

Electronic Survey Research Guidelines

The collection of survey data via digital survey platforms is an extremely common form of data collection in human subjects research. Depending upon the nature of the study, studies that solely use these methods may even meet exempt or expedited categories. While this is a common and acceptable form of data collection in human subjects research, there are some elements to consider that are particular to the use of these platforms. There are also additional elements related to the construction of surveys and the storage of data collected in surveys that researchers need to consider to uphold ethical research. This document is meant to detail some common issues related to electronic survey research and guide applicants as they articulate the use of these activities in research undergoing IRB review.

Electronic Survey Research with AU Students

Due to the sometimes heavy volume of information solicitation from students, the use of AU students (especially large or general AU student listservs) for human subjects research in electronic surveys is not recommended by AU administration (with the exception of classroom research). Researchers seeking to use AU students as participants in human subjects research using electronic surveys should consult with their appropriate Dean and seek approval from AU administration. It is recommended that this be done prior to an application to the IRB. ***IRB approval of research does not override any university policies or need for permissions from Aurora University to conduct research.***

Electronic Survey Platforms

In most cases, the use of Qualtrics¹ or Survey Monkey² are acceptable platforms that are approved by the AU IRB. If conducting electronic survey research, one of the key considerations of the IRB is confidentiality of data. When completing an IRB application involving one of these platforms, it is helpful to review and include relevant security features of these platforms. These can be reviewed at the links below:

Qualtrics: <https://www.qualtrics.com/security-statement/>

Survey Monkey: https://help.surveymonkey.com/categories/Privacy_Legal
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/legal/privacy/>

Anonymity of Survey Data

The use of “anonymous” surveys represents the lowest-risk form of electronic survey research. In fact, if the study involves only the use of surveys that are truly anonymous, it is likely that the study meets exemption categories. However, sometimes there is confusion about what is meant by the use of anonymous surveys. Researchers may presume that they are using “anonymous”

¹ Students in the EdD program are required to use the EdD Qualtrics account for electronic survey collection.

² MTurk is another platform that has become common in the use of survey research in recent years. However, there are some particular risks to confidentiality when using this platform due to its link to Amazon accounts. The IRB reviews the use of this platform on a case-by-case basis.

surveys if they collect personally identifiable information (PII) from respondents, but plan to not report this information in findings. However, this really is a form of confidentiality, not anonymity. For a survey to be truly “anonymous,” it should not collect any PII from respondents. Another misconception is that the surveys are completely anonymous as long as no names are recorded. However, some platforms automatically record IP addresses of respondents, which is considered PII. To maintain anonymity, researchers should consult the policies and procedures in their chosen platform to remove this feature. Unless it is necessary to track the particular identities of respondents for research purposes, it is recommended that researchers use anonymous electronic surveys.

Surveys Collecting PII

There are, of course, legitimate reasons to utilize surveys that are not anonymous, that collect personally identifying information (PII), in research studies. However, this comes with additional risks and concerns related to confidentiality and security of data. When utilizing electronic surveys that do collect PII, researchers should explain in detail in IRB materials and consent forms what PII will be collected and, importantly, how confidentiality and security of the data will be maintained.

Data Confidentiality and Security

When researchers utilize electronic surveys, it is requested that they store collected data under multiple layers of locks. An example of this would be in a password-protected folder within a password-protected computer. Researchers utilizing surveys that collect PII have further considerations for the storage of data. Researchers should create separate data sets when collecting PII: one that includes collected data with no identifiers and another that includes the list of identifiers without the collected data. These data sets should be stored separately and with multiple levels of security. This provides an additional layer of protection of respondent data.

It is also possible that, depending upon the nature of the research, the data collected, and potential risks to participants, the IRB will request that collected data be encrypted. This would be required for surveys that collect PII and involve sensitive information (e.g. health information) or data that could be damaging to participants if revealed.

IRB applications and consent materials should explain the data security and confidentiality measures employed in the use of electronic survey research.

Electronic Surveys and Informed Consent

It is often difficult to obtain documentation of informed consent in electronic survey research. When studies involve minimal risk or there may be a concern that documentation would present a risk to participants, it may be possible to waive the requirement for documentation of informed consent for electronic survey research. **This does not waive informed consent, only the documentation of it from participants.** In most cases, an informed consent section will be required prior to the electronic survey itself. Please see the “Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent” section in the IRB Manual.