Imposter Participants

Current Issues and Strategies to Manage Authentic Participation in Qualitative Research

Nicole Bobbette, PhD.

February 24th, 2025

Objectives

- Share common 'red flags' related to suspected inauthentic participation in virtual qualitative research.

- Discuss strategies to support authentic participation in virtual qualitative research.

- Offer additional considerations: Naming the tensions and reflecting on the effects of these actions.

- Hold space for discussion and learning from our local community.

Image: https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/online/images/reflexivity%20integral%20researcher.jpg

Background

- Inauthentic participation is not new to research; however, increased risk in qualitative research poses unique pragmatic and ethical challenges.

- *Key Factors*:

  - Rapid adoption of online methods for recruitment and data collection,

  - Pandemic's impact on economic stability (e.g., long-term inflation and cost of living crises).

    (Newman, Guta, & Black, 2021; Ridge, Bullock, Causer, Fisher, Hider, Kingstone, … & Southam, 2023)

  - "Fantasy, the desire to occupy an imagined persona, boredom, or a genuine desire to disrupt research for personal or ideological reasons could also be relevant" Garcia-Iglesias, Heaphy, Yodovich, Atherton & Merchant, 2024, p.4).

  - Prepare and plan for the possibility of 'imposter' participants and determine how to ensure trustworthy data (Roehl & Harland, 2022).

Red Flags - Recruitment

Participants respond quickly, sometimes within minutes, of recruitment advertisements being posted on social media, and some of these posted multiple follow-up emails in quick succession An influx of these responses within a short period should raise suspicion.

Email:

- Blank subject lines in emails expressing interest in the study (as well as emails that were only a sentence or two long) were common, with some potential participants copying text from recruitment ads verbatim.

- Generic private email addresses often composed of a common name (perhaps a celebrity's name) and series of numbers. Common: firstname.lastname123@gmail.com e.g., john.doe123@gmail.com

- Watch for messages written in very similar wording, using similar titles.

- Fraudulent participants may use the same email platform or duplicate addresses.

- Suspect participants sometimes cited recruitment sites that were not used by the study.

- Omits any personal details beyond their first name. May have poor grammar.

(Mistry, Merrick, Cabecinha, Daniels, Ragan, Epstein, … & Levell, 2024; Ridge et al., 2023; Santinele Martino, Perrotta, & McGillion, 2024; Sharma, McPhail, Kularatna, Senanayake & Abell, 2024)

Red Flags - Recruitment

Screening/ Screening questionnaires

- Unexpected information on demographics or disease. Free text answers may be left blank, be vague, or contain inappropriate responses. Metadata may show responses were completed in an unrealistically fast time (Mistry et al., 2024).

- Being cautious of certain instances of unclear and contradictory responses from participants, especially when it comes to eligibility criteria, is important (Santinele Martino et. al, 2024).

- Unwilling to put on screen/camera (Santinele Martino et. al, 2024).

- Only using VOIP or not a real phone number (Hoskins, Sebetka, Thomas, Simonetti, Williams & Khazanov, 2025).

Red Flags – Data Collection

- Preference for online rather than telephone interviews or focus groups.

- Camera off.

- Difficult to build rapport, limited engagement, and/or the participant seems distracted during interview.

- Limited content knowledge -

  - Vague or brief answers to questions (thin description). Unable or reluctant to elaborate on answers when probed.

  - Incongruent responses compared to prescreening questionnaire. Unable to clarify on these discrepancies when asked.

- Duration of focus group or interview notably shorter.

- Duplicate or similar responses among fraudulent participants/same participant joining as multiple.

- Repeated requests for payment.

(Cascio, 2024; Hoskins et al.,2025; Mistry et al., 2024; Ridge et al., 2023; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Santinele Martino, 2024; Sharma et al., 2024)

Strategies

- Be aware and plan for it; consider a protocol or process.

- Guiding questions (Ridge, 2023):

  1. During recruitment, how could I verify that the participants meet the inclusion criteria? How confident can I be in this information?

