Chat Technology
Chat technology is a real-time, instant messaging electronic communication between two users, connected by a network. Once a chat has been established, users enter messages that appear on the other user’s screen. Many networks and online services offer a chat feature.

Chat technology includes a number of free or paid solutions. Examples of free solutions include SnapChat, Gmail Chat, Skype, and Yahoo! Messenger. Examples of paid solutions include: Velaro, Olark, LiveChat, and SnapEngage. Depending on the technology selected, it can either run as a stand-alone program, web service, or web application.

When communicating with a research participant via online chat that is not part of a videoconference, or by text in general, investigators should consider the inability to observe visual and auditory cues, which could lead to possible problems in interpretation of both questions and responses. Voice intonation and facial expressions are often used to convey and/or emphasize meaning. Thus, investigators may need to ask explicit clarifying questions in order to accurately interpret responses, and provide additional information in order to ensure that potential participants understand questions and information being communicated via a chat session. Another consideration is that a separate language or shorthand has developed around chat technology. If investigators or participants are not familiar with this lingo, chat sessions may generate more confusion than clarity. (See netlingo.com/acronyms.php for a list of acronyms and text shorthand)

Chat technologies used for research purposes are generally not encrypted. The consent should inform research participants that chat sessions are not encrypted or secured during their transmission, and could be intercepted or received from their browser cache.

IRBs often do not have the expertise to evaluate chat technology. Thus, IRBs often require sign off from others to determine whether the chat technologies are suitable for use in research in reference to regulations such as HIPAA and other data privacy laws. If the investigator decides to use a chat service, the service offered by the company should be fully understood and may need to be approved by IT and the IRB for use in research. Keep in mind each chat technology company has its own terms of use agreement and privacy policies. Users must follow rules dictated by the terms of use; some are common sense, while others are based on the company’s policies.

Below are model statements investigators may adapt to describe chat technology.

**Sample: Chat Messaging - Confidentiality**
Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used. Chat messages are not secure when sent in an unencrypted format. First, they can be intercepted (read by others or altered by others), and second, the reader cannot be certain that the sender is who they claim to be.

**Sample: Chat Messaging - Encryption**
The most effective way of ensuring that what we write will only be read by each other is to use encryption. Some encryption programs are packaged as portable software, which means you
can run them from a USB flash drive on any computer. If we communicate without encryption, it is possible that third parties could intercept and read our conversation without our consent. However as long as your information cannot be easily re-identified, any risk to you will be reduced.¹ [If the research team recommends using encryption software, include “ask the research staff about encryption software”].

Sample: Chat Messaging – Use of Different Email Account
For this research study, you may want to set up a new instant messaging account not associated with your full name. Using an instant messaging account that is not linked to your full name (e.g. someguy@hotmail.com) will also provide a degree of confidentiality.

Sample: Chat Message - Storage
Text messages are stored by the telecommunications provider and therefore may not be secure.