

# RESPECTING RESPONDENTS

Why respondent centric research drives quality insights

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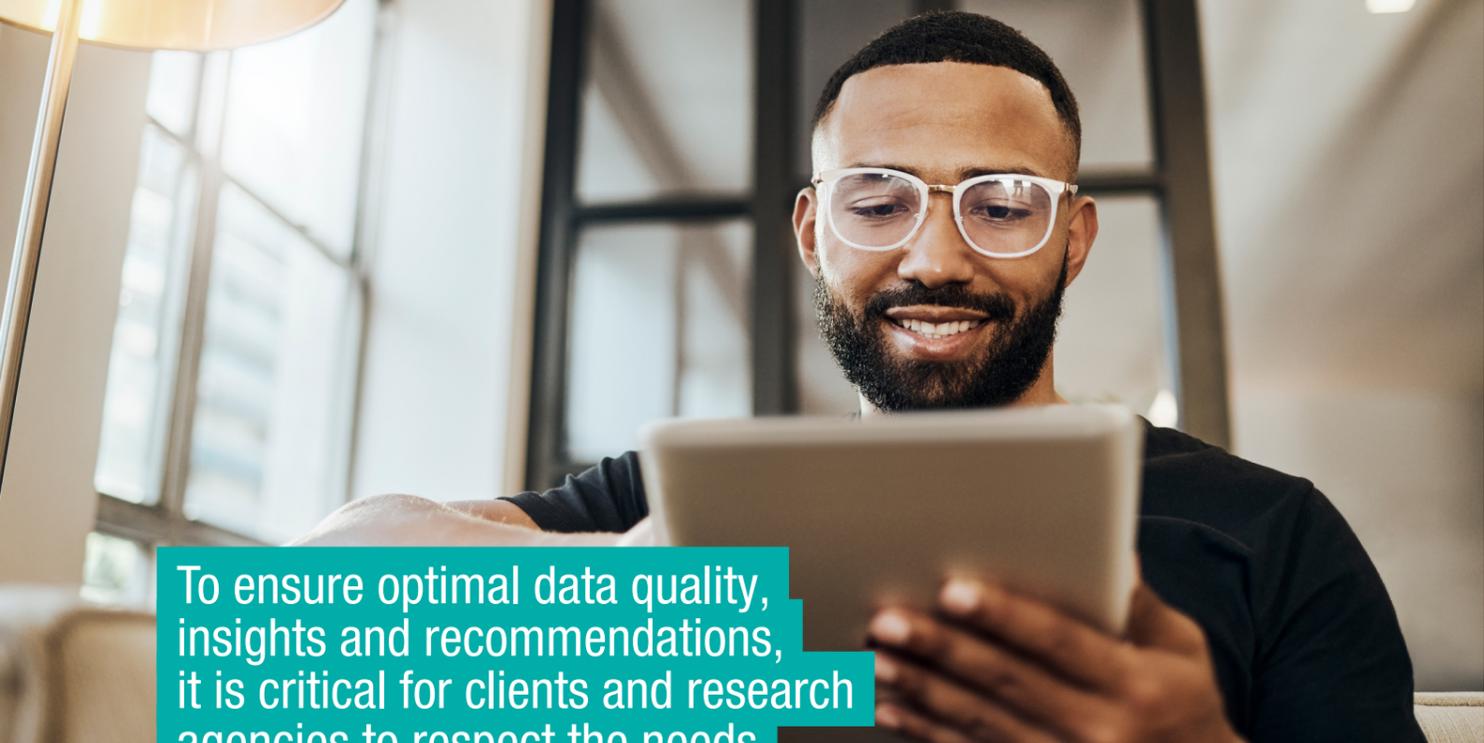
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**IPSOS  
VIEWS**

**GAME CHANGERS**





To ensure optimal data quality, insights and recommendations, it is critical for clients and research agencies to respect the needs of research participants. ”

## INTRODUCTION

In market research, there are always three parties to each research study – the client, the research agency and the research participant. The research agency is a facilitator that needs to understand their clients’ business needs to deliver the right insights to impact the right decisions. Without engaged and interested research participants there are no meaningful recommendations. To ensure optimal data quality, insights and recommendations, it is critical for clients and research agencies to respect the needs of research participants.

Leveraging panellist data, this paper seeks to share the four Cs of research design that will deliver the best quality insights for clients, while maintaining a respondent centric approach.

