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When a 'Social Worker' is NOT a Social Worker: Reflections of the Ethical Tensions that Emerge When Imposter Participants Present as Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

This *ethics in practice* article reflects on the ethical dilemmas and tensions that emerged from a research study employing online interviews with social workers in the context of (i) how to respond to suspected Imposter Participants (ii) whether to report individuals for fraudulently posing as social workers; (iii) how to better screen for Imposter Participants whilst minimising the chance of excluding genuine participants and (iv) whether to reimburse suspected Imposter Participants for their time. The article also makes recommendations for researchers seeking to recruit a similar participant demographic by way of a 'what we would do differently next time' section.

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Introduction

Background

This *ethics in practice* article emerges from a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) funded mixed-methods project looking at social work in coastal areas of England. The overall aim of the study was to identify best practices with respect to the recruitment and retention of social workers in these communities. The reflections that are discussed within this article are taken from one work package of the project, which aimed to recruit up to 28 participants, made up of both current and former social workers, and interview them online about their experiences of social work in coastal areas of England.

Whilst the larger research team was made up of four seasoned research academics and four research assistants, the work (and reflections) reported here was undertaken by three of the academics and one research assistant. In this context, it is prudent to note that each of this smaller group had significant experience of recruiting and interviewing practising

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social workers for the purposes of research (including hundreds of social workers across multiple projects in the case of the two most senior members of the team). Two also had extensive experience practising as social workers and remain registered social workers with Social Work England. However, none of the team had (to the best of their knowledge) encountered any fraudulent participants in any of their previous research endeavours, which sets the scene for the reflections that follow.

Strategies for enhancing the recruitment of practising social workers

It is important to acknowledge that the recruitment of practising social workers as research participants can be complex and is often hindered by practitioners' significant workplace pressures and a feeling that research is an 'optional extra' compared to statutory duties (Cyhlarova, Clark, and Knapp 2020; Keemink et al. 2025). Moreover, Powell and Orme (2011) describe a 'circle of resistance' in which practising social workers often do not engage in research due to a lack of confidence and competence in research skills. Similarly, Cyhlarova, Clark, and Knapp (2020) report that social workers can be a difficult group to recruit, not only because of workload pressures but also due to a lack of awareness about the benefits of research participation.

On this basis, we, as a research team, planned carefully for the recruitment of social workers to our study and employed several strategies designed to maximise our uptake of suitable participants, including:

- Developing a targeted social media recruitment strategy (including posting recruitment flyers on various social media platforms – e.g. 'X', BlueSky and LinkedIn).
- Minimising participant burden by offering flexibility in participation (i.e. by offering an option of an online interview).
- Offering appropriate remuneration for participation (specifically, a £20 shopping voucher) and clearly communicating this information upon initial contact with potential participants.

However, within this article, we will consider how these strategies may have contributed to what was hitherto an unfamiliar experience for the research team: encountering the phenomenon of individuals who claimed to be social workers, but whom we strongly believe were not.

The growing prevalence of imposter participants and their risk to social work research

Imposter participants (IPs) are described as participants who fake their identities or exaggerate their experiences to fit the criteria to participate in research (Ching et al. 2026). Literature shows that IPs in research present significant ethical challenges for researchers, not least in terms of data integrity (Strickland et al. 2025). They are particularly problematic for online research, where filtering practices are inconsistent and unreliable, and bots (automated software) and other fraudulent techniques are rife (Xu et al. 2022).

Ching et al. (2026) highlight that online participation means that IPs have the opportunity to search for appropriate answers to interview questions in real time, provide false

and nonsensical data, access vulnerable groups and their sensitive data, or fake different identities to participate multiple times (see also Strickland et al. 2025). Authors also suggest that IPs' motivations to participate fraudulently in research are multifaceted and can include sociopolitical and attention-seeking, but are most often related to financial incentives (see Ching et al. 2026).

The literature pertaining to IPs in social work research is limited. Yet a principal text by Golden Guzman and Ast (2025) asserts that findings based on fraudulent data can result in policies, programming and services that are not reflective of the lived experiences of social workers or their clients, thereby limiting the effectiveness of emerging interventions. Moreover, inaccurate data stemming from nonhuman respondents, or from individuals whose responses are not representative of the targeted population, risk perpetuating harm to communities because findings generated from these responses can promote erroneous understandings of community needs or lived experiences (Golden Guzman and Ast 2025; Xu et al. 2022). Furthermore, inaccurate insights gleaned from IPs could be used to justify policies or programmes that are ill-suited to community wellbeing (Golden Guzman and Ast 2025; Xu et al. 2022).

