How I conducted my Experiment sessions online through ESSL

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I did my first study online across 12 sessions. Below are the steps I followed and certain experiences I had through the sessions. I hope this will be helpful for someone planning a study online.

1. I coded my experiment in oTree. The code was just as it would be for a lab session, except I had to be careful with each page's timeout seconds. Timeout seconds allow the session to continue even if a subject gets disconnected or drops out.

2. I used the Rooms feature in oTree to enter the list of participants for every session.

3. The app was uploaded online using Heroku and deployed using oTree Hub. I just went with the free basic version.

4. Once everything was ready, I invited participants through the ESSL Sona system. My smallest session was with 12 participants, and the largest was with 36 participants. My session was synchronized, so participants had to wait for others to move forward. I found 24 to be the optimal session size as the total time increases in the number of participants. About 75% of the sign-ups turned up for their session.

5. The study website was a simple google form that collected payment information. The participants could access it after signing up.

6. One day before the session, I sent every participant who had submitted the google form, their unique participant label. I generated these labels through random character and number generator on Excel. I sent these emails using Excel hyperlink function, and there are more efficient ways to do that (ranging from Outlook and word to Python). Below is a screenshot of an email I had sent.

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Participant Label for ESSL Study #2020-04 Inbox ×

Nishtha Sharma <nishths@uci.edu>   Sat, Aug 1, 4:32 AM (9 days ago)
to pereraa1

Dear Adriana

Your unique Participant Label for the session is CK16
Your Venmo id is @Adriana-Perera

Your session is scheduled for Saturday, August 1st at 11:30 am. It will last for 60-90 minutes.
I will send you the study link at 11:10 am i.e., 20 minutes before the session begins.

Please click on that link and enter your Participant label.

Then, you will have to wait for the session to begin.

Please refresh the page 2 minutes before the session begins (i.e., at 11:28 am), to make sure that you are identified by the system and are still connected.

If you enter after 11:30 am, you will not be able to participate.

Please email me if you have any questions or concerns.

Best,
Nishtha

7. For those who had signed up but not submitted the payment information form, I sent them an email requesting it.

8. 20 minutes before the session, I emailed the session link to everyone (bcc) who had signed up and sent the payment information. This link is available on oTree Hub after deploying the app. It remains the same for every session, but I would update the list of participant labels in the rooms tab before deploying the app and resetting the database for each session.

LINK TO PARTICIPATE - MUST OPEN ON A LAPTOP/COMPUTER   ⬍ 🖶 ⬀

Inbox ×

Nishtha Sharma <nishths@uci.edu>   Sat, Aug 1, 11:39 PM (9 days ago)   ☆ ↩ ⋮
to bcc: dericc, bcc: Anganette, bcc: dcojuang, bcc: Diana, bcc: sjgong, bcc: khorn1, bcc: nhovekea, bcc: Daniel, bcc: rcignaci, bcc: ▾

Hi,

Please click on this link to enter the study. You will have to enter your Participant Label given earlier.

https://contest-grad.herokuapp.com/room/Contest/

You will see a Wait Screen until the session begins.

The session will start at 11:30 am. Make sure that you are online and on that page at 11:30 am. The session will last for about one hour.

REFRESH YOUR SCREEN AT 11:28 AM, TO ENSURE THAT YOU ARE NOT DROPPED OUT OR YOUR INTERNET DID NOT GET DISCONNECTED.

Please close all other browsers and windows. Also, please do not start if you think that you may not be able to finish, and email me to let me know in that case.

Email me if you have any questions.

Best,
Nishtha

9. I stayed online and monitored each session throughout. Many participants send emails during the session. Most of the emails I received were about wait times and if it was normal. Most subjects patiently wait online after they receive a reply to their email. I had one session where one subject told me and dropped out in the middle. The most efficient way to handle that situation was to participate on their behalf. I used the same session link and entered that subject's participant label on my computer to pop right back where they had dropped out. I had to drop the data associated with that participant label and whoever interacted with them, but it helped with avoiding a super long session. Another case was when someone dropped out without informing me, and timeout seconds had to move them forward, although that is a bit slower as it operates on every page. When I'd see no activity by a participant label for a while, I'd send them a "Are you still actively participating?" email. That helped as a nudge in some cases. In short, I had to be alert and available during the session.

10. After the session is over, I get the pdf of payments due to each participant label. (I would also have an excel/csv file of this information as my experiment sessions had "payment info" as the last app in the app sequence. So, the data from this app only had the participant labels and payoffs.) Then I just pulled in the payoffs from this file to the one with the payment information by matching the participant labels.

11. Then, I paid them manually using their preferred payment method (Usually Venmo, sometimes Paypal or Quickpay with Zelle). I recorded this in Sona as comments. I marked those who signed up but did

not turn up as Unexcused No-Show.

This summarizes my experience collecting data from 242 subjects over 12 online sessions. There might be better ways to do it, and there must be scope for improvement to make it more efficient.