




CATFISHING

Tips & Tricks for Developing IRB Protocols

“Ask RCRA” community forum

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AGENDA

- Define terms related to “catfishing”
- Cover IRB expectations
- Review mitigation strategies
- Explore consent and protocol guidance
- Outline IT solutions
- Resources

SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

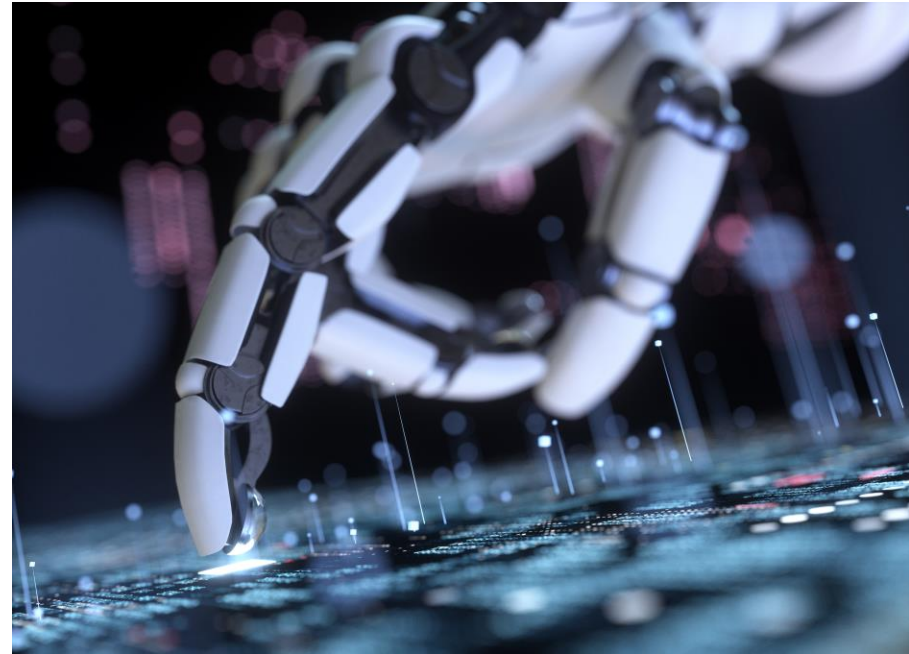
- Research projects are being targeted by bots or malicious actors.
- Specifically, the bots are posing as study participants seeking to gain compensation for completing study surveys.



DEFINING THE PROBLEM

“[I]ndividuals, groups, or computer processes (i.e. bots) participating in online, internet, or web-based data collection methods at a statistically significant level, such that data are or would be measurably distorted.”

Johnson, M. S., Adams, V. M., Byrne, J. (2024). Addressing fraudulent responses in online surveys: Insights from a web-based participatory mapping study. *People and Nature*, 6, 147 - 164. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10557>



DEFINING THE PROBLEM

“Survey respondents who: a) are ineligible respondents due to the study specifications; b) take the survey repeatedly to either distort results or take advantage of incentives; and/or c) are potentially eligible but have responded in a way that may challenge the validity of survey results or noticeably distort research data.”

Arthur, W., Hagen, E., & George, F. (2021). The lazy or dishonest respondent: Detection and prevention. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 8(1), 105–137. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012420-055324>



ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The IRB is tasked with ensuring that research participants receive adequate information related to the study, including information regarding withdrawal and/or compensation.

The IRB ensures that recruitment is fair and equitable, with a systematic approach to collecting data from participants.

IRB CONCERNS



- Potential misuse of funds, since study teams may compensate bad actors.
- Potential non-compliance with consent terms, if a decision is made to withhold compensation after survey completion.
- Tracking enrollment becomes difficult when there is a lack of clarity about what constitutes valid data.
- A subjective and inconsistent approach to determining legitimacy of response raises ethical concerns.