  2. During data collection, was the participant hesitant or flustered when asked probing questions for additional detail?

  3. Did I document impressions of honesty in my reflexive journal?

  4. Did the participant's answers make sense, and were they detailed enough about the topic being researched?

- Work with the Research Ethics Office (Sharma et al., 2024)

Strategies

Recommendations to:

Prevent **FR**audulent **O**nline **S**tudy
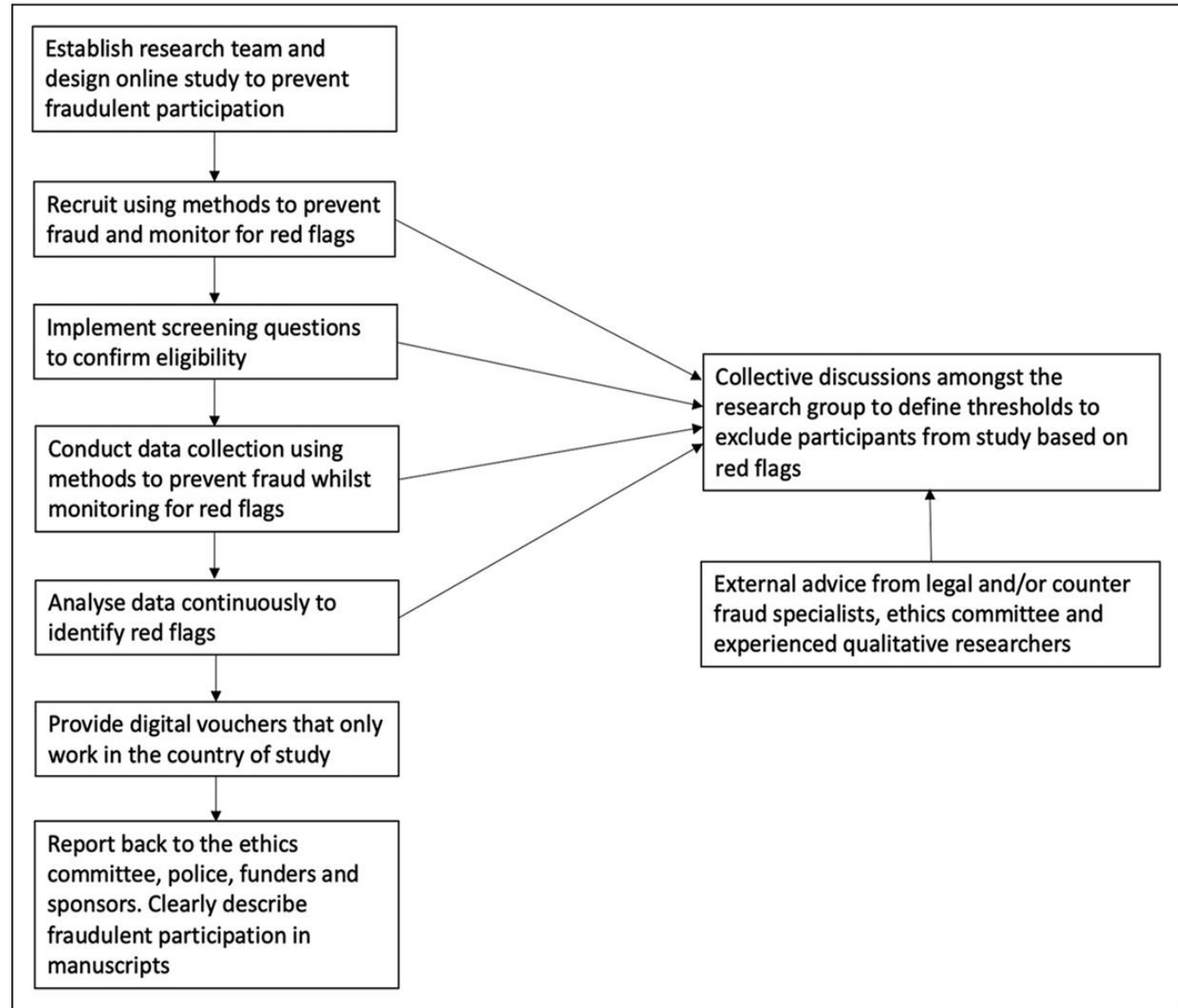**P**articipation **(P-FROST)**

(Mistry et al., 2024)

Figure 1. Example of a standardized approach to preventing, identifying, and managing fraudulent participation using P-FROST.

Strategies - Recruitment

- Consider adding in an expression of interest step or screening process.

- Add in information to the screening process that can help you triangulate (city, postal code, number). Ask about access needs before hand (e.g., is there a need to type or have your screen off?)

