ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR MINDCARE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

I confirm that I have considered the ethical considerations my research proposal gives rise to and will obtain ethical clearance from my university as soon as possible after submitting my proposal and before data collection begins

☑ **confirm**

Task One: Ethical Considerations

MindCare Burundi is created to offer accessible and culturally relevant mental health support. Since this project deals with sensitive user information, it's important to handle and protect the data responsibly while addressing key ethical concerns.(WHO, 2021)

1. Data Management and Storage

To keep user information safe and private, we will take the following steps:

- Encrypt all user data, both while being sent and when stored, to prevent unauthorized access.

- Users' identities will not be linked to their mental health assessments or counseling sessions.

- Only authorized personnel will be able to access sensitive data, and strict security measures will be in place.

- All information will only be stored as long as necessary and deleted once it is no longer needed(European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2016).

2. A possibility of discovering anomalies in existing systems

- The research will not cover some biases or even inefficiencies in current mental health interventions.

- Any identified anomalies will be documented and ethically reported right away.

- Findings must be used to improve the system, and they should ensure that no harm is caused to users.

3. Use of Pre-Built Systems and Algorithms

- MindCare Burundi ought to use some existing frameworks for self-assessments.

- Any third-party components will be reviewed to make sure they follow security and ethical standards.

- Any borrowed code should be credited, and automated decision-making tools will be checked for fairness.(Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

4. Getting Ethical Approval and Data Permissions

- Ethical approval will be obtained from the university's ethics committee before data collection begins.(National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

- If using secondary data sources, we will obtain the necessary permissions from relevant institutions.

5. Protecting Minors and Vulnerable Users

- The platform shall include enough guidelines to ensure responsible use by minors.

- Professional counseling should be prioritized for vulnerable users.

- Minors will require parental or guardian consent before using our services.

- More safeguards will be put in place to protect all minors from harmful content or potential risks (WHO, 2021).

6. Avoiding Harmful Labels and Psychological Effects

- Users might misunderstand or even misinterpret self-assessment results and think they are 'depressed' or 'abnormal.'"

- The MindCare Burundi will make it clear that self-assessments are not official diagnoses and will encourage immediate support from professionals whenever needed.

- Emotional support and crisis intervention resources will be made available all the time.

- Community engagement efforts will help reduce stigma around mental health issues (Floridi, 2013).

7. Impact on Social and Work Life

- Keeping user identities anonymous will prevent any risk related to social stigma, workplace discrimination, and so forth.

- Personal details will not be shared with other people or third parties.

- Educational resources will promote a positive view of mental health and will take part in reducing harmful stereotypes.

8. Handling Confidential or Personal Data

- All personal data will be protected according to ethical and legal standards established.

- Users will be informed about how their data will be used and ought to give consent.

- Data will be anonymized before being analyzed for research or anything else.

- Secure storage and deletion policies will be put in place to prevent unauthorized access to private data.

9. Transparency and Avoiding Deception

- The platform will not use any misleading tactics during the data collection process(Boddington, 2017).

- All interactions should be transparent, and our users will have clear information about terms of use and conditions.

- All AI-generated responses will be labeled so that users can differentiate them from human responses.

10. Handling Sensitive Mental Health Topics

- Since our platform will deal with serious topics like mental illness and trauma, all content will be designed to be supportive enough.

- Users in distress will be guided to professional resources.

- Research findings will be shared carefully to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about mental health across Burundi.

Task Two: Applying Ethical Standards and Professional Conduct

Project Plan and Timeline

A detailed timeline outlining the project phases and milestones is included in the appendix. Here is an overview of the key phases:

- **Week 1-2:** Research and Ethical Approval

  - Research on existing mental health challenges in all parts of Burundi.

  - Identify key stakeholders, including mental health professionals, community health workers and leaders, and so on.

- Submit an ethics approval request to the university and respond to feedback on time.

By the end of this phase, we'll have a research report that guides our work and an ethics approval certificate confirming we're following best practices.

- **Week 3-4:** Designing and Implementing MindCare Platform

    Design the platform's core features (counseling, self-assessment, and educational resources).

    - Create wireframes and user interface prototypes.