IMPACT ON RESEARCH DESIGN

Recruitment/Screening Plans

Consent Process

Procedures

Compensation

Post approval monitoring

Policy on withdrawal

Data integrity

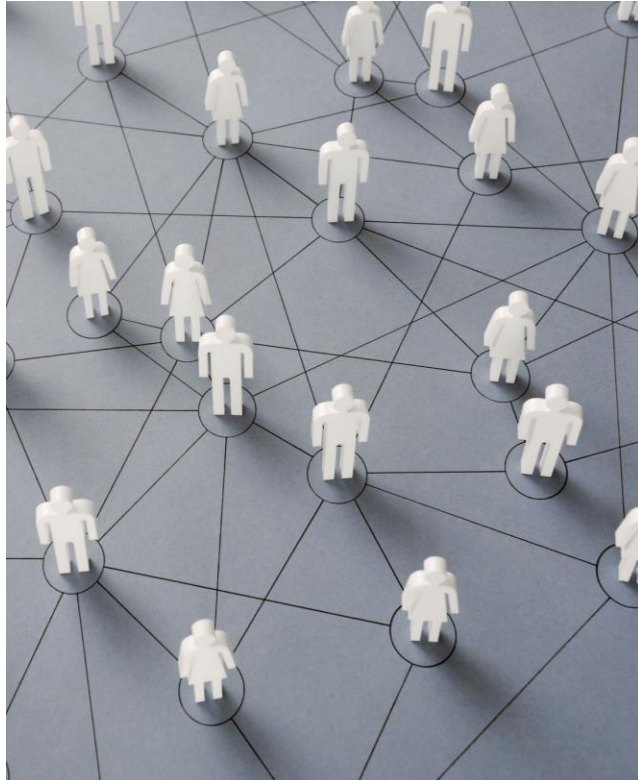
Statistical analysis



REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

- Participants using fake cartoon character names
- Survey bots that respond with fake values and submit the survey multiple times in an attempt to receive compensation
- Adults posing as children
- Inconsistencies between pre screener/in person interaction/surveys responses from what should be static info (e.g; age, race)
- Incomplete or jibberish responses

PROTOCOL ELEMENTS

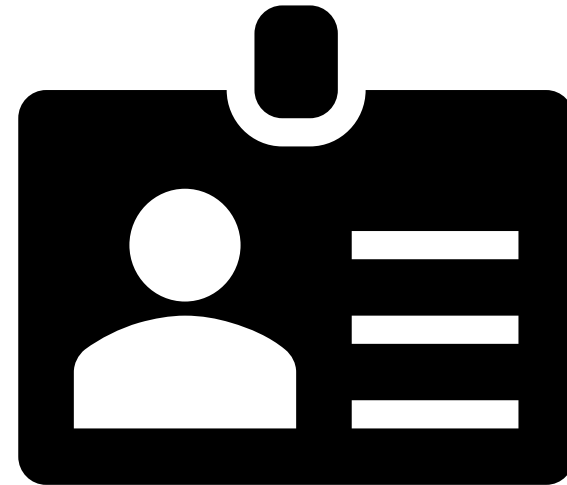


Template Prompts:

- Include details on mitigation strategies to avoid inclusion of erroneous data. This can include steps to avoid in addition to plans for monitoring survey responses
- Be clear about plans for managing data (e.g.; maintain in a separate data set, retain for analysis, etc.)
- Develop a compensation plan that outlines scenarios where respondents will/will not be paid, or if a suspicious response automatically disqualifies the respondent from payment.
- Consider an upper limit of compensation for hourly paid surveys

PROTOCOL ELEMENTS INVOLVING HUMAN INTERACTIONS

- Tie it back to initial screener responses
- Ask for ID once on camera
- Ask participants to be in camera for all Zoom sessions
- Have a plan/process for ending the research interaction if the respondent is deemed ineligible
- If the study includes multiple interactions, ask a similar open-ended question at each encounters to check for consistency