This article will explore:

- The elements of the explicit and implied **contract** expected by panellists, which implies
- **Choice** in what they do in the moments they have available for research
- The need to allow panellists **control** in their research experience
- And their expectations that research be **considerate** of them as individuals

## CONTEXT

In advance of exploring the components of the contract research participants expect, there is a need to contextualise the broader digital ecosystem within which these research participants engage which underwent significant shifts over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Pew, nine-in-ten US adults suggest the internet has been essential or important for them during the pandemic, with two-in-five suggesting, as a result, they have used the internet in a new or different way.<sup>1</sup> From online shopping to online streaming, and the boon of new social medias, like Tik Tok, the impact of technological shifts following the pandemic is most poignantly demonstrated in the speed at which ChatGPT reached one million users. In 2022, it took five days for ChatGPT to reach that mark, a significant difference to Instagram which took two and a half

months to reach one million downloads in 2010, and two and a half years for Airbnb to reach one million nights booked in 2008.<sup>2</sup>

Online market research sits within this ever-evolving ecosystem. An ecosystem where people can talk directly to manufacturers, marketers and decision makers through social media and other communities without a research agency intermediary. Is market research evolving quickly enough? Participating in research is far less appealing to millennials than it is to older generations, survey failure rates are on the rise, and survey abandons continue to climb. To mitigate these challenges, to attract younger respondents and prevent poor survey behaviours, like fraud and disengagement, the panellist contract and its components need to be built into and delivered in every study design.

## LIVING THE CONTRACT WITH RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In many ways, the “job contract” a research agency has with its research participants is quite formal, especially when those participants are impanelled and have agreed to Terms and Conditions and Privacy Policies. Their expectation is that their data and privacy will be protected (especially post-GDPR), their answers will be anonymised when used exclusively for the stated research purposes, and that their data will be deleted after a period. But in addition to the stated elements of the contract, there are implied rules of engagement such as in providing their personal information, research participants will be able choose what makes most sense for them,

will have some semblance of control over their experience, and that the market research industry will consider both their time and needs.

“ I like to have my opinion heard, as it also makes me think more of the world around me.

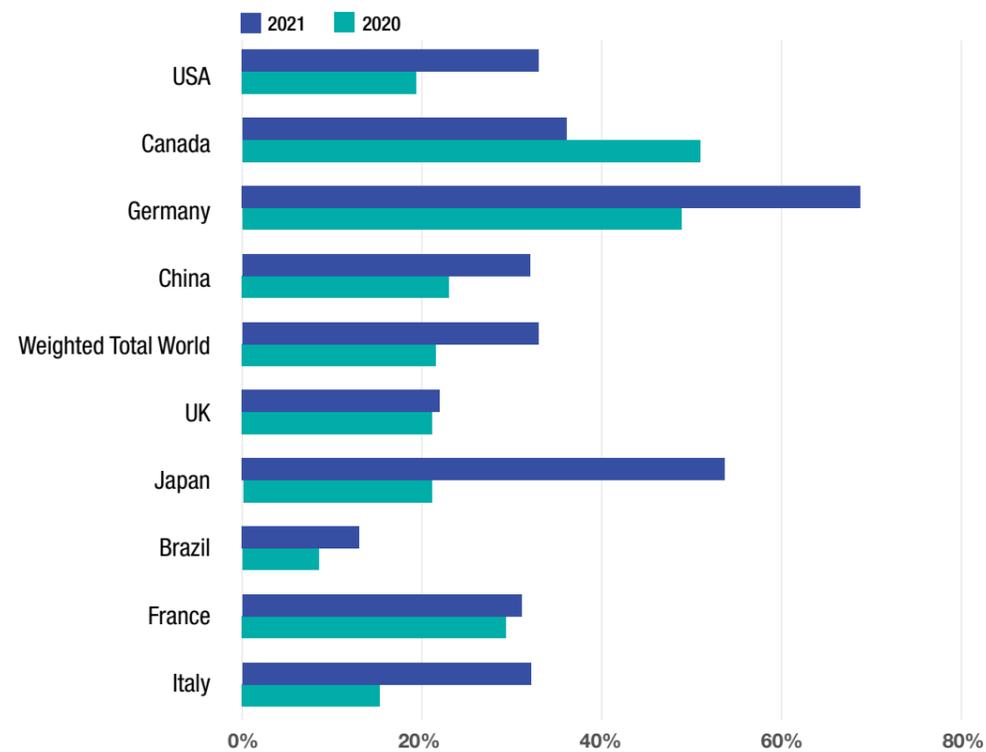
“ I find taking the surveys to be pretty rewarding. I take my “job” seriously and do a thorough job, always answering to the best of my abilities.