- Advise participants of this process. Add information into your letter of information and recruitment material related to screening process and collection of information.

- Call, if possible, to confirm participation vs. relying only on email or survey screening.

- Ask for phone numbers vs. VOIP.

- If virtual screening, ask to turn on screen, even just for a moment.

- Be wary of recruiting over open social media channels (vs. closed groups). Consider closing recruitment to those sources if observing an increased number of suspected participants.

- Be up to date on information security.

(Cascio, 2024; Hoskins et al., 2025; Ridge et al., 2023, Mistry et al., 2024, Santinelo Martino et al., 2024)

Strategies for identifying locally relevant screening questions: (Cascio, 2024)

1. Review the methodological literature for successful screening questions.

2. Review the responses of pilot studies or previous interviews for comfortable and culturally relevant screening questions.

3. Consult community members.

Table 1. Research team documentation of suspect patterns.

Concerning characteristics and patterns		
Recruitment		**Alternative explanations and ethical challenges**
Email address identification	Email addresses from different participants following a similar general format (e.g. firstnamelastname123@gmail.com); spelling errors in email addresses specific to name (e.g. Smauel instead of Samuel)	Limitations in technological skills and literacy may impact email formatting; excluding individuals based on this factor may inhibit range of perspectives. However, it is uncommon to misspell one's name, especially in an email address.
Inappropriate screening call greetings	Answering screening call with an inappropriate greeting for the time of day (e.g. saying "good evening - I mean, good afternoon" when study team member called at 3 PM EST)	Individuals, including those whose jobs may require inconsistent work schedules outside of traditional business hours, may answer with an inappropriate greeting; however, this error may suggest an international location and inattention to time zone.
VoIP phone number	Use of a voice over internet provider number (e.g. Google voice, Skype) rather than a U.S. cell/ landline number	A large and growing proportion of Americans use VoIP numbers for personal and business use, though individuals from international locations have an elevated probability of using VoIP numbers to gain study access.
Persistent requests for participation	Flurry of "cold" outreach emails using similar general language (e.g. expressing "interest in your study") with idiosyncratic phrasing, formatting, grammar errors, etc., all received within a few days of each other and with urgent requests	Assumptions regarding language and grammar risk premature exclusion, yet persistent requests with urgency suggest templated outreach and are inconsistent with the nature of the study.
Name inconsistency	Inconsistency with name provided in interest survey, phone screening, and/or within email address (e.g. Mitchell Michael vs. Michael Mitchell)	Busy individuals may mistype or erroneously note a recent name change, but it is unusual to misspell one's name in a short time period.

(Hoskins et al., 2025)

Strategies – Data Collection and Analysis

- Ask to turn on screen again, even just for a moment.

- Consider building in a question that would require a deeper knowledge of the concept/phenomenon of interest e.g., Can you give me an example of what a lesson plan would look like?

- Maintain a reflexive journal to document feelings (audit trail).

- Have the research team meet regularly to discuss (very important if there are multiple data collectors); consider ethical approaches and tensions.

- Start analysis as soon as possible.

- Keep all data?

- Consider adding a "suspicious response" code to be discussed later with the broader research team.

- Gift cards vs. e-transfers

(McLachlan, 2024; Mistry et al., 2024; Ridge et al. 2023; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Santinelo Martino et al., 2024).

"The balance between inclusivity and rigour is a delicate and complex one, and the current literature on imposter participants fails to provide an adequate framework to critically address this phenomenon. We believe there is a need for a greater engagement with reflexive epistemology with respect to suspected participants and how we respond, as researchers, to our own concerns" (Garcia-Iglesias et al, 2024. p.7).

Additional Considerations: Tensions and Effects

- A prescriptive approach is not sufficient; thoughtful and systematic consideration needed (McLachlan et. al, 2024)

- Naming and framing the problem - "imposter participant" as problematic (Garcia Iglesias et al., 2024)

  - Shift to "suspected participants" as it more accurately reflects who 'owns' the problem.

  - Theoretical and epistemological assumptions that underlie the concepts of imposter, fraudulent unchallenged. Need to consider deconstructive, reflexive approaches in relation to suspected participants.

- Trust and Mistrust in the research relationship (Hoskins et al. 2025). Fracturing of trust?

