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I've been catfished, now what? A case study of identify fraud in online research.

VELO HIGUERAS, M.

2023

I've been catfished! Now what?

A case study of identity fraud in online research

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Imposter participants

Fake-bots

Ineligible participants

Online impersonators who pretend to be eligible to participate in research studies for financial gain

Fraudulent participants

Fraudsters

Identity fraud

Background

Online recruitment

Benefits

- Maximises geographical and demographic reach
- Reduces travelling cost and environmental impact
- Minimises recruitment time
- Increased anonymity of participants

Risks

- Data protection
- Fraudulent participants

Financial incentives increase the risk of fraudulent behaviour

In survey studies, up to 1/3 of data can be potentially fraudulent

Identity fraud in research participants seems to have rapidly increased since COVID

The research study

A feminist interpretive description of UK midwives' attitudes and experiences on freebirth

Aim

to describe the attitudes, opinions and experiences on freebirth of UK registered midwives currently working in clinical practice

Methods

Feminist qualitative interpretive description design

Sampling

UK registered midwives currently providing direct clinical care to women and families

Convenience sampling

10 to 15 participants

Recruitment

Social media
advertisement

Expression of
interest form

Electronic
consent form

Pre-interview
questionnaire

Invitation to
interview

Data collection

Demographic
online survey

Pre-interview
emoji question

Online interview
(teams)

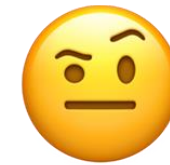
The case of Jane Doe*



Pre-interview



Online interview



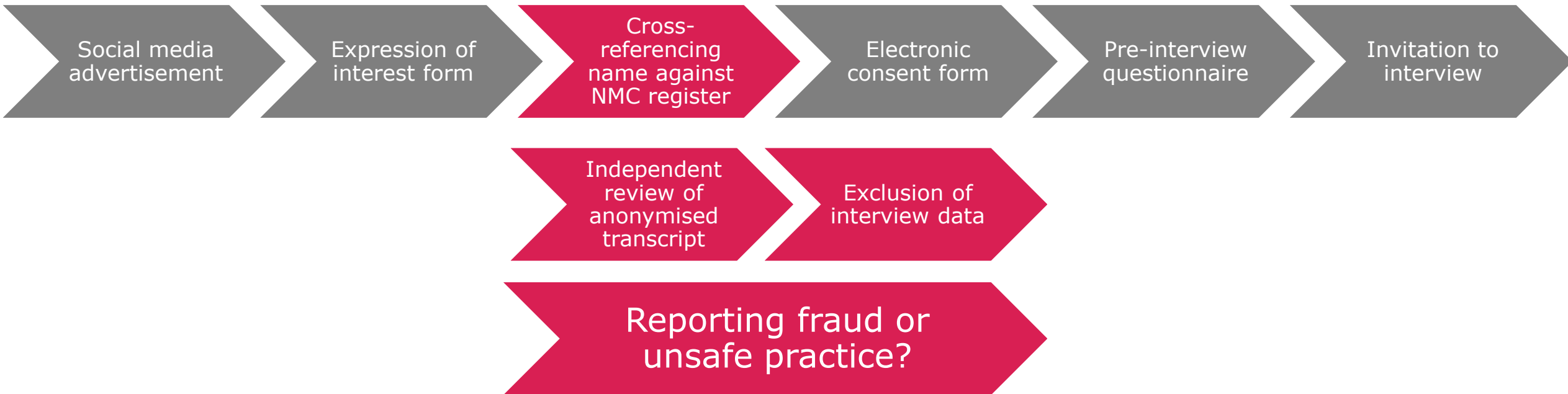
Invitation to interview



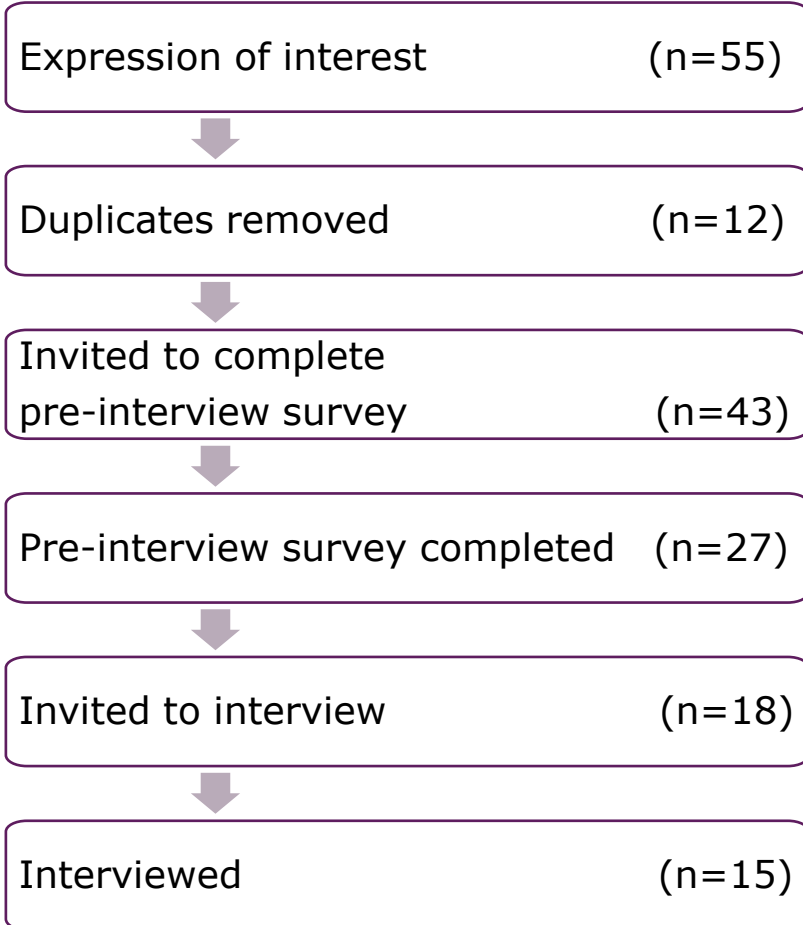
Post-interview



Ethics and protocol amendment



Recruitment findings



Name verified against NMC (n=32)

Name verified but other signs of fraud identity (n=1)

Name not verified (n=12)

Duplicate submissions (n=5)

Suspicious email pattern (n=8)

Pre-interview survey with minimal information (n=2)

Relevance



How to identify potential fraud

At screening or survey studies

- Duplicated entries
- Clustering of entries
- Unusual email patterns
- Inconsistent or conflicting answers
- Loss of contact when requested to authenticate
- Queries about payment, including alternative payment methods
- Urgency to participate

At qualitative data collection

- Camera off
- Poor internet connection
- Vague, short and undetailed answers
- Inappropriate answers unrelated to the question
- Loss of contact when confronted or when probed for further details

How to protect your study data

External ID
validation

“Background
checks”

Make payment
subject to ID
validation

2step
verification log-
in

IP and captcha
features in
survey studies

Researcher as
gatekeeper


Ask for camera
to be on

Insider
knowledge


Multiple
manual review
of suspicious
answers

Work for the future

Identity fraud protocols should be included in ethics applications



Fraud detection should be reported in any study conducted online



Consider identity fraud in other online research activities (e.g. PPI)

Conclusion

Online recruitment of research participants is growing in popularity. Conducting research on social media requires deliberate attention to online fraud detection and methods to assess the eligibility of participants.

Addressing fraudulent behaviour in online research poses new ethical challenges for researchers that need to consider issues of confirmation of participant eligibility, confidentiality, crime reporting and data integrity and validity.

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