

Web-based Surveys

IRB Areas of Review

Researchers must address the following areas in their research protocols

1. recruitment • make people aware of the survey
2. risks, benefits,
3. informed consent,
4. participants' privacy, and
5. confidentiality of data.
6. ,issues unique to the medium employed the technology used (hardware, software, etc.),
7. processes employed to collect, handle, transmit, and store data.
8. Inform participants that the survey is part of a research project. (researchers need to explicitly state this information in both the survey's introductory page/screen and in the informed consent information. Researchers may want to add an introductory page/screen to demonstrate their affiliation).
9. Include method for study participants to contact the researcher(s) with questions or concerns, (to include telephone number for the researcher.)
10. Include a debriefing or feedback to study participants at the end of the survey.

Informed Consent

As per federal regulations informed consent is required for all research. Informed consent must contain all elements required by federal regulations

Methods for addressing informed consent include:

- requesting a waiver from the IRB of the requirement for obtaining a signed consent form from each participant.
- researcher may obtain informed consent by having the participant provide IFC prior to responding to the actual survey and requires the participant indicate their acknowledgement of the consent.
- use of an on screen box stating "I consent/agree to participate" to click if they accept the terms of the consent is provided. Once this button is clicked the participant may then be sent to the survey. In addition an "I do not consent/agree to participate" or "have questions/need further information" box may also be incorporated thereby linking this information back to the researcher and preventing advancement into the survey screen(s).
- participants must also be allowed to request and print a copy of their consent documents(Schmidt, 1997).

Use of email address for obtaining informed consent.

- the participant reads the consent, checks the I consent/agree to participate box and submits a valid email address.
- upon receipt, the participant is sent a confirmation of their consent to participate via email and provided with the survey's code, password and/or Web address.
- **If the participant's email addresses is maintained the researcher should do the following: notify potential participants they are doing this and inform the participant the purpose for maintaining the email address and the researcher must log the participant's email addresses separately from their survey responses to ensure confidentiality and privacy (Schmidt, 1997).

Ensuring Privacy of Participants and Security of Data

Researchers must describe protective measures, especially when private identifiable information from research participants is collected, will be employed. The use of a Web server and encryption technology is helpful. When the researcher employs a web server different from the machine in which data will be analyzed, security methods must also be addressed. (Once data is stored on the web server and decoded, the data is no longer safe thereby demanding the researcher ensure that further security methods are employed to protect access by unauthorized persons. Once data is placed onto the computer in which it will be analyzed, a password protection system known only to the researchers must be employed. Researchers should also remember that although information may be deleted on a computer, it may remain on the hard drive for an extended period of time. Researchers must also remember that when participants submit survey response data to the Web server, identifiable information such as an email address is also being submitted, thereby requiring methods for securing this information (Schmidt, 1997; Johan Putzky StudyTrax, Personal communication, July 27, 2007).

Use of Internet Service Providers and Web Survey Host Organizations

Researchers using these methods are responsible for ensuring that they understand the procedures and processes thereby ensuring security measures are in place to protect privacy of participants and confidentiality of data.

The following information on privacy and confidentiality issues must be included in the research protocol:

I. Description of the hardware and software setup(s), to include:

- the physical location of the computer receiving the data (if different from the researchers'),
- the security measures in place to protect data during initial transmission from participants' computers to the Web server,
- how the Web server data storage location is protected,
- how often data are backed up,
- where back-ups are stored,
- who has access to data and backups,
- what data the Web server log files collect,
- how it is used, how often log files are downloaded and cleared from the Web server,

- who has access to the log files,
- how data are transmitted to the researchers' computer(s),
- the security measures in place to protect data during this transmission process,
- who has access to the researchers' computer(s), and
- how this data storage location is protected.

II. Steps participants must complete in order to participate in the study and after recruitment

- logging on,
- consenting to participate,
- entering identifying information,
- answering survey questions,
- reading the debriefing page, and
- exiting the survey website. (Schmidt, 1997).

Informed Consent Screen

The consent information screen should appear before participants provide identifiable information, so if they choose not to participate no identifiable information is transmitted to the researcher. Once the participant has agreed to participate they should be provided detail on what identifying data participants will be asked to provide. The collection of highly identifying data should be explained in the research protocol as to why it is being collected. Any general demographic information that may also be collected should be addressed here.

Describe the steps that will be taken to ensure that all data collected will remain private and confidential, including:

- security measures during transmission the point at which any identifying data are separated from other survey data, When data are transferred to researchers with identifiers attached, explain why this is necessary and at what point the researchers will de-identify data. How identifying data are stored separate from survey data. In addition researchers will also need to describe how data will be reported, at what level data will be aggregated, what data will be reported, and how will researchers address data that may identify unique individuals.
- the form (as submitted or coded),
- the point at which identifying data are destroyed (if at all).
- researchers should describe how participants' requests for results will be handled.
- researchers should address how they will store information entered by participants to request survey results,
- the storage of the requests in a separate data file from their responses thereby ensuring participant privacy and confidentiality of information (Schmidt, 1997).

Submission of Documentation

The Oakwood University Institutional Review Board does require that printouts of all screens research participants will view be provided in the submission of the research protocol for review.