  - Exclusion of those underrepresented in research

  - Inadvertently silencing voices that don't fit normative expectations

- Privacy and honoring sensitive content

- Rapid evolution of AI participation (Sharma et al, 2024).

"Are we excluding eligible participants due to our suspicion and creating barriers for participants who are so often questioned and silenced?" (Santinele Martino et al., 2024, p.1295)
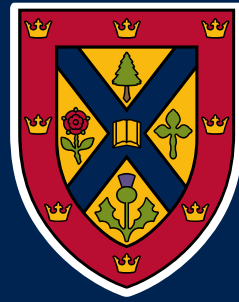
Summary

- Need to be aware it is happening and plan for it.

- Engage students during their training and dissertations.

- Work with the Research Ethics Office.

- Reflect on tensions in the field.

Image: https://merlien.com/introducing-bounded-project-based-qualitative-approach-pre-conference-interview-dr-raman-k-attri-kla-tencor

References & Papers of Interest

Cascio, M. A. (2024). Remote interviewing, accessibility, and scams: Notes on a case of fraudulent responses to a recruitment flyer. *Qualitative Research*, 14687941241255234.

Drysdale, K., Wells, N., Smith, A. K., Gunatillaka, N., Sturgiss, E. A., & Wark, T. (2023). Beyond the challenge to research integrity: imposter participation in incentivised qualitative research and its impact on community engagement. *Health Sociology Review*, *32*(3), 372-380.

Garcia-Iglesias, J., Heaphy, B., Yodovich, N., Atherton, S., & Merchant, A. Imposter participants? Towards a reflexive epistemology of 'suspected participants'.

Gibson, A. F., & Beattie, A. (2024). More or less than human? Evaluating the role of AI-as-participant in online qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *21*(2), 175-199.

Hoskins, K., Sebetka, K., Thomas, A., Simonetti, J., Williams, J., & Khazanov, G. K. (2025). Pragmatic and ethical challenges in navigating inauthentic participation in remote qualitative research. *Research Ethics*, 17470161251316286.

Jean Louis, R., & Thompson, L. M. (2024). Bots and fake participants: ensuring valid and reliable data collection using online participant recruitment methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 1-11.

Klein, L. B., & Cruys, C. (2024). Imposter Participants in Online Qualitative Interviews: A Protocol for Trauma-Informed and Equitable Decision-Making. *The Qualitative Report*, *29*(8), 2214-2222.

McLachlan, K., Truffyn, E. E., Dunleavy, B., Linkiewich, D., Powell, D., Taddio, A., & McMurtry, C. M. (2024). Fraudulent participation in psychological research using virtual synchronous interviews: Ethical challenges and potential solutions. *Ethics & Behavior*, 1-23.

Mistry, K., Merrick, S., Cabecinha, M., Daniels, S., Ragan, J., Epstein, M., ... & Levell, N. J. (2024). Fraudulent participation in online qualitative studies: Practical recommendations on an emerging phenomenon. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10497323241288181.

Newman, P. A., Guta, A., & Black, T. (2021). Ethical considerations for qualitative research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergency situations: Navigating the virtual field. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 16094069211047823.

Ridge, D., Bullock, L., Causer, H., Fisher, T., Hider, S., Kingstone, T., ... & Southam, J. (2023). 'Imposter participants' in online qualitative research, a new and increasing threat to data integrity? *Health Expectations: An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy*, *26*(3), 941.

Roehl, J. M., & Harland, D. J. (2022). Imposter participants: Overcoming methodological challenges related to balancing participant privacy with data quality when using online recruitment and data collection. *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(11), 2469-2485.

Santinele Martino, A., Perrotta, A., & McGillion, B. J. (2024). Who can you trust these days?: Dealing with imposter participants during online recruitment and data collection. *Qualitative Research*, 14687941231224591.

Sefcik, J. S., Hathaway, Z., & DiMaria-Ghalili, R. A. (2023). When snowball sampling leads to an avalanche of fraudulent participants in qualitative research. *International Journal of Older People Nursing*, *18*(6), e12572.

Sharma, P., McPhail, S. M., Kularatna, S., Senanayake, S., & Abell, B. (2024). Navigating the challenges of imposter participants in online qualitative research: lessons learned from a paediatric health services study. *BMC Health Services Research*, *24*(1), 724.

Woolfall, K. (2023). Identifying and preventing fraudulent participation in qualitative research. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, *108*(6), 421-422.