

Simmons University Institutional Review Board Amazon MTurk Guidance

What is MTurk?

MTurk, or Amazon Mechanical Turk, is a crowdsourcing marketplace. According to Amazon, “[MTurk] makes it easier for individuals and businesses to outsource their processes and jobs to a distributed workforce who can easily perform these tasks virtually. The Mechanical Turk service gives businesses access to a diverse, on-demand, scalable workforce and gives workers a selection of thousands of tasks to complete whenever it’s convenient.”

Amazon Mechanical Turk is a site primarily for matching people with work and submitting payments to workers. ***MTurk is not designed with an eye towards human subjects research. It lacks the sophistication and security measures of dedicated survey software tools and collection of data by Amazon is subject to Amazon’s Privacy Policy and Terms of Service.***

How are academic researchers using MTurk?

MTurk allows researchers to have access to a large population of willing participants for research studies. Researchers can generate a Human Intelligence Task (HIT) that gives MTurk users a title and description of the online task. It also states the amount of compensation users will receive and the amount of time it takes to complete. Researchers have also been using MTurk as a method of recruitment, while bringing participants to an online survey posted on a different software site (i.e. Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, Google Forms, Survey Gizmo, etc.). MTurk houses a more diverse, heterogenous, population that is more attractive to researchers than the typical campus population. It also allows for more pseudo-anonymity between researchers and participants by having a third party (Amazon) oversee payments to participants.

What do Simmons researchers need to consider when submitting an MTurk study to the IRB?

- **Recruitment**
 - The title of the study and the description of the HIT are acting as a form of recruitment. Researchers should be sure to include the title and HIT description, as it will appear in MTurk, as part of their protocol.
 - Researchers should be clear about compensation in their description for participants, and how long it takes for participants to receive their payment.
 - Clearly state the time required to complete the task or survey.

- Participants should be told if there is a screener in order to qualify. It would be important for researchers to make clear if participants are being paid for the time it takes to complete the screener or not. One option would be to list qualifications for participation in the description. Another option would be to make a hit for the Screener (which would pay a nominal amount) and then if a participant is eligible for the main study, they get a bonus amount or are invited to a follow-up HIT which includes the main study.
- Researchers should be clear about the type of task participants are being asked to do (i.e. watching videos, writing, etc.). Be aware that more complex tasks elicit higher compensation.
- The link to the online survey should be included in the IRB protocol **exactly** how it will appear to participants.
- **Consent**
 - The first page of the survey should be the consent document. Please see simmons.edu/irb for guidance on online survey consent.
- **Debrief**
 - Any study using either incomplete disclosure or deception, where participants consent to a study without being fully informed about the study's true aims, should include a debriefing form at the end of the survey that explains the true purpose of the study.
 - That debriefing form would require participants to answer a final question giving researchers permission to use their data.
- **Confidentiality**
 - Anonymity cannot be guaranteed in any online environment where data is being collected.
 - MTurk IDs can easily be linked to individuals' Amazon profiles including Amazon Wish Lists and previous product reviews. This should be noted in the potential risks portion of the project description. In the consent portion of the survey, participants should be encouraged to create a separate Amazon account that they use solely for the purposes of MTurk.
 - MTurk collects IP addresses, personal identifiable information (name, email addresses, and physical address), and survey responses. However, researchers do not have access to this information and cannot link responses to participants.
 - Researchers must be careful in deciding what information to collect and MTurk IDs should not be collected. If collecting MTurk IDs is necessary, then the researchers should ensure that worker IDs are kept confidential and secure, are not linked back to survey data, and are deleted after use.

- Using an external software site for MTurk survey research is recommended, particularly when questions are intended to solicit information that may be considered sensitive or personal, or that may pose greater-than-minimal risk to participants. For example, Qualtrics or Survey Monkey, or Google Forms may be used to collect survey data.

Additional things to consider with regard to confidentiality of participants identity and data are the Amazon MTurk Terms of Service (TOS) and online survey software (Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, Google Forms, etc.) TOS especially as it relates to the collection of participants online behavior and history (through the use of cookies or other tracking systems) and the selling of participants data to third parties. It would also be important for researchers to be aware of any policies or procedures in place by MTurk and/or online survey software companies when a breach of data occurs. It might be helpful to think about the researchers own protocol for when a breach of data security occurs. This information could then be relayed to participants through the consent.

Sources:

<https://www.mturk.com/>

https://research.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/10/mechanical_turk.pdf

<https://www.umass.edu/research/guidance/mturk-guidance>

<https://cphs.berkeley.edu/mechanicalturk.pdf>