

Template Ethical Review Board

The setup of the panel was ethically approved by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee (SMEC) (G-2023-6742).

Background and objectives of The Social Study

The Social Study (TSS) is an academically driven online data collection infrastructure owned by all 11 Belgian universities and designed to promote longitudinal and interdisciplinary survey research in the social and behavioral sciences. This Belgian online probability panel is a representative panel of about ± 5000 individuals (so-called panel members) living in private households in Belgium, aged 16 years and older. Panel members participate in 6 to 10 short surveys (15-20 minutes) per year, online or offline with paper and pencil.

The Social Study panel allows to study (changes in) the living conditions, attitudes, and behavior of people in Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital Region. High standards of data quality are explicitly pursued. The research infrastructure supports the broader behavioral and social sciences research community in Belgium in its social mission to conduct relevant and high-quality scientific research.

Sampling and recruitment

The Social Survey relies on a permanent panel of individuals that is representative of 16 years old or older Belgian residents. The panel counts $\pm 5,000$ panelists. In order for this research panel to be representative, a random sample was drawn from the Belgian National Register of Natural Persons by a Trusted Third Party.

In order to do this, TSS applied a two-stage cluster sample, by first randomly selecting boroughs (NIS6) as primary sampling units (proportional to population size and with replacement), and subsequently randomly selecting persons from each selected borough (with the number of selected persons per primary sampling unit varying according to the number of sampling points and the expected response rates in the primary sampling unit). At the first stage, 800 sampling points were randomly selected, clustered within boroughs, explicitly stratified by regions and provinces, and implicitly stratified by target population size. At the second stage, persons within each of the primary sampling points were randomly selected by a systematic random sampling procedure with equal inclusion probabilities, implicitly stratified by age and gender. For each sampling point, between 13 and 22 persons were drawn, depending on the expected response rate in the urbanicity category of the respective municipality.

This sampling strategy resulted in a gross sample of 18,034 persons, of which XXX (to be completed) ultimately joined the panel. Before joining the panel, sampled persons were first asked for their written ethical consent to actively join the panel and for the scientific use of the data collected from them in successive surveys.

Researchers who apply for survey time with the panel can request for a random sample of minimally 1,000 panelists.

Data handling and management

TSS data are collected through a panel infrastructure platform hosted by XX. This infrastructure is secure and confidentiality of user and personal data are ensured at all times. Panelists who participate offline will be sent a paper survey, which will be digitalized immediately after data collection. Paper surveys will be stored in a locked space in a similarly locked cabinet accessible only to those involved in the project. Paper surveys will be stored for a period of two years after which they will be destroyed. After data collection, TSS survey data are carefully cleaned and securely stored in a data archive, which is accessible free of charge to the wider research community. Before being published as a scientific use file in the data archive, TSS carefully pseudonymizes the data files by re-encrypting the internal pseudo-ID to a public pseudo-ID. In this way, it is avoided that the data made available to the end user can be linked in any way to the identities of the TSS panel members. In addition, the risk of indirect identification based on the data files before publication is evaluated by TSS, and where necessary mitigated by customary methods of statistical data protection (e.g., reducing variables to a limited number of categories). The carefully pseudonymized survey data files of TSS will be immediately available to the researchers who have collected the data with TSS. After an embargo of one year, these pseudonymized data files will also be available to a wider research community.

Scientific use files in the archive can only be accessed by the research community after signing an agreement for data use stipulating that the end user agrees to (1) use the data only for scientific research, (2) not retain the data longer than necessary for that research, (3) not attempt to indirectly identify panelists, and (4) not further disseminate the data. End users who wish access to this data archive need to apply and sign an end user agreement with TSS via the archive. Upon registration, end users gain access to the archive for two consecutive years. Those who fail to re-register after this two-year period will no longer be granted access to the archive.

Highly pseudonymized data is stored indefinitely except in case of the cessation of TSS's existence. In this case, the data is anonymized and all contact information and pseudonymization keys will be destroyed.

Discomfort and counseling

Panelists will be informed about the research topic of requested studies, so that they have an understanding of the content of the questionnaires. In any case, respondents always have the possibility to abandon the surveys and/or to leave the panel at any moment. The TSS staff responsible for Panel management can be contacted at any time with any questions that might arise from taking part in the study. Moreover, researchers commissioning questionnaires which deal with sensitive topics (e.g., sexual preferences, mental health) will be encouraged to include contact information of their ethical committee and well-being organizations (e.g., AWEL) that might be of value. Participants will be informed that they may contact such organizations through telephone or online services.

Remuneration and study outcome

For each completed survey, the panelists will receive a reward in a virtual wallet (value of 8€). Researchers that commissioned surveys in TSS will be asked to send a one-page summary of their main results to TSS. Participants will regularly receive information about the results of the research through a newsletter and the online panelist environment. Furthermore, TSS will also be active on social media and regularly post interesting research results there.

