually rapid response rates, identical free-text entries, short and/or vague responses, inconsistent demographic information, repetitive email patterns and lack of formality in emails (e.g., no greeting, lack of subject line, emails focused solely on compensation), scripted interview responses, phone area codes outside the study's geographic region, and refusal to use video during online interviews or focus groups. In alignment with the [UWE Handbook of Research Ethics](#), researchers must take proportionate steps to protect participant welfare, minimise risks, safeguard university resources, and ensure the integrity of their findings.

2. Principles and Expectations

- **Research integrity:** researchers must take reasonable steps to ensure data are genuine and valid.
- **Responsible use of resources:** incentives should only be issued to verified participants.
- **Transparency:** planned fraud-mitigation strategies must be clearly described in ethics applications and participant-facing materials.
- **Fairness:** anti-fraud procedures should remain proportionate and not deter genuine participants.

3. Recommended Practices for Mitigating Non-Genuine Participation

3.1 Before data collection

- Use closed or targeted recruitment routes where possible.
- Avoid including information about incentives in study flyers or adverts unless necessary.
- Implement eligibility checks that require contextual or domain-specific knowledge.
- Include a fraud-mitigation strategy in the ethics application, specifying how validity will be assessed.

3.2 During quantitative online data collection

- **Technical checks:** use reCAPTCHA, bot-detection, duplicate-detection, hidden questions (“honeypot method”), and other technical checks available via Qualtrics and other online data collection services.
- **Response-pattern checks:** examine completion speed, duplicate entries, unusual answer patterns, and inconsistencies in demographic data.
- **Content checks:** use attention checks, include open-ended questions and assess free-text coherence, and look for repeated or AI-generated phrasing.
- **Live monitoring:** watch for sudden spikes in responses or implausible response volumes.

3.3 During qualitative online data collection

- Conduct a brief pre-interview verification call.
- Require camera-on verification at the start of interviews (where appropriate).
- Check for inconsistencies between survey responses and spoken information.
- Note signs of scripted or externally prompted responses.

3.4 Before distributing incentives

- Conduct all quality checks *prior* to issuing vouchers or payments.
- Maintain records of removed non-genuine responses and the criteria used.
- State clearly in the Participant Information Sheet that incentives are issued only to verified participants. Suggested wording for the Participant Information Sheet: *“Issuing of incentives will occur only after responses have been checked for validity. Non-genuine or duplicate responses will not be eligible for compensation.”*

4. Responsibilities of Researchers and Supervisors

- Include fraud-mitigation procedures in ethics applications.
- Monitor data collection throughout the study and act promptly if irregularities arise.
- Consult UWE’s Research Integrity, Governance and Ethics Manager with concerns (see contact details below).
- Report significant issues to the relevant College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) Chair(s).

5. Additional Resources

- [UWE Bristol Handbook of Research Ethics](#).
- If you have any questions, please reach out to UWE’s Research Integrity, Governance and Ethics Manager [Dr Mateja Celestina](#) in the first instance: Mateja.Celestina@uwe.ac.uk.
- [Dr Kat Schneider](#) leads the Fraud Analysis in Internet Research (FAIR) working group, which is a collaboration between academics, researchers, statisticians, editors, and others at UWE and other national and international institutions. This working group has been established to bring together researchers who are interested in understanding, identifying, and addressing non-genuine responses in online research. If you are interested in joining FAIR, please contact: Kat.Schneider@uwe.ac.uk.

6. Future Development

- This guidance will be updated as sector-wide standards develop. UWE aims to align future versions with national frameworks on non-genuine participation in online research.

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Guidance Author:	Dr Kat Schneider