Online Survey Tools

Investigators may utilize online surveys or questionnaires to gather data from many participants in a short amount of time. There are a wide variety of online tools available for online surveys. Use of third party survey software companies such as SurveyMonkey, Psychsurveys.org, Mechanical Turk, Zoomerang, Lime, and others may be permitted for most minimal risk studies that employ online survey procedures. However, it is important to note that third party survey software companies differ from survey tools made available through academic institutions (e.g., Qualtrics or REDCap). For example, when using a third party to administer surveys, the website might store collected data on their own company backups or server logs which may be kept beyond the timeframe of the research project. The investigator should be aware of the conditions and terms of the survey company’s storage and retention policy, and include relevant information in the protocol or other documents submitted to the IRB, including the consent information provided to participants. Investigators should check with their institution’s IRB and/or IT department for a list of vetted online survey tools.

Data security requirements for projects that include online surveys or questionnaires will depend on the design and complexity of the project and the specific study population. Some factors for consideration include: a) whether it is a one-time survey or a longitudinal study with follow-up; b) whether participants will be able to stop and re-enter the survey(s); c) whether data will be collected to facilitate a remuneration process; and d) whether minors are included as a population and, if so, any applicable parental permission considerations. If security measures are not adequate to protect the data being collected (e.g., the risk/benefit ratio is too high), use of the given survey company may not be approved.

Few surveys are truly anonymous. Even though a participant may not be asked for his/her name in the survey, other pieces of information (IP address, email address, zip code, etc.) and/or demographic questions (sex and race, especially in a small sample with low diversity) can potentially be used to glean the identity of individual participants. As part of the consent process, prior to participation research participants need to be informed of these concerns and all data security measures that will be taken.

Below are model statements investigators may adapt to describe online survey tools.

Sample: Participating in an Online Survey

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to complete a computer survey that asks you to [describe in detail what you want the participant to do]. We expect this survey to take [enter the number of minutes] minutes to complete.

Investigators will not be able to link your survey/interview responses to you, but they will know that you participated in the research if you provide your contact information. We plan

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to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you.

You may choose to not answer an individual question or you may skip any section of the survey by skipping the question or clicking “Next” at the bottom of each survey page to move to the next question. ¹

Sample: Coded Responses
Your survey responses will be coded so that the research staff will not be able to link your responses back to you. When completing the survey, your responses will only be saved to the survey software and accessible for the research staff to view after you hit “submit.” Only authorized research staff will be given access to the survey data, but since the survey software is located on the Internet there is a risk it could be hacked into by unauthorized users. To further protect your survey information, make sure to use a strong password into the survey software system and to not share that password with anyone. <<If applicable, the survey includes a section at the end for you to include your personal contact information for the research staff to contact you for further information. If you are concerned about your identity being found out, please talk to the research staff on ways to protect your survey information.>>.³

Sample: Participating in a Survey – Provide Email Address
If you wish to participate in this research, please follow this link and fill out a survey: [Insert URL here]. The survey will take you [ex.15-20 minutes] to complete.

At the end of the survey, you will be asked to provide your email address. Your response is confidential, and your colleagues’ responses are anonymous. After we finish collecting data and make sure your response is matched with your raters’ responses, your email address will be deleted from the data.

Sample: Participating in a Survey – I agree/I do not agree
Please retain (print) a copy of this form for your records. If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and will consent to participate in the study, click on the “I Agree” button to begin the survey/experiment.

If you do not wish to participate in this study, please click the “I Do Not Agree” button to exit this program.⁴

Sample: Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap)
This study will collect data in Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap). REDCap was developed specifically around HIPAA-Security guidelines and is implemented and maintained according to [Institution Name] guidelines. REDCap currently supports > 500 academic/non-profit consortium partners on six continents and 38,800 research end-users. REDCap servers


are securely housed in an on-site limited access data center managed by [name of institution’s department here (e.g. divisions of biostatics)]. All web-based information transmission is encrypted. The data is all stored on a private, firewall-protected network. All users are given individual user names ids and passwords, and their access is restricted on a role-specific basis.

**Sample: Survey Monkey and the US Patriot Act**

Please note that the online survey is hosted by Survey Monkey, which is a web survey company located in the USA. All responses to the survey will be stored and accessed in the USA. This company is subject to U.S. Laws, in particular, to the US Patriot Act/Domestic Security Enhancement Act allowing authorities to access records with your responses stored and accessed in the USA. The security and privacy policy for Survey Monkey can be viewed at: surveymonkey.com/mp/policy/privacy-policy.

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6 Considerations and Recommendations Concerning Internet Research and Human Subjects Research Regulations, with Revisions. SACHRP, 13 Mar. 2013. PDF.