Indicators of imposter participants in our initial data collection endeavours

Whilst we, as a research team, had limited knowledge or experience of IPs prior to undertaking this project, our awareness of the problem, how it can present, and the risks it can pose to research accelerated rapidly in the first few weeks of data collection. Indeed, after the first two weeks of hosting online interviews, each of us had reason to believe that several individuals whom we had interviewed were posing fraudulently as social workers.

The signs that these individuals were IPs were multifaceted and comprised several of what we now understand to be 'red flag' indicators for IPs (see Sharma et al. 2024; Xu et al. 2022), including:

- Refusing to switch on their video camera during interviews.
- Providing consistently brief and distracted answers.
- Vague and inconsistent accounts of experiences/stories in respect to social work.
- Inconsistent demographics (e.g. joining a call with a different name, claiming to be a different age or in a different location).

In addition, we encountered three participants who claimed not to have heard us due to 'poor internet connection' when we asked them specific questions about how they met the inclusion criteria for the study (i.e. to be a current/former social worker practising/previously practising in a coastal area of England). At times, it was suspected that the individuals were using these delays and distractions to look up information, potentially with the support of artificial intelligence (AI) technology (thereby further negatively impacting the integrity of our data).

The sections that follow discuss the ethical dilemmas and tensions that emerged in the context of (i) whether and how to respond to suspected IPs in the moment; (ii) whether to report individuals for fraudulently posing as social workers; (iii) how to better screen for

IPs, whilst minimising the chance of excluding genuine participants and (iv) whether to reimburse the suspected IPs for their time. The article also makes recommendations for researchers seeking to recruit a similar participant demographic by way of a 'what we would do differently next time' section.

Ethical tension 1: whether and how to respond to a suspected imposter participant in the moment

After the first two weeks of data collection, our research team hastily arranged to meet to discuss our experiences of suspected IPs. We also liaised with our ethics advisory group, who were supporting the research and were able to offer additional experience and knowledge. Each of the research team reflected that we were surprised both by the presence of IPs and indeed by how many of these initial participants we suspected of being IPs. We retrospectively realised that *at least* ten of the first eleven participants showed signs of being IPs. We also recognised that we were ill-prepared for the presence of IPs, never having knowingly encountered them before, and therefore lacked an agreed-upon strategy for how to navigate suspected IPs in real-time.

Relatedly, we considered that an initial dilemma that we had all encountered was whether to openly challenge the individual in the moment, and, if so, how to do this in an ethically sound way (i.e. in the absence of proof and without causing any undue stress to that individual). We reflected on the sense of 'unease' and 'frustration' that had emerged in those initial moments and the difficulty of managing these feelings when deciding how to respond. We also realised that each of us had adopted a different approach in responding to the suspected IP, which we accepted was less than ideal in the interests of ensuring consistency and fairness. For example, whilst some of us had openly challenged the participant in the moment (potentially showing signs of frustration), others had chosen not to. Similarly, some had rather abruptly discontinued the interview, citing their suspicions that an individual was an IP, whilst others had continued until the interview's conclusion.

We reflected, therefore, that we required a uniform approach to this dilemma; one that was ethical and would prioritise the integrity of the data, whilst not causing any harm or discomfort to the participant. As such, we looked for ethical direction on the issue but were disappointed to find a lack of guidance on either an institutional or professional level. Thus, we resolved to devise our own strategy for responding to suspected IPs, considering that it should be grounded in three core ethical principles for social work research:

(i) Respect for Persons (i.e. ensuring that the individual, whether an IP or otherwise, would be treated with dignity and respect).
(ii) Beneficence (i.e. minimising harm to the individual, including when confronting them on the issue of being an IP).
(iii) Maintaining Data Integrity (i.e. that we should take steps to avoid data from IPs impacting the results of the research, including by discontinuing an interview when an IP was suspected) (see Thyer and Reamer 2010).

