

SSI POV: Online

Verification in the Online World

- The majority of research participants are engaged and honest in their responses.
- Although “bad” participants have been shown, time and time again, to make no material difference to the survey results, this is not a reason not to be concerned about them, especially since their impact is increased in low-incidence projects.
- Technology enables increasingly accurate identity verification, which is effective in deterring frauds.

The Reason Respondents Cheat?

Verification procedures in telephone and face-to-face interviewing (both at the interview and data entry stage) are usually done as a check on the truthfulness of the interviewer, not the participant. It is the interviewer who has the means, motive, and opportunity to cheat. In online surveys, of course, it is the participant who has the opportunity to cheat. The question is: Why would they do that?

You could imagine that a person would cheat to qualify for a survey, in order to claim a reward. In fact there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that hard-core fraudsters over qualify for interviews. Research also suggests that a large majority of such people are physically located in places where the small rewards or offer from market research are worth a great deal—places like India, China and the Philippines.

“Out-of-Area” Checks Are First Line of Defense Only

For this reason, many research agencies do not allow participants into surveys with “out-of-area” IP addresses. One needs to be careful doing this, however, because if the fraudster finds they are blocked they will find another route into the survey—possibly proxy-hopping to look like they are “in area.” SSI’s quality control product, SSI Verify™ has IP verification functionality built in, as do many other proprietary systems.

SSI Verify also prevents the same “person” doing the same survey more than once, either because they are coming from multiple panels being used on a project or exist multiple times within the same panel. Otherwise “good” participants might be tempted to cheat to get into a survey because a high reward is offered, especially if the invitation gives the game away by telling you how to qualify!

Practical Steps Minimize Fraud

We know, from our own research, that large incentives do not encourage generally better response rates, so we discourage clients from trying to offer them. We also advise against invitation text that says too much about the survey itself. One good idea is to use the questionnaire itself, where possible, to verify that the person is indeed what they claim to be by asking them something that they should know. This is easier to do in business-to-business settings where knowledge-based questions can be asked.

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SSI's Recommendations

Poor data is correlated with speed, so it is a good idea to work out the minimal time it would take to complete the survey with reasonable attention to the questions (remembering that some people make very quick decisions), and look carefully at the data from records faster than this. Look for straightlining on grids and the over use of “don’t know” responses.

It is also good to include statements where agreement with one implies disagreement with the other.