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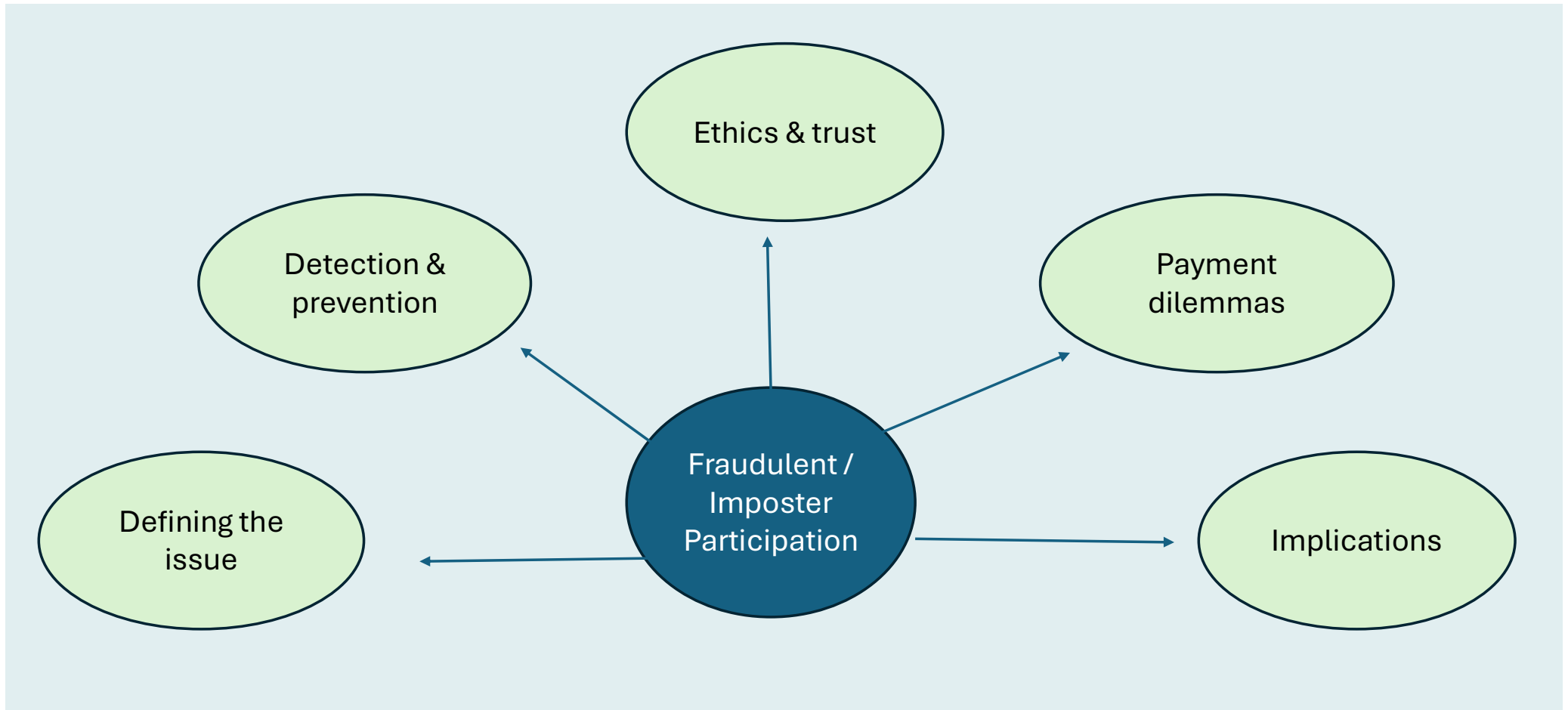
Imposter / Fraudulent Participants in Qualitative Research and PPIE: Methodological, Ethical, and Practical Challenges



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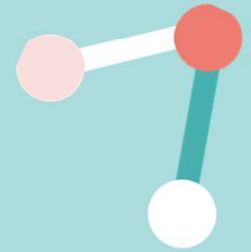


What's on Your Mind?