On this basis, we drew from several informative academic papers (specifically, Cho, Lewis, and Broden Arciprete 2025; Giles et al. 2025; Ziminski and Liddell-Quintyn 2025), to agree on a 'protocol' comprising four key elements:

1. **To engage in 'check-in' questions**.

We decided that if suspicion of an IP arose during an interview, we would pause to ask specific questions related to the study topic and/or inclusion criteria (e.g. location details, specific experiences). This would allow us to see if answers satisfied or else heightened our suspicions.

2. **Request visual verification**.

Where participants chose not to turn on their camera, we resolved to politely ask them to do so, even briefly, so that we were able to confirm their identity. If they refused, we would explain that we would not be able to continue with the interview without this verification.

3. **Avoid aggressive confrontation**.

We agreed to avoid directly accusing the participant of being an IP, reasoning that this could create a hostile situation and cause stress to them and us. Instead, we would adopt a 'politely sceptical' or 'respectfully uncertain' approach, both also key elements within social work assessment and practice (Laming 2009).

4. **Terminate politely**.

If, after adhering to the first three elements, we still suspected that a participant was not genuine, we agreed to end the session politely whilst indicating that we had all we needed from the individual (regardless of progress through the interview schedule).

We agreed to adopt this protocol in any future cases of a suspected IP, but also acknowledged that, given the large number of potential IPs in the initial group of interviewees, that we needed a better strategy for screening for this issue during our recruitment activities. We also reflected that because we had encountered individuals whom we suspected of posing fraudulently as social workers (which can have specific legal ramifications in England), this created an additional ethical tension in respect to whether we would report these individuals to the relevant agency.

Ethical tension 2: whether to report a suspected imposter participant for fraudulently posing as a social worker

In England, 'social worker' is a legally protected title, making it a criminal offence for an individual to falsely claim or imply that they are registered with the social work regulator, Social Work England (SWE). The Social Workers Regulations 2018 state that a person:

- Must not use the title 'social worker' unless they are a registered social worker.
- Must not falsely represent themselves to be a registered social worker, to have a qualification in relation to social work or be the subject of an entry in the social work register.
- Must not let someone else refer to them as a 'social worker' unless they are a registered social worker.

SWE also states that: 'If someone is calling themselves a social worker when they shouldn't be, this is a misuse of title concern' … and therefore, should be reported to the social work regulator (SWE 2026, 1).

However, we, as researchers (but for two of us, also as social workers), remained acutely aware of the growing level of deprivation and poverty in England and around the world (United Nations 2025). As such, we reflected that the financial incentive offered for participation in our study (i.e. a £20 shopping voucher), whilst relatively small, might have compelled some who were in hardship to fraudulently pose as social workers in the hope of acquiring some financial relief. As a group, we agreed that we could understand why some people in these circumstances may have chosen to do this. As such, this again created a sense of unease and tension amongst us, in that we considered that reporting a suspected fraudster, whilst important for maintaining the integrity of the profession and our research study (and for protecting vulnerable service users), also risked adding to an individual's possible hardship.

We debated and discussed the most ethically justifiable approach to responding to this issue, and whether that was to report an individual for potentially illegally posing as a social worker (with associated negative implications for the profession and service users) or else choose not to report them. The latter would be on the basis that their motivation to take the time and risk of posing as a social worker, in exchange for a £20 voucher, suggests a person in financial hardship and perhaps exploitation. Reporting them could also further exacerbate their financial hardship, which, in all likelihood, is related to systems and structures outside their control. Furthermore, we reflected that in this instance, the IPs had been identified early enough to prevent harm from being done (i.e. to our data, the profession, service users, etc).

We also considered that to report an individual to the social work regulator for a 'misuse of title' case (and thus, potential prosecution), we would require:

- '*Evidence that shows the person is (or was) committing a misuse of title offence*'.
- '*As much information about the person's identity as possible, so [that the regulator can] contact the person of concern (such as their full name and contact details)*' (SWE 2026, 3).

