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OBTAINING CONSENT FROM ONLINE/REMOTE PARTICIPANTS

When data collection is taking place online or remotely, researchers must adapt their method of obtaining consent. Online environments refer to situations in which data is being collected via web-based recruitment sites (e.g., Mechanical Turk, Prolific.co etc.), web-based experimental platforms (e.g. Pavlovia or JATOS) or via other web-based tools (e.g., questionnaires presented via SurveyMonkey, Qualtrics, Google Forms, etc.). Remote data collection refers to situations where material is sent to known participants via email, post or where telephone or video interviews are being conducted.

In all of these situations, as the participant is not immediately able to provide written, informed consent in the presence of the researcher, alternative steps need to be taken. Most importantly, in order to be in line with the UM Research Code of Practice, all online/remote participants must be presented with a clear description of the study, what will be required of them, and they must be informed how their data will be managed. Finally, it must be clear that participants consent for their data to be used for research purposes. How such consent is obtained varies depending on the environment, as detailed in the following sections. Example information/consent forms relating to online and remote studies can be found at <https://www.um.edu.mt/research/ethics/resources/samples>.

For online studies, participants should be presented with the relevant information using an online version of a standard information/consent form and/or the information should be presented in the online study description. If possible, an option to download the information/consent form should be offered to the participant. Having been presented with the relevant information, it should be made clear that by proceeding with the study, the participant is providing informed consent. For example, this could be achieved via a “confirm” or “cancel” decision box in the online tool or by the use of a simple “Proceed” button. In any event, data collection should only be possible once the relevant information has been shown to the participant and it is clear that they have chosen to proceed.

For remote studies involving direct contact with known participants, the information and/or consent form should be sent via email, or via post before commencing data collection. You should confirm with your FREC whether such direct contact requires the use of an intermediary. In the ideal

situation, the form is printed, signed, then sent back to the researcher via email (scanned or photographed) or in the post. Once received, data collection may begin either by sending the research material via email or post, or by scheduling the relevant interviews/focus groups.

Additionally, for remote studies involving telephone or video data collection, the session should always start with the participants giving an audio-recorded declaration that they have read and understood the nature of the study, and that they give their consent to participate. If you have provided a valid reason for not being able to obtain signed consent forms from participants prior to the session, then researcher should additionally record full verbal consent whereby the recruitment letter/consent form is read out before data collection and the participants verbally agree to all the conditions. In all cases, audio-recorded verbal consent should be stored separately from the data collected, including recordings of the interviews / focus groups.

There may be additional ethical considerations when conducting online research that simultaneously involves more than one participant, such as focus groups. One concern is the added risk that a participant records a group discussion without permission. In order to mitigate against this happening, the consent form for focus groups should include a statement of the type: "I understand that I am NOT to record the focus group discussion in any format".

In the case of students, the above guidance on options for acquiring informed consent in online/remote scenarios is to be used within the context of students' FREC approved research, under the guidance of their supervisor who is responsible for ensuring that research is carried out using ethical best practice as laid down in the UM Research Code of Practice.