    - Develop the backend using Django and PostgreSQL.

    - Implement data protection features like encryption and access controls.

At the end of this stage, we'll have a working prototype, a secure backend using Django & PostgreSQL, and a platform that protects user privacy.

- **Week 5-6:** Testing and Improvements

    -Conduct enough testing with a small group of users.

    - Collect feedback on accessibility, cultural relevance, ease of use, etc

    - Improve system performance and fix bugs found during testing.

    - Ensure self-assessment tools work ethically and correctly.

By the end of this phase, we'll have a beta version of the platform, a user feedback report, and a list of necessary improvements.

- **Week 7-8:** Deployment and Feedback Collection

    - Deploy the platform on a secure hosting server.

    - Run a pilot program with mental health professionals and selected community members.

- Gather necessary user feedback to assess platform effectiveness.

- Prepare a final report outlining key findings, challenges, areas for improvement, etc…

At the end of this phase, we'll have: a fully launched platform, feedback from real users, and a final report summarizing everything we've learned.

1. Impact on Stakeholders

The main users of MindCare Burundi are:

- People with depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns. MindCare Burundi will help them access information and support easily.

- Family members or close friends of people experiencing mental health challenges will use MindCare Burundi to learn more about mental health and ways to support the person.

- Doctors, therapists, and counselors will use MindCare Burundi to share knowledge, guide users, and connect them with resources.

2. Community Impact

MindCare Burundi will benefit the Burundian community in two ways:

- Since many people in Burundi and beyond are afraid to talk about mental health due to fear of judgment. MindCare Burundi will change this by raising awareness and showing that seeking help is normal and important. In short, It will reduce stigma.

- In Burundi, mental health services are hard to find or too expensive. MindCare Burundi will make support more accessible by providing important information and guiding people to the right services.

3. Ethical Responsibility

Since MindCare Burundi deals with sensitive topics, this is how we will protect our users:

-User information will be kept safe and confidential to build trust and prevent misuse.

-MindCare will avoid content that could cause distress or mislead users. It will provide guidance and recommend seeking professional help whenever needed.

-Misinformation about mental health can be dangerous, MindCare Burundi will only provide trusted, expert-backed content to help users make informed choices.

Relevant Ethical Frameworks Guiding the Research

Below are frameworks that will guide MindCare Burundi research by ensuring compliance with ethical standards and best practices in data protection, user privacy, and responsible research conduct:

1. **The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).**

   This framework emphasizes three key ethical principles in research:
   - Respect for individuals: MindCare Burundi will make sure that users provide consent before sharing any personal information.
   - Beneficence: MindCare will be designed to protect users from harm and promote well-being.
   - Justice: MindCare Burundi will ensure equitable access to mental health support, especially for underserved communities.

2. **WHO Research Ethics Guidelines (2020)**

   These guidelines are good for conducting ethical research in mental health interventions. MindCare Burundi will follow these recommendations by:
   - Making sure self-assessments are scientifically valid and culturally appropriate.
   - Giving clear guidance on when and how to seek professional mental health support.
   - Putting strong protections in place to keep vulnerable users, especially minors, safe.

3. **GDPR Data Protection Principles(2016)**

   The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is an international framework for data security and privacy. MindCare Burundi will follow GDPR principles by:

- Protecting user data with encryption and strict security controls.

- Being transparent about how data is collected, stored, and used.

- Giving users control over their personal data, including the option to delete it if they choose.

4. **[ALU Research Ethics Framework](#)**

   This framework aligns the MindCare project with the ethical research policies of the African Leadership University (ALU). It will guide the project by:

- Requiring ethical approval before collecting user data.

- Ensuring fairness and responsibility in research.

- Promoting honesty and integrity in all research involving human participants.

References

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3. Floridi, L. (2013). *The ethics of information*. Oxford University Press, USA. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199641321.001.0001

4. Mittelstadt, B. D., Allo, P., Taddeo, M., Wachter, S., & Floridi, L. (2016). The ethics of algorithms: Mapping the debate. *Big Data & Society, 3*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716679679

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6. World Health Organization. (2021). *Ethics and governance of artificial intelligence for health*. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240029200