

## ***Protocol for identifying and dealing with false participants in online research***

This guide can be used to help researchers identify false participants during online study recruitment and data collection.

The below factors have been noted as identifiable patterns amongst false research participants in previous online studies. Some steps to follow are suggested below, in the event that a researcher's suspicions are raised based on a combination of these factors\*.

### **1. Email address and writing style**

If research participation interest is expressed by email, take note of the person's email address, and writing style in the email body. There has been a pattern of similar email addresses coming from false participants (e.g. [name1234@gmail.com](mailto:name1234@gmail.com)), and a lack of introduction/formality in email writing (e.g. no 'dear x' or 'hello', simply one line saying 'I am interested in this research', no sign off or signature).

#### *Suggested actions:*

- Share and discuss email body and email address with research team if suspicions are raised.
- Ask a screening question relevant to the study at the point of initial email – e.g. ask what country/county/borough the person lives (i.e. explain needs to be UK-based due to complex care systems and its relevance to the study); the company they work for and their role.
- Ask for their home or work postcode to send voucher/reimbursement to, following research completion (i.e. if speaking to a care worker, a work postcode could be for a care provider office). Avoid sending electronic vouchers where possible, or until legitimacy of participant can be confirmed - false participants have tended to opt for e-vouchers, if given a choice, to avoid providing a postal address.

### **2. Intentionally vague responses/lack of detail**

Answers to research questions are short (e.g. lots of 'yes' and 'no' answers), vague, or do not make sense in relation to the topic. False participants have previously shown a lack of understanding of the research topic in relation to health and/or social care.

#### *Suggested actions:*

- Ask an initial screening question to gauge understanding of the topic, both at the recruitment stage and start of an interview/survey.
- For survey research, if survey completion time is recorded, check whether this might be unusually fast. Avoid sending automatic payment upon completion.

If you become suspicious during an interview, pause to check what the participant believes is the topic of the interview, or another question to gauge understanding of the specific topic.

- Consider terminating the interview if you are unsure and discuss with your research team – e.g. 'I apologise, I'm going to have to end this interview as I believe you might have been recruited in error', or 'I need to pause this interview today to check something with my team, I will be back in touch by email'.

### 3. Audio-visual cues in interviews

- a) Not turning camera on during the interview. False participants have displayed a pattern of keeping their camera turned off during interviews.

*Suggested actions:*

- Consider that not everyone feels comfortable to use their video during interviews – however if other suspicions are raised (e.g. points described above), this may be another factor in establishing whether the participant is genuine or not. Ask participant to turn on camera, even briefly.

- b) Familiarity of voice. This can be hard to gauge but your suspicions may be raised, if along with other points noted above, you feel like you may have already spoken to the participant before, particularly if their responses are also familiar.

*Suggested actions:*

- Ask if they have already taken part in this research study, explaining you can only speak to each person once. It is likely they will say no, so you might wish to consider pausing the interview and consulting with your team.

Dealing with false participants can be challenging for researchers, both practically and emotionally. It is important to draw on the support of your research team and/or line manager if you feel affected by the experience.

**\*Important to note - individual factors alone do not necessarily mean a participant is not genuine, but suspicions may be raised based on a combination of the above factors.**