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## **REB Guidelines: Using Video Conferencing Platforms for collecting data from human participants**

Although video conferencing platforms are convenient and critical to enable the conduct of research at this time, all cloud-based online communication platforms carry inherent risks and should only be used where the risk to participants is considered 'low' or 'moderate' should data inadvertently be disclosed. It is difficult to guarantee the security of any online communication platform. Researchers should be aware that most platforms will allow any participant to capture or record the contents of a communication in real time, which potentially introduces a further risk. This is of particular concern for focus groups conducted via a video-conferencing platform, as a participant could record the information being provided by other participants. Consent processes should make the potential risks to participants clear and offer alternate methods for data collection should participants so wish.

**Obtaining consent:** If solely using online methods to interact with participants it may be more challenging to obtain written consent, as this is traditionally done by having the participant physically sign a consent form in the presence of the researcher. Participants must be consent and be fully informed so it is important that they receive all the information. This will most likely be provided by emailing a copy to the participant or by placing the file online (i.e. on OneDrive) to be downloaded. You will need to confirm they have received, read and understood the information and their consent should be obtained and recorded. When using online platforms participants should clearly understand the format of the recording (audio, video or both). It should also be made clear to them where the recordings are stored and how long they are stored.

Researchers might want to avoid using recording functionality built into platforms to record interviews and instead use a separate device (such as an audio-recorder) that has a secure password. If using the build in recording device on the platform you should understand the default location where the information is stored so that it can be retrieved and stored securely. Files should be removed and deleted from any outside file storage site and kept securely in University approved secure storage locations. It is good research practice to fully delete recordings when transcriptions and note-taking are complete.

**Confidentiality while interacting with participants:** When interacting/interviewing participants online or by phone, researchers should make sure they are in a private and quiet place with as little background noise as possible and where they will not be disturbed. Researchers should ensure that participant confidentiality is maintained and that they will not be overheard or seen. Researchers should use a quiet, private location where their screen cannot be seen by others. Researchers may also wish to use headphones rather than their computer speakers and take care as their interactions progress to ensure they are not verbalizing confidential information (if there is a risk of being overheard). Researchers should also confirm that participants have considered the above and that they are also somewhere



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suitable. This is additionally important for an online focus group, as one person not adhering to this may impact the confidentiality of all the other participants.

There may be challenges for both researchers and participants who are sharing limited accommodation or office space with others. In these circumstances, researchers must consider the sensitivity of the research or topics for discussion and, if privacy cannot be guaranteed, whether it is appropriate to continue and if so, only continue with participants' explicit consent.

For online focus groups, researchers should develop a basic set of meeting rules that include the above and some basic etiquette, such as not talking over others.

Below are some technologies that Yukon University (YukonU) makes available that may help facilitate research and reduce the need for face-to-face interactions, while allowing research teams to communicate with each other and with participants as needed.

### **Institutional Subscriptions**

- Microsoft Teams
- Zoom
- Skype for Business

Institutional subscriptions offer certain protections to members of the YukonU community. We recommend you use the MS Teams and Zoom for research activities which involve remote video communications. Each service offers some advantages and disadvantages, and ultimately the choice largely comes down to preference. It is important to note that none of these platforms should be considered 'fully secure'. Their use would be considered appropriate for low and medium risk studies, where the risk to participants should the contents of the interview be released is considered 'low' or 'moderate'. However, the use of any video-conferencing platform for any data collection where the risk to participants should the contents of any interview be released is considered 'high' is not appropriate. Such data should be collected via face-to-face interviews or by an encrypted voice calling or messaging service such as 'Signal' which has clear policies about the storing of logs of communication metadata.

Consent forms should include language that makes it clear what platforms are being used, and also that no guarantee of privacy of data can be made, so the risks of participation are clear.

An example of language that might be used:

*"This study will use the 'X' platform to collect data, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. A link to their privacy policy is available here (LINK). Please note that while this service is approved for collecting data in this study by the Yukon University Research Ethics Board, there is a small risk with any*



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*online platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the research team. If you are concerned about this, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements for you to participate, perhaps via telephone. Please talk to the researcher if you have any concerns."*

Consent forms should also include language that participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of a meeting / data collection session, and in the case of focus groups remind participants that researchers cannot guarantee that all participants will refrain from recording the session.

The consent form should specify what is being recorded (audio only, or both audio and video). Unless seeing the participant(s) via video is essential to the data collection methodology, the participant(s) should be given the option to participate in the meeting by audio only. When making recordings, it is important that they are saved to a local computer rather than to the cloud-based service wherever possible. Where recordings must be saved to a cloud, they should be downloaded to local storage and deleted from the cloud immediately.

Any meeting details should **not** be publicly posted, and should limit access to authorized participants, perhaps through the use of a meeting password or by requiring authenticated access.

For more information about the Zoom platform:

- [Yukon University REB Guidelines for Using Zoom for Research Involving Human Participants](#)
- [REB Guidelines for Interviews on Zoom \(draft\)](#)
- [Privacy and Security for Zoom Video Communication](#)

For more information about Microsoft Teams, please see here:

- [Using Microsoft Teams for research involving human participants](#)

There are also tips on [conducting remote online focus group sessions](#).

If you are applying to YukonU REB and have questions about using online communication platforms for human participant research, or would like further guidance on the REB review process, please contact Valoree Walker, Research Ethics Coordinator by email to [ywalker@yukonu.ca](mailto:ywalker@yukonu.ca).

For technical support with Zoom or Microsoft Teams contact the Yukon University Help Desk at <https://help.yukonu.ca/>

*These guidelines have been adapted from resource materials posted online by McMaster University, Simon Fraser University and Trinity College, Dublin University.*