To that effect, the pool of individuals willing to participate in market research is finite, while the share of online surveys is increasing overall, together with the overall market research industry. And given it is a finite pool, it has increased the pressure on these individuals to complete surveys. Therefore, it is critical to keep those who are willingly engaged, and willing to complete additional surveys honestly and to the best of their ability. **The organisation that is most respondent centric will be able to attract and retain the most engaged research participants** – those participants who provide the best quality data and answers.

When research is not designed to be an optimal experience, that minimises fatigue and frustration, the risks include abandonment, distracted or banded answers, or at worst, providing the opportunity to fraudulent respondents who disproportionately gain access to surveys which many other research participants do not want to complete. The unfortunate consequence could be the wrong business decision.

Respondent centric research is therefore designed to align with the job contract and recognize participants desire for choice, control, and consideration.

Figure 1: % of surveys conducted online



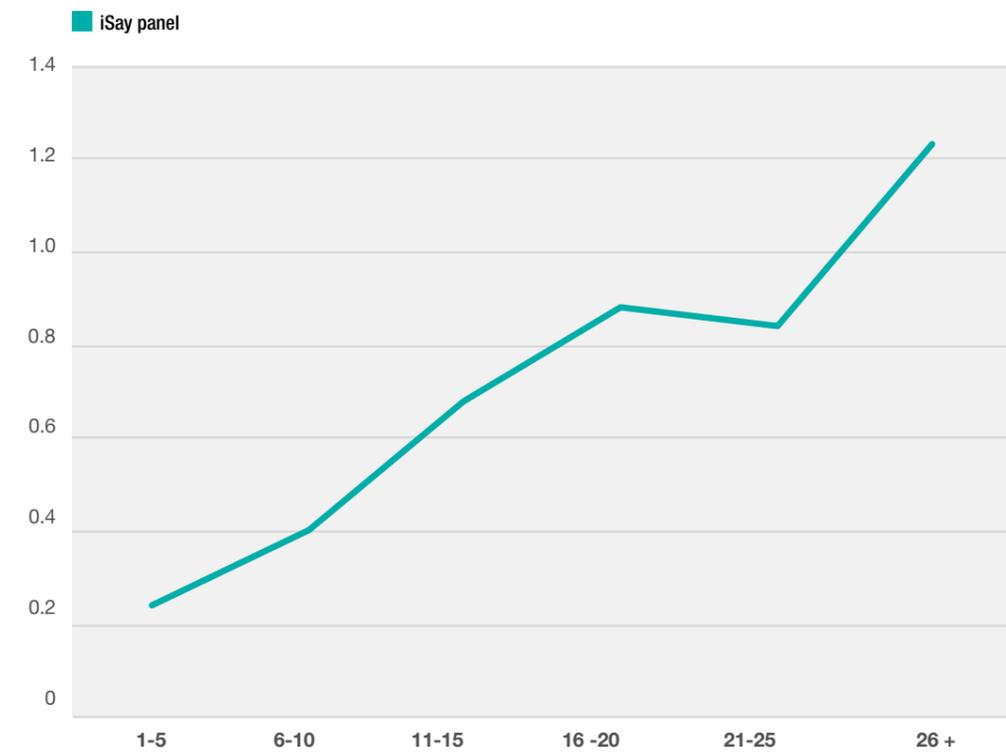
Source: Esomar Report 2021/2022 (note: with Esomar reporting increasing MR turnaround in all countries)

## HOW RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS CHOOSE THEIR SURVEY EXPERIENCE

Participants are first and foremost humans. They have limited amounts of time and interest to dedicate to research and have very real preferences when it comes to research topics. Participants make different study choices at different times based on what is currently best for them. It is well documented that online interviews over 15 or 20 minutes are subject to greater abandonment. Once a survey exceeds 20 minutes, one participant is lost for every participant that completes (a 50% failure rate).

That said, if given details about length of interview, the ability to understand the progress made throughout the survey, and the potential points available, respondents will choose to participate in a longer survey for more points. Ideally for them, that experience would be a survey on a topic they truly enjoy and without any potential challenges, such as additional tasks, or several grids, repetitive loops, or open ends.

Figure 2: Abandon rate per length of interview



Source: Ipsos Analysis on Abandons: Jan 1 – May 10 2022 N= 37,990 records



“ I love testing new products and then seeing them hit the shelves.

“ I love giving my opinion and hearing how the surveys are used on the news etc. I love product testing and diary surveys.

