

## Guidance for Research Using the Internet

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*Chaminade University IRB  
September, 2015.*

These guidelines are used by the Chaminade IRB in evaluating internet research proposals. Refer to the full IRB Charter or email the IRB Chair for further guidance.

Ethical guidelines for research studies in which interactions with subjects occur via the internet or e-mail are the same as for studies involving other modes of interaction. Internet-based studies must incorporate the principles of The Belmont Report and Title 45 CFR 46. Subjects' identities must be protected to the extent the researcher is able such as using a secure, password protected study Web site and installing security software on the researcher's computer. Studies must include an informed consent process. With appropriate preparation of the informed consent form, obtaining electronic agreement to voluntarily participate is possible. Research involving minors requires obtaining consent from parents, a legal guardian, or legal representative. Written consent (signatures) may be obtained by mailing or faxing an informed consent form or consent statement to the researcher. Telephone consent may be obtained for low risk studies. A face-to-face interview should be conducted to obtain parental consent for studies with minors that involve more than minimal risk.

When reviewing a proposed Internet-based study, the IRB will want to know how the researcher will:

- Include an informed consent process;
- Ensure that a participant is in the desired age group and that he/she is not a minor—to the extent possible;
- Provide opportunities for potential participants to ask questions and fully understand what they will be doing in the study;
- Provide processes for subjects to withdraw from the study and to decline to answer any question(s);
- Secure all data collected;
- Provide assistance or treatment if subjects are harmed by their participation in a study;
- Ensure that intruders (hackers) will not be able to enter the study, intentionally or inadvertently;
- Provide a link to the online survey, questionnaire, focus group, or interview questions for review.

Researchers may, for example, design an online informed consent form with buttons for selecting "I Agree" and "I Do Not Agree," followed by a "Submit" button. Potential participants who click "I Agree" and "Submit" will be directed to

the survey, questionnaire, focus group, or interview questions. If a potential participant clicks “I Do Not Agree,” he/she should be returned to the study’s home page or directed to a “Thank you for considering participation in my study” page. Other methods for obtaining consent may also be used. A link to “Exit This Study” should be provided to allow participants to withdraw at any point in the study.

Unless a convincing case can be made, no Internet Protocol (IP) addresses may be retained or collected.

The CITI program offers an optional module addressing Internet research. Researchers submitting an application to the IRB for an Internet-based study are encouraged to complete this module.

### **Research Conducted in Online Communities**

Conducting research in online communities, such as chatrooms, blogs, social sites, and gaming sites, requires researchers to respect members of the communities, their privacy, and their right to grant permission to conduct research within their communities. Researchers should take care to conduct research in online communities in such a way as to avoid damaging the reputation of researchers that would result in fewer opportunities for conducting research in online communities. Joining an online community for the purpose of lurking in the background while collecting information and quotes for a research study is unethical and would not be approved by the IRB.

A researcher may set up his/her own chatroom, for example, for a research study. Each person who joins the chatroom may be greeted with a statement about the research study. For a low risk study, the statement may be sufficient. For higher risk studies, obtaining informed consent from participants is needed.

Conducting Internet research involving sensitive topics, such as sexual orientation and activities or illegal activities, requires extreme caution to avoid the loss of confidentiality and release of a participant’s personally identifiable information. The use of pseudonyms and other coding methods may be used and employed with protection of the link between the real names and the pseudonyms or codes.

Researchers need to determine from whom to obtain consent in online communities—the site owner, a group’s gatekeeper, an online personality, and/or individual participants. Sometimes consent is necessary from more than one party.

*Adapted from University of Notre Dame IRB Guidelines, 2015*