

**UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-WHITEWATER  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS**

**INTERNET RESEARCH**

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Researchers utilizing the Internet as a research tool must address the following issues (unless considered "not applicable") and include information on each issue in their protocol and informed consent:

1. State whether the Internet site is considered *public* or *private* space. State whether you have obtained (or how you attempted to obtain) permission from the list owner or administrator (if applicable) to recruit subjects from, or post messages on, the site. If no list owner or administrator can be contacted, researchers should post a message of interest to conduct research to the list participants for their discussion and consideration before informed consent documents are provided to participants. Researchers shall also obtain permission to use archived data from a list or site. (Permission may be verified by an e-mail from the list owner or administrator, and a copy should be included in your protocol.)
2. Inform the subjects that online communications, in general, are considered *public* in nature. Electronic records of such communications may therefore be subject to open records requests.
3. Inform the subjects that there is no completely secure interaction online. The following statement must be inserted into the informed consent document: *As an online participant in this research, there is always the risk of intrusion by outside agents, i.e., hacking, and therefore the possibility of being identified.* Such a statement highlights concerns related to data confidentiality and the risk/benefit of participation in the study.
4. State that subjects provided with an online e-mail account are allowed *and encouraged* to change passwords at regular intervals.
5. If the researcher uses encryption software, a thorough set of instructions shall be included in the protocol and provided to the subjects.
6. The protocol will describe how subjects will be identified in written reports, whether by use of their screen names or by pseudonyms (if applicable).
7. The researcher will state that the data and identifiers shall be kept on different servers/computers<sup>2</sup>.
8. Researchers shall provide a forum for participants to ask questions online (e.g., the researchers' e-mail address) before consenting to participate in a research project.
9. Researchers shall identify how participant identity will be safeguarded on a forum where some participants consent while others do not.

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<sup>2</sup> The Research and Sponsored Programs office offers a laptop computer that can be checked out and utilized for storage of identifiers and/or data.

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10. The researcher will provide a yes/no statement or checkbox in the online format to substitute for a signature on the consent form.
11. Online research with minors is *strongly discouraged*. If minors are recruited for online research, a written, signed informed consent by a parent or guardian is required.