“ I like being able to influence products and services it's so much fun.

A recent research-on-research study demonstrates that in a gamified, choice-based experiment, in both North America and Europe, research participants will choose exactly this experience: a long survey with more points, on a topic that they enjoy, especially when they know the progress they have made. When directly asked, this holds true.

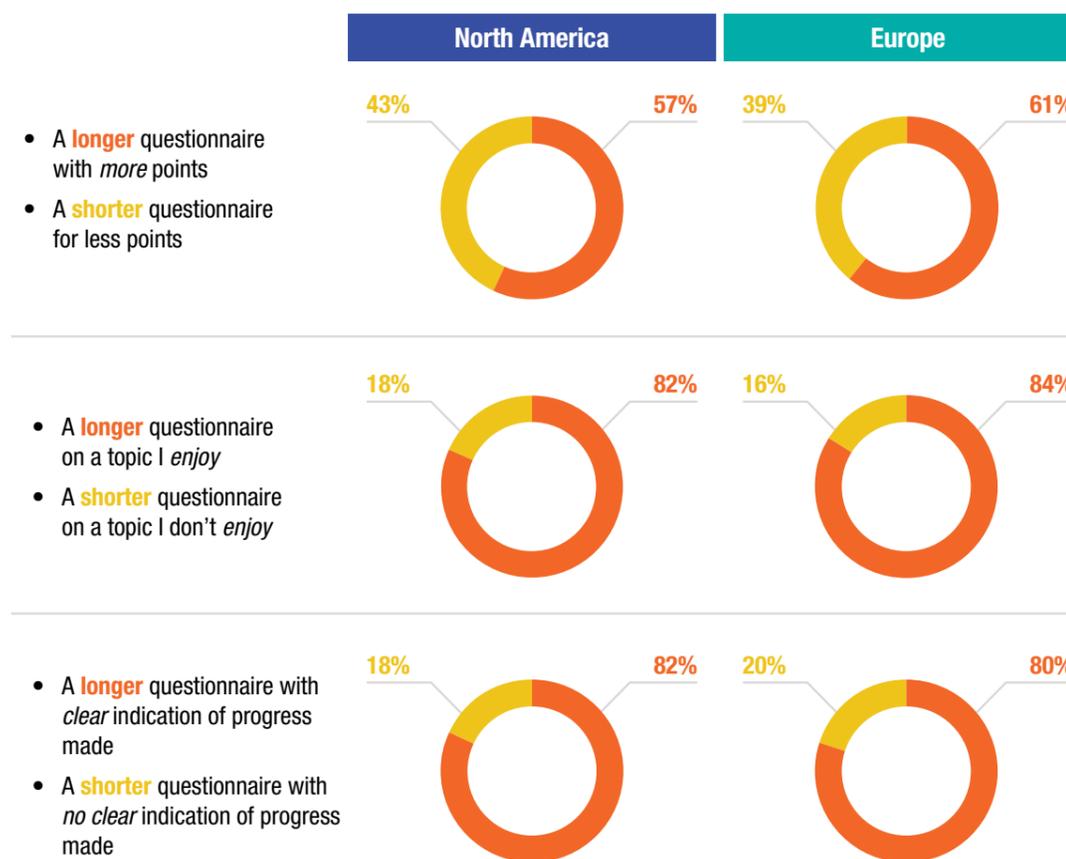
Participants are first and foremost humans. They have limited amounts of time and interest to dedicate to research and have very real preferences when it comes to research topics. ”

Figure 3: Panellists' gamified choice-based ranking of survey experiences

	North America	Europe
 Most chosen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>long</b> questionnaire with <i>more</i> points</li> <li>A <b>long</b> questionnaire on a topic I <i>enjoy</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>long</b> questionnaire with <i>more</i> points</li> <li>A <b>long</b> questionnaire on a topic I <i>enjoy</i></li> </ul>
 Least chosen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>short</b> questionnaire with <i>technical challenges</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <b>short</b> questionnaire with <i>technical challenges</i></li> <li>A <b>short</b> questionnaire with <i>no</i> indication of progress made</li> </ul>

Source: Ipsos online study conducted with n=2,826 Ipsos iSay panellists between April 7 and April 18, 2023

Figure 4: Panellists' direct choice of survey experiences



Source: Ipsos online study conducted with n=2,826 Ipsos iSay panellists between April 7 and April 18, 2023



## WHO COMPRISES THE RESPONDENT POOL

It is important to create surveys and systems with participants in mind. In addition, there is a need to ensure research ecosystems eliminate respondents that have no intention of volunteering good survey data, and only want to “game” the system.

