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## ***Informed Consent as a Component of Online Research Ethics - - The Perspective of the Participants<sup>2</sup>***

### **Extended summary**

The paper discusses informed consent as a component of online research ethics. The Internet/www, as a special context in which and through which online research is realized, imposes the need to reconsider certain issues related to informed consent. These issues before all else concern the possibilities and the way of realization of informed consent, i.e., its characteristics.

The process based on acquaintance with relevant information about specific online research creating opportunity for participants to make an independent decision to join the research is labelled with syntagm “informed consent”. By obtaining the official consent from the participant to take part in the research, his/her right to self-determination is respected, while, at the same time, the researcher thus transfers a part of responsibility for accepting and agreeing to what the participant will meet during the research.

The analysis of the process of obtaining informed consent is focused on the consideration of four basic preconditions: competence - the decision is made by a mature individual, capable of independently making such type of decision; information - potential participants are acquainted with relevant information about the research; understanding - future participants adequately and fully understand the information about the research that they received from the researcher; voluntariness - potential participants are able to choose to participate in the re-

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search freely, i.e., voluntary. Regarding the first two preconditions, special attention is paid to the difficulties that accompany the realization of the process. The following problems are considered: the type and scope of research information with which potential participants should be acquainted, the possibility of the influence of researchers on the accuracy of this information; dilemmas regarding whether the participants read the text based on which informed consent is carried out, and to what extent they understand the information stated in it, etc.

The empirical research is aimed to describe the characteristics of the process of obtaining informed consent in online research, such as: the frequency of usage of informed consent in online research; the content, comprehensibility, and usefulness of the text based on which informed consent is carried out; as well as examination of the statistically significant differences related to the mentioned characteristics, regarding the environment of the schools in which teachers are employed, their age, and the length of their tenure.

The research was conducted on a sample of 153 teachers employed in primary schools in the Republic of Serbia. The instrument, developed for research purposes, is a combination of survey-type questions (closed, open and combined) and a five-point descriptive scale. In addition to the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, the content of the questions was concentrated around the following problems: teacher participation in online research, frequency of using informed consent, content, comprehensibility, and usefulness of the text given as a base for consent. The research was conducted online, via the Kwiksveys application. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the variables. To examine whether there are statistically significant differences between individual groups of participants regarding the characteristics of the process of obtaining informed consent in online research, the  $\chi^2$  test and Kramer's V correlation coefficient were used.

The results of the empirical research indicate that most of the participants had the experience of giving informed consent in the online research in which they have participated so far; that the text usually contained information about the purpose, goal, and about tasks of research, as well as about the protection of participants' identity; and that most teachers evaluate the content of the text as understandable and useful. The environment of the schools in which teachers are employed is a variable on which the characteristics of the process of obtaining informed consent mainly depend. Statistically significant differences were registered in relation to the representation on the purpose and goal of the research in the informative text, as well as in the assessment of the comprehensibility and usefulness of the obtained information. The results also point to the conclusion that teachers from Belgrade and the older teachers have higher expectations in terms of certain characteristics of that process in comparison to the teachers from schools in other Serbian cities and concerning the younger teachers.

Improving the process of obtaining informed consent places new demands on researchers in online research. First, from the perspective of the participants, the importance of potentially relevant information about the research should be assessed. Second, a special challenge for researchers is balancing participants that are adequately informed about the research and the scope of the text; as well as consideration that, to some extent, there are differences in expectations regarding the content of the text between certain groups of participants. However,

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giving more detailed guidelines about the improvement of the process of obtaining informed consent from participants in online research requires new empirical research.

**Keywords:** ethical issues in research, informed consent, online research

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