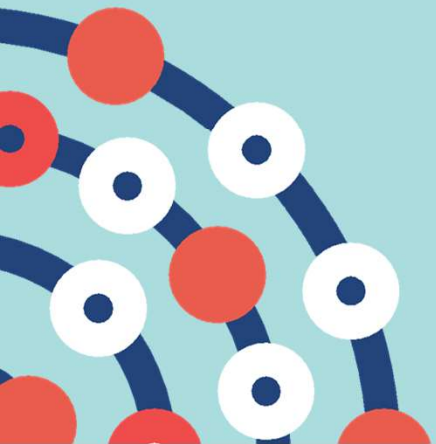


Before we begin...

- An emotive and controversial topic
- Not unique to research
- Few formal policies and existing guidance is patchy
- Emerging issue where caution is needed



What is it?



What do we mean by “imposter” or “fraudulent” participation?

- “...dishonest, fraudulent, fake, or false participants who **fabricate their identities** or **exaggerate their experiences** to join a study”
- "We note that fraudulent participation in qualitative research is an apparently newer and potentially more complex endeavour than carrying out online survey response **scams.**"
- "We believe the term “imposter participant” more accurately describes the **dishonest, fraudulent, fake, or false** participants in qualitative research because they **completely fake their identities** or **exaggerate their experiences** in order to participate in qualitative studies. The overconfidence that a participant must have to volunteer for a study where they will be interviewed shows the extent they will go to fabricate or elaborate a specific persona to **purposefully deceive the researcher.**"

(Chandler & Paolacci, 2017; Ridge et al. 2023; Roehl & Harland, 2022).

"Ineligible public involvement is when individuals get involved in shaping, delivering, or making use of research but their lived experience, knowledge or skills **do not match the requirements for this involvement** (eligibility requirements)."

(NIHR 2025)

Reasons for ineligible involvement:

Misunderstanding:

"an individual pursues involvement or becomes involved because the eligibility requirements weren't made clear or weren't understood properly. Or, when communication about this was ineffective, for example, due to a language barrier or learning disability."

Misrepresentation:

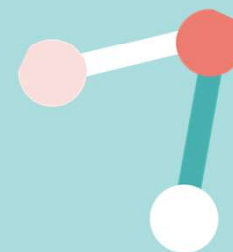
"an individual pursues involvement or becomes involved, having misrepresented their suitability."

(NIHR 2025)

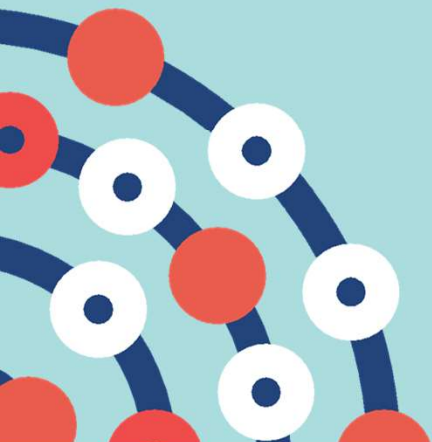
Some proposed grey zones of eligibility...

- 'Double dipping'
- Proximity posing
- Experience inflation
- Ambiguity

Ultimately, none of these are necessarily 'problematic'



How do we spot it?



Recognising / identifying potential imposter/fraud/ineligible

Recruitment red flags

- Unusually high or sudden interest
- Near-identical emails or wording (possibly AI-generated)
- Emphasis on payment or reimbursement
- Non-representative demographic clustering

Technical inconsistencies

- Suspicious IP locations or mismatched geography
- Multiple sign-ups from similar accounts

Interactional clues

- Reluctance to meet via phone/video
- Vague or very brief answers
- Overly “textbook” descriptions, lacking personal detail
- Very short interviews or multiple appearances by same individual

Case Report: NIHR BLOG

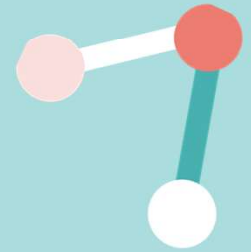
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Challenges of
'Imposter
participants' in
patient and public
involvement