Ipsos invests on three fronts: eliminating bad quality respondents, creating surveys and survey ecosystems that nurture good respondents. Bad behaviour is a spectrum, so our classification system primarily relies on the way participants behave and on their motivation.

### GOOD RESPONDENTS

Participants who are really who they say they are and make no or few mistakes in a questionnaire. They can – and will - show signs of fatigue or inattention, particularly toward the latter parts of a questionnaire, if said questionnaire does not provide a good respondent experience. However, they can be – with the right questionnaire – be “perfect”.

### OVERSTATERS

Participants willing to exaggerate during our screening process; they will overstate their interest/past participation to qualify during screening but then will provide - at least partially - correct answers with no or few mistakes.

### UNDERCLICKERS

Participants who cut corners, to avoid additional questions. Rather than acknowledging four brands used, a respondent might choose to declare only two, to avoid being pulled into loops and follow-up questions.

### INATTENTIVE RESPONDENTS

Participants who do not pay attention to certain types of questions. For example, they do not give coherent answers in grid questions or across similar questions within the questionnaire flow.

## FRAUDULENT RESPONDENTS

Individuals who intentionally misrepresent themselves, and knowingly provide incorrect, made-up answers. They typically demonstrate multiple types of low engagement behaviour as defined above. Their objective is simply to accumulate financial rewards.

Benchmarking studies are regularly conducted across various panels leveraging a reliable and impartial tool for assessment to better understand the quality of the data collected. While fraud is hard to measure, because the fraudulent respondents take a lot of care in trying to disguise themselves, we can gauge how large a group they may be.

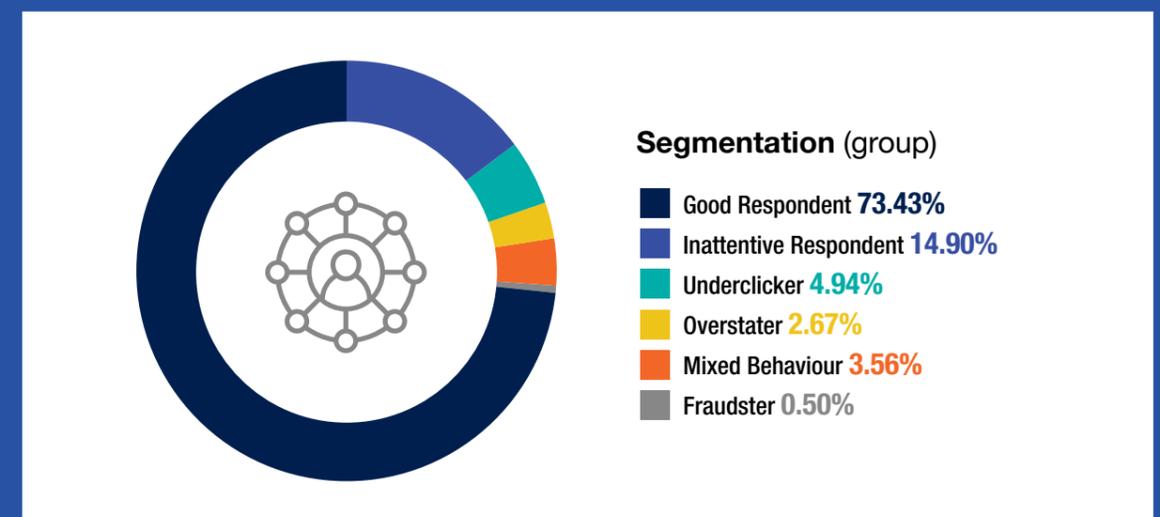
Leveraging data collected through a proprietary system (which allows us to check and control the behaviour of respondents before they start a project), the relative importance of each group

can be estimated. It can be estimation of the relative importance of each of these different group (the system allows us to neutralize the possible influence of the survey design).

The overall conclusion is that most of the people taking part in surveys behave well. Inattentive participants (i.e., those failing grid questions) as well as underclickers are contributing the most to our low-quality spectrum. A smaller portion shows mixed behaviour (i.e., more than one suboptimal behaviour) or outright fraudulent activity.

This does not account for duplication as deduplication is handled at an earlier stage of the process, before respondents access the platform. This also does not account for the in-study quality systems, which are managed separately.