The challenge here was that in each case, to provide '*evidence that shows the person is (or was) committing a misuse of title offence*', we would have to break our confidentiality agreement with the participant (i.e. by sharing with the regulator the email and other details they provided, video recording and/or transcript of the interview). This again created a sense of unease and an additional ethical dilemma amongst the research team. We reflected that we had not explicitly referred to the potential consequences or risks of fraudulently posing as a social worker in the 'circumstances in which we will break confidentiality' or potential 'risks of taking part' sections of our Participant Information Sheet (PIS). As such, whilst we accepted that breaking confidentiality in this context could be argued to be acceptable given the potential harm that can be caused by IPs to vulnerable service users and indeed the profession (see Strickland et al. 2025), it could also place us in a potentially ethically compromised position in respect to satisfying the test of 'informed consent'.

We also reflected that for ethical and data security reasons (i.e. the 'data minimisation' principle), we had only collected minimum contact and identifiable information for individuals. We had not, at this point, asked participants to provide a physical posting address

(something we would later do for issuing shopping vouchers) or indeed a current (or former) SWE registration number (which could have assisted with identification, but also verification of their social work qualification and registration).

We retrospectively theorised that names offered by a suspected IP could be fake, and that emails may have been set up purely for the purposes of fraudulently participating in our study. All of the initial cohort's email addresses were from '@gmail.com' accounts (and none were from verifiable work or professional email addresses). We also reflected that, as many of the suspected IPs had refused to turn on their video camera, it was difficult for us to know, with any degree of certainty, who it was that had potentially been fraudulently posing as a social worker. It was also suspected that many, if not all, of the suspected IPs were outside of England, something evidenced by their lack of basic geographic knowledge (e.g. thinking London was on the coast, or that Yorkshire was a town). This all led us to question whether attempting to report an individual in this context would be a worthwhile or else futile exercise.

Ultimately, we decided that the potential impact of the individual fraudulently posing as a social worker on the profession and/or service users would be reduced if we chose not to include their contributions in our data analysis (unless they were subsequently able to satisfy additional screening criteria, see below). We decided that, on this basis, in the interests of beneficence, a lack of informed consent about the consequences of fraudulently posing as a social worker, and the challenge of being able to provide evidence to this effect, we would not seek to raise any 'misuse of title' concerns against any of the initial cohort of participants.

This is a decision that, whilst still providing us with a sense of unease, we feel was ethically defensible and justifiable in the specific circumstances. However, we also reconciled that before continuing with any further data collection, we required a more robust process for checking an individuals' social work credentials and screening for potential IPs. As such, we paused recruitment for the study at this juncture to put a more rigorous process of screening in place.

Ethical tension 3: how to better screen for Imposter Participants, whilst minimising the chance of excluding genuine participants

Literature on the growing prevalence of IPs in online research highlights that whilst researchers are increasingly employing measures to screen for and exclude IPs, they are, by implication, also increasingly excluding genuine participants from their research, given that genuine participants may also, inadvertently, display 'red flag' indicators for being an IP (Keemink et al. 2025; Strickland et al. 2025). Guidance on the most effective screening strategies cautions that a researcher must accept that the more safeguards they have in place for screening out possible IPs, the more false-positive assessments will take place, and the higher the number of genuine participants that will be excluded (Husted et al. 2025; Strickland et al. 2025).

Equally, the 'data minimisation' principle in recruitment of research participants dictates that researchers should only collect and use the minimum information they need to manage their participation (Ching et al. 2026; Husted et al. 2025). Moreover, a researcher must get informed consent from all participants for all user research activities, including personal information to be used at screening (Sharma et al. 2024).

With these principles in mind, we decided that in employing additional screening activities, we would limit our supplementary safeguards to those which we felt were absolutely essential (Sharma et al. 2024). On this basis, we decided that two supplementary screening safeguards would suffice:

1. Requiring potential participants to provide a work or professional email address that could be manually verified, which is highly effective at screening out bots and spam signups (see Strickland et al. 2025).
2. Requiring potential participants to provide a current or former registration number for SWE, meaning that their social work credentials could be checked against the SWE register.

To do this, we returned to our institutional ethics committee to (i) explain our suspicions of recruiting IPs and the need to better control for this, (ii) seek approval to ask these additional screening questions during recruitment and (iii) ensure that we would be ethically justified in using the ensuing information to verify an individual's suitability for the study.