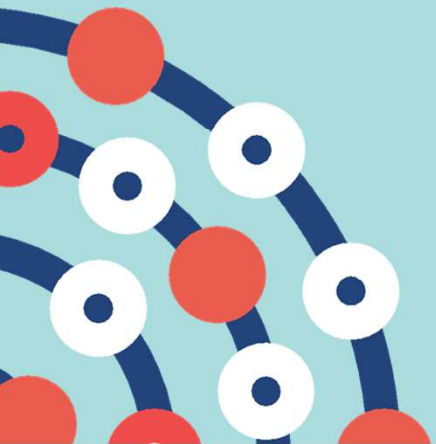
socr.nihr.ac.uk/news/blog

- Online PPI meeting advertised (mention of reimbursement, no amount stated)
 - Day 1: 25 sign-ups
 - Within 24 hrs: 137 suspicious emails, mostly duplicates/spam
 - After verification: 40–45 genuine responses
 - 7+ hours spent screening
- Lessons:**
- Use structured registration forms (e.g., MS Teams) with basic demographic info + CAPTCHA
 - Be cautious about advertising reimbursement upfront
 - Avoid broad social media blasts; use trusted networks
 - Share verification workload across the team

(Saunders et al. 2025)



What can we do about it?



What can we do?

Level	Strategies
Design & Recruitment	Closed networks; multi-stage screening; red-flag training
Data Collection	Visual checks; lived-experience questions; rapport
Validation	Data cross-checks; team review
Ethics	Include protocols in ethics apps; trauma-informed language

(Giles et al., 2025; Roehl & Harland, 2022; Sharma et al., 2024; Ridge et al., 2023; García-Iglesias et al., 2025; Bobbette et al., 2025)

What can we do?

Prevent Fraudulent
Online Study
Participation (P-FROST)
(Mistry et al., 2024)