Figure 7: % of different sub-optimal respondent types within Ipsos Trap Module



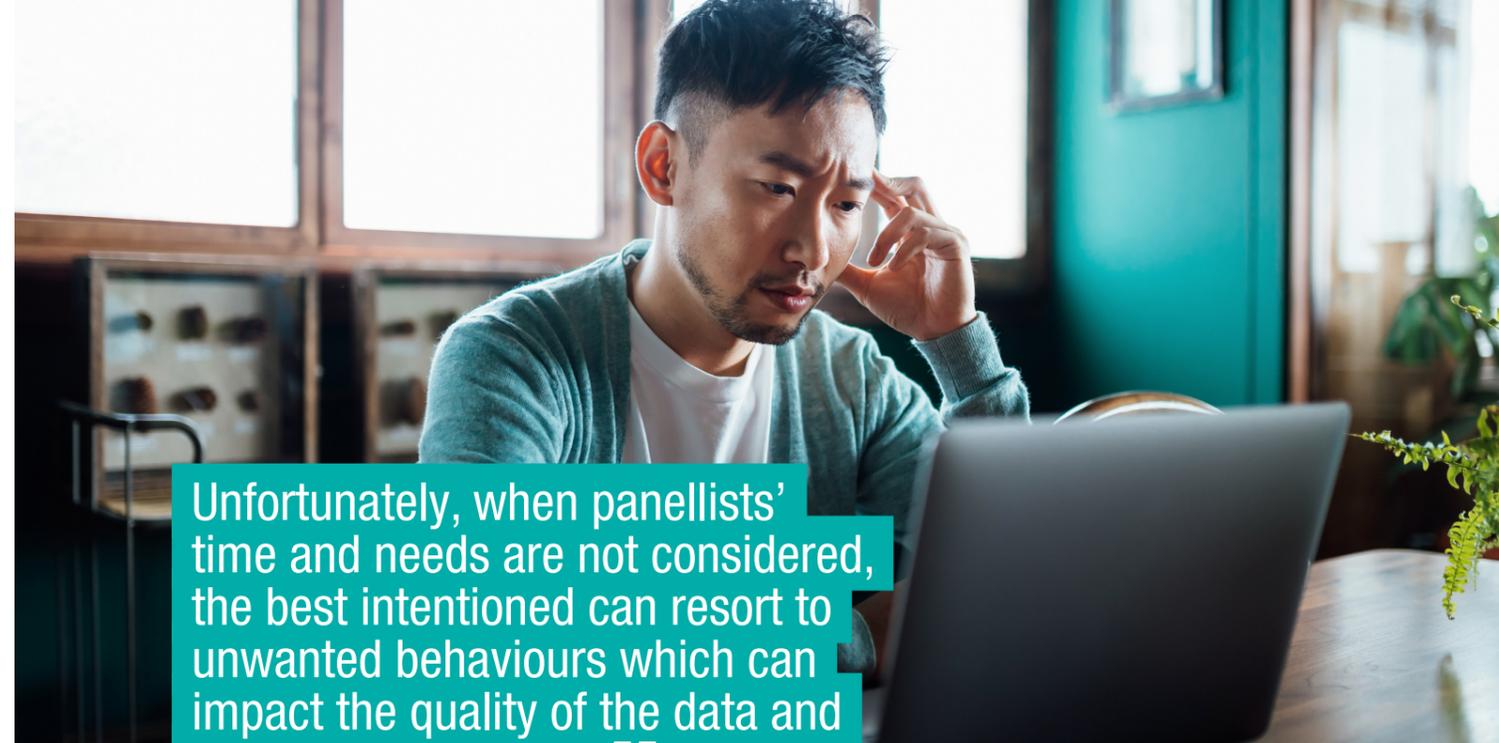
Source: Ipsos Trap Module – pre-survey quality measure N=370,383; countries: US/UK/AU/NZ/IN

## A DESIRE FOR CONTROL AND CONSIDERATION

Most panellists, regardless of region, want to give good quality responses. In both North America and Europe, the overwhelming majority of panellists (97%) appreciate offering their opinion and feedback and enjoy being a part of the panel (96%). That said, when put in a position where the design of the questions does not allow them to answer to the best of their ability, whether by making them feel that they are not in control of the experience, or by giving them the impression that their opinions and time are not considered valuable nor important,

