IRB Guidance and Recommendations for Using Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for Social/Behavioral Projects:

What is Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)?

MTurk is a website run by Amazon that works as a readily available marketplace to match "workers" with available work from various "requesters." MTurk is a crowdsourcing platform often used for conducting human subject's research. Review MTurk's Acceptable Use Policy before using MTurk.

Acquaint yourself with MTurk by visiting Amazon.com and reading about MTurk features.

- Amazon's Welcome Page: mturk.com

- Amazon's Advanced "How To" Guide: http://docs.amazonwebservices.com/AWSMechTurk/latest/AWSMechanicalTurkGetting StartedGuide/

- Amazon's FAQs: https://www.mturk.com/help

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 HIT (Human Intelligence Task) 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. Because MTurk is being used primarily as a recruitment site, researchers have been routing users to links for their online surveys that are housed at different online survey software sites (i.e. – Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, Google Forms, etc.). MTurk houses a more diverse, heterogeneous, population that is more attractive to researchers than the typical college campus population. It also allows for pseudo-anonymity between researchers and participants by having a third party (Amazon) overseeing payments (compensation) to participants.

Amazon MTurk is a site primarily for matching people with work and submitting payments to workers. It 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.

What do academic 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 part of the

IRB application. In the description, researchers should be sure to include the following information:

- Be clear about compensation and bonuses. Also, it would be useful for participants to know how long it will take for the researchers to approve their HIT (i.e., how long it takes for turkers to receive payment).
- Clearly and accurately state the time required to complete the task.
- 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 turker is eligible for the main study, they get a bonus amount or are invited to a follow-up HIT which includes the main study.
- Be clear about the type of task participants are being asked to do. For instance, if the task involves writing, or watching videos, this should be stated in the description. Also be aware that certain types of tasks, such as writing tasks, elicit higher compensation.
- The researchers name and/or school affiliation should be listed either as the Requester or in the description of the HIT.
- If applicable: The link to the online survey should be included.

Payment for Participation: Some researchers recommend looking at what similar tasks pay. It is also recommended using common assessment such as the reasonable estimate of how long it will take to complete a 200-question survey with 15 open-ended essay-style questions, for example. Here's a handy formula for figuring out how much you should ideally pay participants. Determine a reasonable estimate of how long your HIT will take. Consider adjusting the "1" in the formula to pay more than minimum wage – perhaps 1.5 or more, given the nature of the HIT.

$$\text{pay to participants (in \$)} = (1 \times \$7.25 \text{ minimum wage}) \times \frac{\text{length of HIT in minutes}}{60 \text{ (minutes in an hour)}}$$

And here's a handy formula for working out your number of possible participants based on paying minimum wage given a certain survey length and your total funding. This formula assumes that you're posting HITs in batches of 10 or more, and that Amazon still charges a 40% (.40) fee. Adjust the ".40" if needed, should Amazon's rates change in the future.

$$\text{\# of possible participants} = \frac{\text{available research funds (in \$)}}{\text{pay to participants (in \$)} + [\text{pay to participants (in \$)} \times .40]}$$

Consent: The first page of the online survey should be the consent document. The online consent will have all of the elements of a regular consent, but it will not require a signature. Participants will either click an "I Agree" or an "I do not Agree" box. The "I Agree" box will take them into the survey. The "I do not agree" box will thank them for their time and take them away from the survey.

Debrief: If the researchers are using deception or incomplete disclosure (i.e., are not stating exactly what the study is about so as not to bias participants responses), then it is important to include a debriefing form at the end of the survey. This debriefing form could be embedded into the last page of the survey and would require participants to answer a final question allowing researchers to use their data (or not use their data) now that they know the true purpose of the study. For more information on debriefing, see [IRB SOP 803: Behavioral and Social Science Research](#).

Note: For particularly sensitive topics, the IRB may want to ensure that participants receive a debriefing form, even if they do not complete the full study (i.e., they click out before the end of the survey). The USA IRB debriefing forms are located in IRBNet: forms and templates.

This might mean contacting participants (through MTurk) and providing them a debriefing form. If this is something that will happen for your study, it would be important to include a statement in the HIT description and in the informed consent that the researchers will be providing participants with additional information after the study and that they may contact participants through MTurk

Confidentiality: Amazon's MTurk Privacy Policy: https://www.mturk.com/mturk/privacynotice

The reality is that anonymity cannot be guaranteed in any online environment where data is being collected. Recent research shows that MTurk worker IDs can easily be linked to individual's Amazon profiles including individual's wish lists and previous product reviews. This means that researchers must be careful in deciding what information to collect from participants. The default should be that participants' MTurk worker IDs not be collected. If it is necessary to collect worker IDs, 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.

Additional things to consider with regard to confidentiality of participants' identity and data are the Amazon MTurk (AMT) Terms of Service (TOS) specific to the online survey software (Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, Google Forms, Survey Gizmo, Zoho Survey, etc.), 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 AMT and/or online survey software companies if a breach of data occurs.