

Helpful IRB Hints When Collecting Data Using On-line Surveys

Online surveys are a commonly used method of data collection, however this methodology does present some unique challenges when it comes to IRB review. If you are using online surveys to collect data for your study involving human subjects, please make sure to review the following and address them in your IRB submission as necessary.

Considerations:

- Online surveys are not necessarily anonymous.
 - Many survey software programs automatically capture IP address and link it to the survey response.
 - You may have to take very specific steps to anonymize the data and, in the cases of collecting very sensitive data, the IRB may not consider it to be anonymous.
 - This may impact the review category determination (exempt vs. expedited)
 - Use the term “confidential” in consent information and protocol submission if the data are not anonymous
- Even if you take all the necessary steps to anonymize a survey response, if you link to another survey from within the main data collection survey, the responses to the main survey may not be able to be considered to be anonymous. This technique is commonly done to record email addresses for incentive distribution without recording email address on the main survey, however, time/date stamps from the end of the main survey and the starting of the incentive survey can link these two surveys. This allows the possibility of linking survey responses to an individual. This may impact the ability of the Investigators to qualify for exempt review and use the term anonymous. For most studies this may not have any impact to the IRB review, but, in studies collecting information about very sensitive topics- illegal drug use, sexual behavior, abuse, etc... this may disqualify the study from an exempt determination.
- Subjects must have the option to skip questions- please ensure to program the survey so that there are no questions where an answer is required.

Helpful hints for administering online surveys and facilitating IRB approval

- In your IRB submission, make sure to detail the following:
 - what software program you are using (Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, etc..),
 - what identifiers, if any, will be collected, and
 - what steps you have taken, if any, to anonymize the data.

- With online surveys it is common practice to add the consent language as the first page of the survey and ensuring that subjects have to click through to the next page to indicate their consent, or click a Yes/No checkbox to indicate consent.
- If using an online survey with an online consent form for data collection in an expedited or full board study, you will need to provide justification for waiving documentation of consent (not obtaining a signature on a consent form).
- In consent documents submitted for review, make sure to include the optional language related to online surveys related to risks and confidentiality. Make sure the terms confidential and anonymous are used correctly and consistently.
- If linking two survey instruments for incentive recording purposes, please include the following statement in the confidentiality section of the consent information sheet: “While your name is not being collected on the main survey there is a small chance that the two surveys could be linked”

Use of Amazon Mechanical Turk (many of these points also apply to other panel respondents)

- If you will be posting your survey as a HIT for Amazon MTurk workers there are a few things to know. Unless very specific steps are followed- surveys completed by MTurk workers are NOT anonymous. MTurk workers must report their Turk ID numbers in order to receive payments and these numbers can be directly linked to a person’s amazon profile making them identifiers. If you are using the survey software embedded within Mechanical Turk, this will allow Amazon to view responses and verify completeness of data in order to assign payments which further reduces any claims to confidentiality. Subjects need to be made aware of this in the consent form. Please also be aware that surveys must be programmed so that questions are allowed to be skipped by a worker and MTurk workers should be made aware if payment is dependent on completion of all questions. In cases of sensitive questions, the IRB may not consider a survey using MTurk workers to be anonymous and it would therefore require expedited review.
- Please contact the IRB Manager with any questions about how to proceed using Amazon MTurk workers and suggestions for options
- Please use the “Guidelines for Academic Requesters” available at <http://guidelines.wearedynamo.org/> as a resource for preparing your IRB submission