On receipt of this additional ethical scrutiny and approval, we restarted recruitment of research participants, albeit with the inclusion of these additional screening questions. However, we reflected that we still did not have proof that anyone from the original cohort of participants had been an IP. Moreover, in the interests of beneficence and inclusion, we wanted to show that we had done all we could not to exclude any genuine participants from the study. Therefore, we also recontacted each of the initial cohort of participants to explain the ethical tension that we had encountered (i.e. suspected IPs) and to retrospectively ask them for the required additional information for inclusion in the study.

None of the initial cohort chose to provide us with either a verifiable email address or their SWE registration number. This, and the fact that in the second round of recruitment, no prospective participant objected to being asked to provide these details, provided us with a sense of reassurance and justification for implementing these additional screening measures. It also ratified our decision to exclude all data from the first group of interviewees, in the interests of maintaining the integrity of our research data and reducing the risks to the profession and its service users.

Ethical tension 4: whether to reimburse the suspected imposter participant for their time

The final ethical tension we encountered was whether we would still compensate those whom we suspected had fraudulently posed as social workers to participate in the research. Whilst not all of these individuals had completed a full interview (and we did not provisionally plan to include their data in our analysis – see above), some of us considered that they had been willing to give up their time, and therefore it would be unethical to not compensate them accordingly and as agreed. However, others felt strongly that, as none of these individuals had been able to satisfy the additional screening questions (i.e. provide a verifiable email address and SWE credentials), it indicated that they had behaved unethically, and therefore, they should not be rewarded (i.e. by way of compensation) for that. Again, we considered that however we chose to proceed would have

specific ethical ramifications. We identified four specific ethical tensions related to this issue:

1. **Fairness vs. fraud**

We considered that a fundamental tension here was between the principle of providing compensation for time spent (a form of respectful treatment in ethical research, see Różyńska 2022) and the fact that an IP was attempting to gain resources under false pretences. We reflected on the arguments proffered by other researchers who have experienced IPs that suggest that even if the information provided is fake, the IPs still invested their time, and failing to pay could be seen as exploitative if they are genuinely in need (Giles et al. 2025); but also to reward IPs risks incentivising future IPs with associated costs for research integrity and, relatedly, vulnerable populations (Golden Guzman and Ast 2025).

2. **Stewardship of resources**.

We also reflected that, as our research had been externally funded, we had agreed (and therefore had an obligation) to ensure that our research funds allocated for the compensation for participants' time were given exclusively to the targeted population (in this case, current or former social workers). We reflected that whilst paying IPs for their time could be perceived as 'fair' and 'non-exploitative' (Giles et al. 2025), others (including our funder) might consider it an illegitimate expenditure of resources that should have been targeted towards genuine participants.

3. **Potential for external coercion/exploitation**.

We again considered and discussed the reasons why an individual may have fraudulently posed as a social worker (e.g. a sense of hardship) with reference to the growing evidence that vulnerable people can be externally coerced, pressured and/or exploited into acting as IPs (e.g. Shah and Hillman 2025). This, we reflected, raised the question of whether we, as researchers, had a duty to compensate these individuals, even though we accepted that this action could also encourage further incidents of fraud and for other vulnerable people to be exploited in this way (Ching et al. 2026).

4. **Breach of contractual agreement vs. a lack of explicit protocol**.

Some within our team felt strongly that the agreement to compensate the participant for their time was based on an informal contractual agreement that they had satisfactorily met the inclusion criteria. Therefore, if the suspected IPs could not satisfactorily evidence that they met these criteria (including the two additional screening safeguards), then they were in breach of this agreement and thus should not be compensated for their time. However, others felt that because we had not included an explicit protocol and statement within our PIS and/or consent form (that compensation would be withheld if fraud was suspected), we were perhaps not justified in withholding the compensation, irrespective of whether the suspected IPs could satisfactorily evidence that they met all of the inclusion requirements.

Ultimately, whether to reimburse the suspected IPs for their time was the ethical tension that we struggled with most as a research team, and we could not come to a consensus on. In the end, we opted for the preferred approach of the majority of the group, which was to only provide compensation if the participant could provide evidence that they met all of the inclusion criteria. However, we resolved that this was an area in which we would take several steps to 'do things differently' in our future research endeavours (as discussed below).