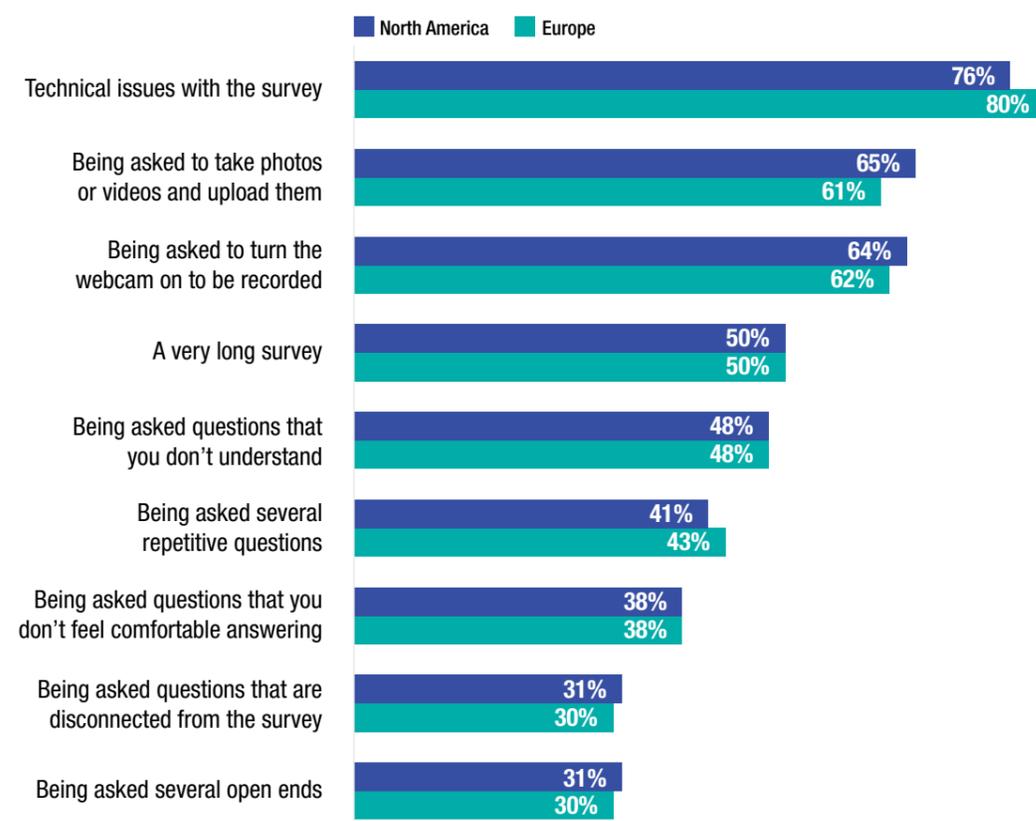
becomes a source of frustration. These are the second and third of the implied elements of the “job contract” that panellists desire.

In the same gamified, choice-based experiment, in both North America and Europe, research participants’ least favourable experiences reflect these implied elements of control and considerations. Technical issues are a major pain point, but since these are occasional, study design issues are the major drivers of dissatisfaction.



Unfortunately, when panellists’ time and needs are not considered, the best intentioned can resort to unwanted behaviours which can impact the quality of the data and subsequent insights. ”

Figure 5: Issues that would force a panellist to leave a study



Source: Ipsos online study conducted with n=2,826 Ipsos iSay panellists between April 7 and April 18, 2023

Sometimes, participants have no control over the responses they are forced to give. Examples include, when they do not understand the questions being asked, are being asked questions to which they cannot answer easily or honestly (because there is no appropriate choice), or that they feel are far too sensitive or intrusive. Furthermore, there can be a sense of frustration, and lack of consideration, when asked repeated questions about something to which they have already directly stated of having no knowledge or being asked for sensitive information. Finally, panellists may also feel cheated if what is promised to be a 15 to 20 minute survey is extended by repetitive loops.

“ Surveys where you cannot give an accurate answer due to poor questions and inaccurate content.

“ Sometimes the questions get super repetitive and one has to answer the same set of questions against multiple brands. It

gets very repetitive and one is unsure how the quality of data gathered can be assured.

“ I don't always enjoy the repetitive questions that make a ten minute survey turn in to 30+ minutes. I also don't like answering questions for a brands that I've heard of but haven't used. I can't provide enough information on them.

“ Feels like a trustworthy site, but I object to giving sensitive personal financial information for pennies.

As the survey experience starts with screening, it is important to consider what is truly necessary during this process. It is very easy for panellists to sense a of loss of control or lack of consideration during screening, especially if the screener is long enough that panellists feel like they have completed an entire study before they are told they are not a good fit. This can readily be mitigated through the use of industry

or agency specific standard screeners which can typically be pre-filled without a panellist needing to answer them and are designed to be considerate of all respondents. In addition, study specific screening questions should be kept to the absolute minimum.