CONSENT ELEMENTS

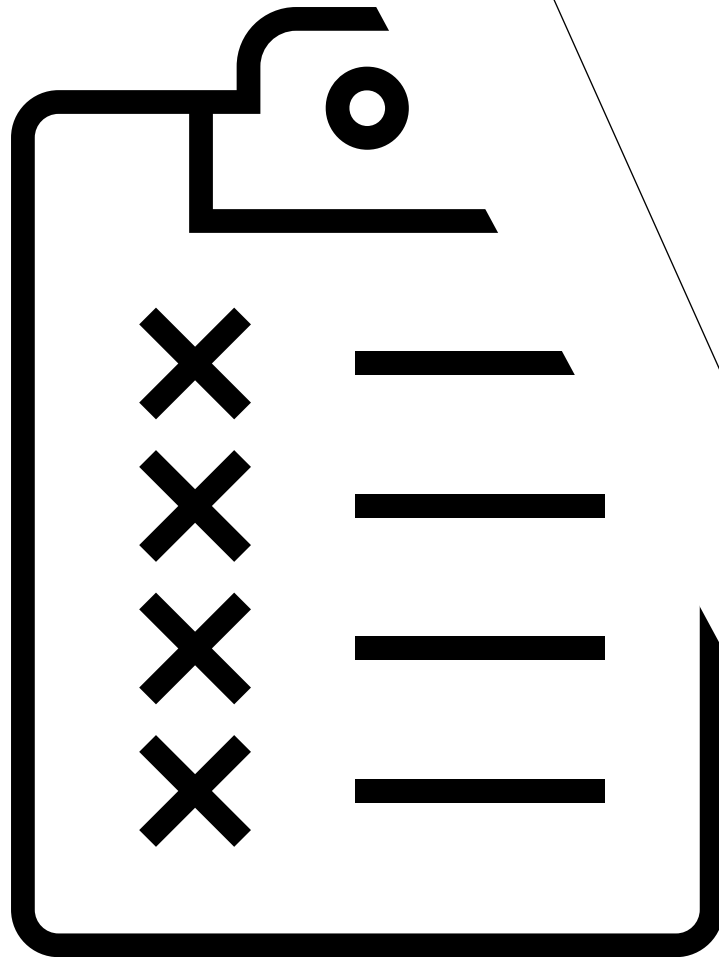


Template Prompts:

Inform potential participants that there will be active monitoring for fraudulent responses.

Include details on what actions will be taken if the checks for accuracy conclude that responses are not legitimate. This should consider whether it results in withdrawal and/or a decision not to compensate.

The protocol should detail plans on managing any issues related to fraudulent responses. For example, plans for techniques to assess and operationalize once the issue is encountered.



RED FLAGS

As noted previously, it's critical to have a *systematic* approach to reviewing survey responses. It shouldn't be based on a subjective analysis.

Some possible issues that raise concern:

- (1) unanswered required questions or requests;
- (2) inconsistent responses to identical questions;
- (3) incomplete surveys;
- (4) impossible data values (e.g., asked for age listed 103);
- (5) illogical responses to open-ended questions.

ENROLLMENT TRACKING

- The IRB defines enrollment as consent. As a result, fraudulent responses would **not** constitute valid consent from an individual.
- Plan to write a “note to file” to document the plans to eliminate fraudulent data

Note: Don't destroy the data, even if not included for final analysis.

TECHNICAL TIPS

Note: REDCap specific, SOME suggestions *may* apply to other survey tools but will depend on the functionality available in the specific tool.

Enabling the reCAPTCHA feature in the project requiring all users to fill out a simple math problem to alleviate bots.

Use the email address as an identifier and ask the participant to provide this email at the beginning and end of the survey. If the provided emails do not match, you can eliminate the participant.

Use fields to capture the survey start and end times and calculate total response time. A field that calculates total response time can be used to flag outliers via reporting and other mechanisms.

Use the @HIDDEN tag to hide a multiple choice field within the survey. If this field is filled out, you can assume the response is from a bot.

Collect demographic information/criteria in the first instrument, then manually send out surveys/forms to participants that match the criteria.

·Add a small set of “challenge” questions at the start of a public survey that real participants would answer .

REPORTING ISSUES TO IRB

Report to the IRB as Reportable New Information (RNI) in study workspace

Approved

STUDY00000003: Re-Treatments with Ritum

Principal investigator: Wesley Becker (pi9)
Submission type: Initial Study
Primary contact: Wesley Becker (pi9)
PI proxies: Rebecca Simms (pi)

IRB office: IRB Office 1
IRB coordinator: Orlando Max (irbc)
Letter: Correspondence_for_STUDY00000003.pdf
Regulatory authority: Pre-2018 Requirements

Entered IRB: 2/21/2019 4:19 PM
Initial approval: 2/21/2019
Initial effective: 2/21/2019
Effective: 2/21/2019
Approval end: 2/20/2020
Last updated: 3/1/2019 3:11 PM

Next Steps

- View Study
- Printer Version
- Create Modification/CR
- Report New Information**
- Assign Primary Contact
- Assign PI Proxy
- Manage Ancillary Reviews

Workflow: Pre-Submission → Pre-Review → IRB Review → Post-Review → Review. Clarification Requested and Modifications Required are feedback loops between stages.

History

Activity	Author	Activity
Letter Sent	Max (irbc), Orlando	2/21/2019
Correspondence_for_STUDY00000003.pdf		
IRB Coordinator Assigned	Max (irbc), Orlando	2/21/2019

RESOURCES

1. Technical support for [REDCap](#) or [Qualtrics](#)
2. Guidance coming soon from both ORA and OIT
3. IRB Protocol [Templates](#)
4. Consent [Templates](#)





QUESTIONS FOR THE IRB?

General inquiries: IRB@emory.edu

Study-specific inquiries: Please contact your study analyst directly.

For Education/Outreach questions, Complaints from study participants, Compliance, and Adverse Event issues, please [contact the Education and Quality Assurance Team.](#)