What we have learned and what we would do differently next time

At the commencement of this study, we, as a research team, were ignorant of the threats posed by potential IPs and the ethical tensions that would emerge as a result. Our experiences in this regard mean that we would choose to do several things differently in future studies where the target population is social workers. We discuss these here in the hope that they will assist other researchers who are targeting a similar demographic in their research endeavours. These suggestions are likely to become more important as the proliferation of AI makes it increasingly easy for participants to impersonate research participants in specific areas like social work.

1. **Have a familiarity with the 'red flag' indicators for Imposter Participants and an agreed protocol for how to respond**.

Retrospectively, we realise that the design of our study was limited by a lack of consideration of the potential impact of IPs. To avoid replicating our mistakes, we recommend that all researchers seeking to recruit social workers as participants should familiarise themselves with the 'red flag' indicators of IPs (irrespective of whether financial incentives for participation are offered or not) (see above). Moreover, they should devise an agreed-upon protocol for how to respond to suspected IPs who slip through the screening process to ensure that this is undertaken fairly, consistently, and in a non-arbitrary fashion. We suggest that this is grounded in social work ethical principles, including respect for persons, beneficence and maintaining data integrity.

2. **Limit the use of social media to the sharing of study sign-up forms whilst employing additional screening measures to ensure social work credentials**

Whilst the use of social media has been shown to have been an effective means of targeting social workers, who are a notoriously difficult demographic to recruit into research (see Jäppinen and Muurinen 2025; Keemink et al. 2025), we believe the use of targeted social media was the core reason for the high number of IPs experienced in our study. Notwithstanding the value of advertising research projects online and via social media (see Keemink et al. 2025), in the future, we would recommend employing additional safeguards to better screen for IPs and reduce the likelihood of them presenting for interview.

For example, we would suggest initially distributing study sign-up forms only through social media advertisements to allow for the collection of additional screening information that can be reviewed prior to inviting prospective participants to an interview. For social work participants, we recommend the requirement that individuals provide

their current/former social work registration number/qualification so that it can be checked against relevant professional databases. We also suggest a requirement for a prospective participant to provide a suitable professional/work email address that can be checked and verified to avoid the chances of bots/fraudulent email signups.

3. **Include a protocol warning of the potential consequences of posing fraudulently as a social worker**

In cases where researchers are seeking to recruit social workers, we recommend that they include a protocol in their study design to ensure all recruitment materials state the explicit references to the risks posed and potential consequences of fraudulently presenting as a social worker, including that this may result in the raising of a 'misuse of title' referral with the social work regulator and, relatedly, prosecution. Such measures may help to avoid any resulting ethical tension as to whether to report a suspected IP or not and will further serve to dissuade IPs from coming forward illegitimately to pose as social workers.

4. **Include clear statements that financial incentives are contingent upon evidencing *all* inclusion criteria, and may be withheld in cases of suspected fraud**

We recommend that future researchers ensure that all study materials (including PIS and consent forms) explicitly state that compensation is contingent upon providing truthful, verifiable information, and that it may be withheld if fraud is detected. This could include asking participants to acknowledge the condition (i.e. on their consent form) that they risk not being compensated if there is suspicion that they are posing fraudulently as a social worker.

Furthermore, wherever possible, we recommend that fellow researchers ensure that compensation offered is limited to requiring a local postal address for physical shopping voucher mailing (and make this clear in all study materials), as this has been shown to be an effective strategy for reducing the tendency for IP signups (see Ziminski and Liddell-Quintyn 2025). On occasions where researchers choose to issue an online voucher (i.e. where they are interviewing those based in international locations and/or where participants may not wish to share a postal address for valid security reasons), we suggest that they may want to include a clearly communicated provision that participants provide some valid form of verifiable identification to receive their compensation (see also Ziminski and Liddell-Quintyn 2025).

Conclusion

IPs are a growing threat to the integrity of research, especially that hosted online. They also pose particular risks for social work researchers not only in terms of data integrity but also to the profession and its service users. Throughout this ethics in practice article, we have reflected on the ethical tensions that emerged because of encountering suspected IPs within our project. We hope that our reflections, strategies for overcoming the dilemmas we encountered, and discussion of what we have learnt and what we would do differently, will provide useful learning and signposting for future researchers who seek to recruit a similar participant demographic.

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