Unfortunately, when panellists' time and needs are not considered, the best intentioned can resort to unwanted behaviours which can impact the quality of the data and subsequent insights. Examples, just to name a few, include exaggerating their experiences, volunteering less information to avoid overly long surveys, choosing the top scale point throughout a list

of attributes (regardless of whether it makes sense), differences in ratings after very long lists or several repetitive loops, or differing levels of study abandonment based on device and age. And even good participants can make mistakes if they become inattentive due to a survey they do not appreciate.

“The most annoying thing is when I spend five or ten minutes answering a survey honestly then get screened out right at the end and not rewarded.

“Surveys that don't give you a none option or the questions are leading

## LIVING UP TO PANELLISTS' EXPECTATIONS

Respondent centric research is the responsibility of everyone involved in the design of a research study, including clients, research agencies and the operations team executing the research. But respondent centric research design will result in the best possible insights to answer critical business questions, because participants will remain engaged and not abandon, answer to the best of their ability and truthfully. In addition, it will support faster insights as studies could potentially be completed more efficiently. Every time we keep a good participant engaged

and completing a study, we mitigate the risk of allowing fraudulent respondents enter, at worst, or at minimum, reducing the number of inattentive participants.

The first rule of being respondent centric is to design studies that everyone would be willing to spend time completing, such as family members or friends. Studies must be relevant within current online environment, where social media, appified experiences and bite-sized content are the norm. In addition, studies must recognise

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## HOW TO OPTIMISE TO PROTECT AGAINST OVER-CLICKERS

### UNDISGUISED B2C SCREENER

Have you bought a car in the last six months?

- Yes
- No *[Terminate]*

### UNDISGUISED B2B SCREENER

Thinking about your business or professional activity, are you responsible for the relationship with your company's banks and financial services?

- Yes
- No *[Terminate]*



### DISGUISED B2C SCREENER

Which of the following have applied to you in the last six months?

Select all that apply

- Adopted a pet
- Flew internationally
- Bought a car
- Opened a new bank account
- None of the above

### DISGUISED B2B SCREENER

Thinking about your business or professional activity, are you responsible for the following

- Relationships with hiring professionals
- Relationships with market research vendors
- Relationships with banks/financial service providers
- Relationships with advertising agencies

Answers

- Yes, on my own
- Yes, jointly
- No *[Terminate]*



what is reasonable for every individual to complete regardless of device, keeping in mind most surveys are taken on a mobile.

panellists know this information is stored, and question why they need to continue to answer non-standard questions.

Best practices for respondent research design include:

1. Given the advancements in the online digital ecosystem, future proofing research will require more constant iteration than previously necessary. At a minimum, a study should be designed to be mobile first, not just device agnostic. If a study has been running without redesign for five or more years, it is necessary to start thinking of how to adapt to current requirements. For more information, please review [Mobile First Survey Design: How to future-proof your research](#).

2. Prioritise only the essential questions and meaningful timelines, especially at the screening phase. If the data point, or question will not be used for analysis, reconsider including it in the study.

3. Use industry or agency specific standard screeners to maximise the participants experience and minimise time answering questions. In an online environment,

4. Use a variety of different question types to keep participants active and engaged.

5. Minimise repetition, and loops. It has been demonstrated that participants will volunteer more information if asked about fewer items.

6. To reduce respondent fatigue, aim for a study that is 15 minutes or shorter, with no more than 50 questions, and no more than a few grids and/or open ends.

7. And for the sake of better quality data, always disguise the study topic and the qualifying criteria.

To ensure online market research is sustainable, it is crucial to invest in positive respondent experiences that maintain high levels of respondent engagement. In the end this is a more effective approach than solely focusing on eliminating undesirable respondents.

Research can be client centric and respondent centric. To consider both stakeholders ensures the best possible outcome – the right decision made.

## REFERENCES

1. McClain, C., Vogels, E.A., Perrin, A., Sechopoulos, S., Rainie, L.. “The Internet and the Pandemic.” 1 September, 2021. Pew Research Center <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/09/01/the-internet-and-the-pandemic/>
2. <https://www.statista.com/chart/29174/time-to-one-million-users/>

## FURTHER READING



1. Mobile First Survey Design: How to future-proof your research <https://www.ipsos.com/en/mobile-first-survey-design>



2. Trust in Research: Fostering trust, advocacy and motivation among research participants <https://www.ipsos.com/en/trust-research>

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