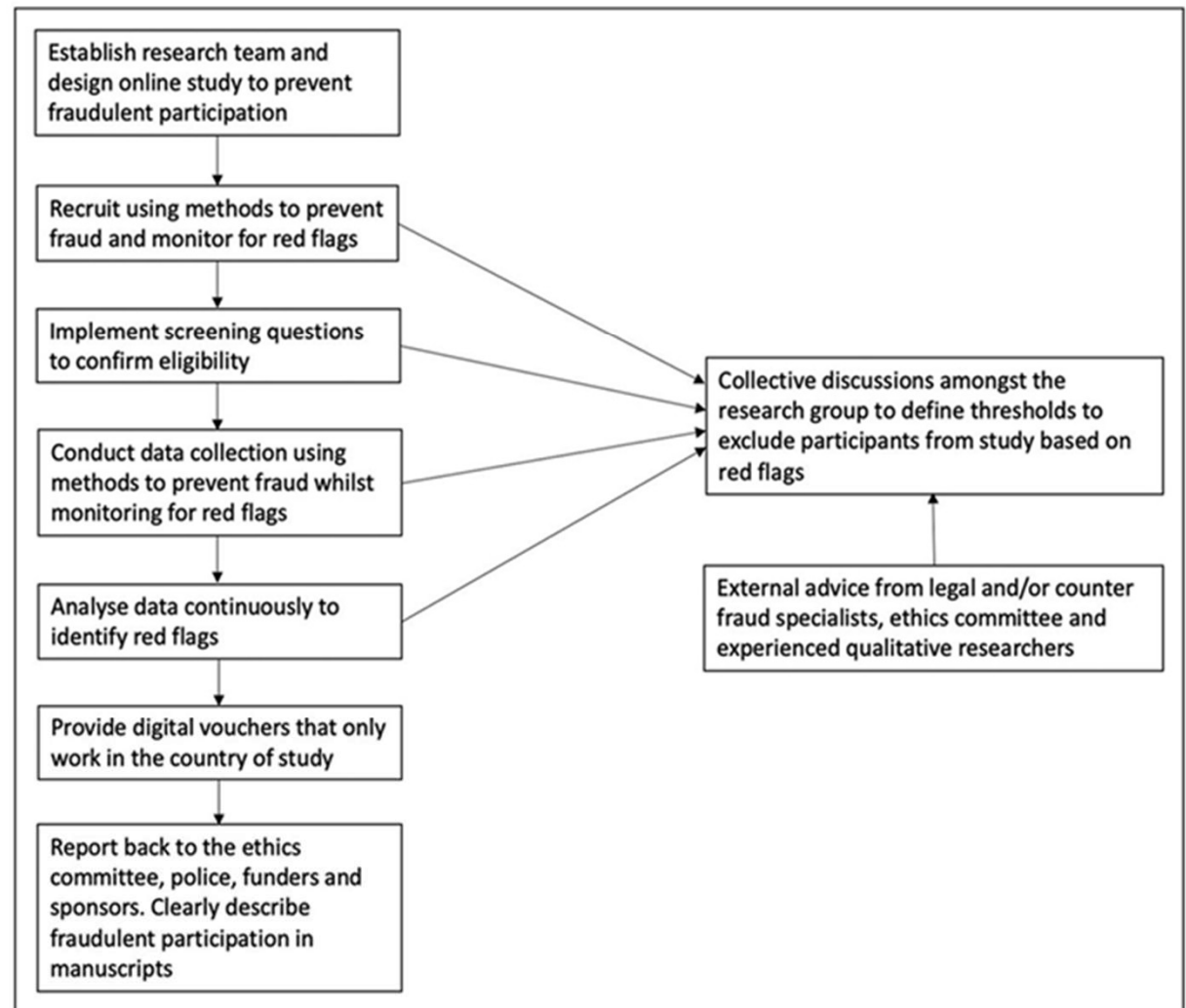


Figure 1. Example of a standardized approach to preventing, identifying, and managing fraudulent participation using P-FROST.

"The best way to safeguard against ineligible involvement is through **thorough and effective processes of engagement and onboarding, coupled with ongoing open and honest communication** (including face to face). This will make sure that the right people are involved/remain involved for the right reasons and that everyone has a shared understanding, and can fulfil the mutual expectations of, proposed involvement."

(NIHR 2025)

What Can We Do About It ? (Without Killing Trust)

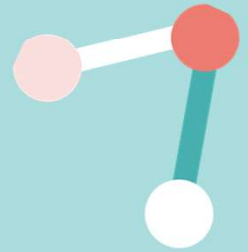
Assume genuine involvement first

- Defining the role and inclusion criteria
- Use co-designed screening tools or group-based inclusion checks
- Effective engagement and onboarding processes
- Foster longer-term relationships, not just one-off input – where possible
- Good communication
- Encourage transparency and reflexive conversations within teams

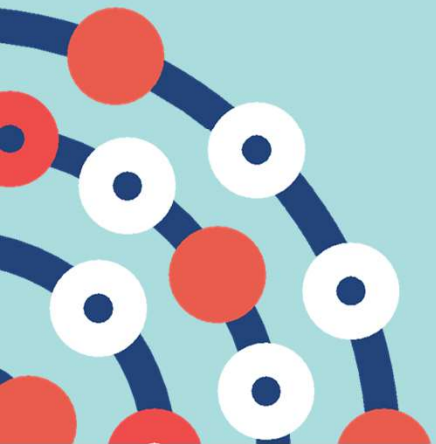
Practicalities: Handling Suspected Fraud or Ineligible Participation

Assume genuine involvement first

- **Seek clarification privately:** frame as support, not interrogation
- **Address concerns sensitively:** use neutral, non-accusatory language
- **Manage in groups carefully:** avoid calling out individuals publicly
- **Balance transparency and reassurance**

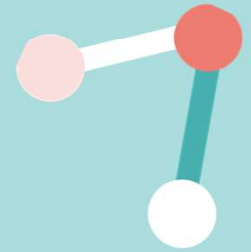


Ethics

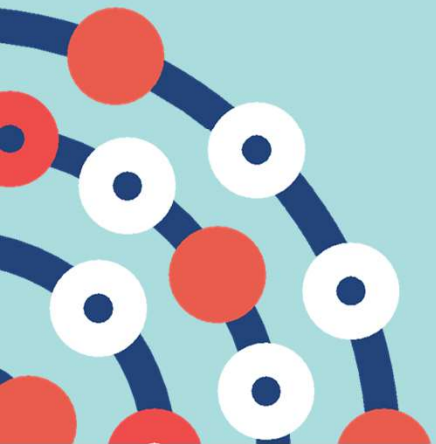


Ethical Implications

- Fairness and integrity
- Defining validity
- Risk of suspicion
- Whose stories count?
- Voice and ownership
- Is duty of care only for “real” participants?



Key take-away message



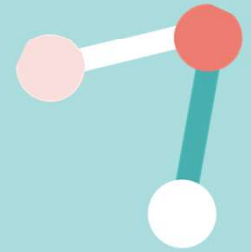
Design with clarity, recruit with care, engage with trust.

- Better design: thinking carefully about who we want to speak to and what we are expecting them to bring to the table
- Transparency: clearly communicating our design and intentions (also ways of working) through recruitment, onboarding and during each stage of the project
- Communication: working with people to have open conversations about when it might not be working for either or both parties (and how to move forward)

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