Guidelines and Recommendations for Online Surveys

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Institutional Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (CIPSHI)

Physical distancing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have posed new challenges to researchers with research projects that use methods for data collection through face-to-face interaction with study participants or subjects. CIPSHI has outlined guidelines and recommendations so that protocols be adapted for the remote data collection alternative—whether it be initial protocols or through modifications[1] to previously authorized protocols.

Although some of these guidelines do constitute current CIPSHI requirements, others are recommendations or considerations that researchers should take into account when presenting their research protocols and creating the research instruments and the documents for informed consent and data protection.

A. Tools

1. The use of **virtual tools** is a viable option if, as a researcher, you believe this data collection method would not adversely impact the objectives proposed in your research. Although CIPSHI does not currently require the use of any specific tool or platform for online surveys, we recommend you use the institutional platforms (Google Suite or Microsoft Office). The use of these tools through the **@upr.edu** domain offers researchers the possibility of greater technical assistance, if required. Additionally, both Google Suite and Microsoft Office meet the required HIPAA specifications for health information exchanges, which offers greater security for the management of the information collected. However, CIPSHI acknowledges that there are other tools with features more closely related to the needs of each study.

2. Examine and verify the data privacy and storage policies of the selected tool. Remember you must inform potential

[1] The modification request form can be found in CISHI's website as "Authorized Protocol Modification Request Form": http://graduados.uprrp.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=169&Itemid=430&lang=es.

participants of the possibility of third parties—who are not part of the key research personnel or affiliated with the research—accessing the data. "Third parties" might mean technical support personnel or the developers of the instrument or tool, among others.

3. You are responsible for taking the necessary precautions to prevent unauthorized access or interception when storing or transferring participants' data via the internet. Keep in mind that data stored both on the cloud (Google Drive, One Drive, Dropbox, etc.) and on physical devices must be protected by at least one strong password[2]. In addition, keep in mind that data must be handled and used in accordance to what is stipulated in the protocol and what was agreed with the participants.

4. If the use of the tool implies that the person will incur any additional costs to be able to participate in the research, this must also be disclosed. Expenses are not only related to the purchase of applications, there may also be additional charges for mobile data consumption, internet connection or storage on the person's devices.

5. Write the instructions for accessing the questionnaire:

    a. State the tool or platform you will use.

    b. State whether the person must register a new account or register their email address to access the instrument. Explain the purpose or use of the registration and whether or not this information, which is identifiable, will be linked to the individual's responses.

B. Questionnaire

1. Questionnaire Design

a. Verify that the platform allows to leave questions blank or delete an answer once it has been marked. If the platform does not allow to delete an answer once marked (like Google Forms with single choice questions), include an "I prefer not to answer" alternative. For validated scales, where including a no answer alternative would not be viable, you must add a waring at the beginning of every question. Also, instruct the person not to answer the question if they are not interested in answering it. You must also indicate if once an alternative has been selected, the person will not be able to leave the question blank. Specify that they may, however, change the alternative selected.

[2] This means a password that is hard to describe or identify by people outside the project.

b. The only questions that may have the "required" or "mandatory" feature turned on are: (1) filter questions about whether the person accepts or declines to participate in the study; (2) screening questions to determine whether the person meets the eligibility criteria; or (3) filter questions to determine to which section of the instrument the person must proceed. These filter questions must also have a no answer alternative.

c. If you need the participant's contact information in order to follow-up, invite them to another phase of the study, report results, deliver incentives, etc., it is recommended you add a link at the end of the questionnaire redirecting the person to another form not linked to the primary instrument. Otherwise, you would be collecting information that is directly identifiable with people's responses.

d. Ensure that all information for consent is transferred to the online questionnaire in accordance with the text reviewed and approved by CIPSHI.

2. Information to be provided to CIPSHI

You must provide the link to the questionnaire in a clickable format. In addition, provide a print out of the electronic questionnaire in PDF format for the protocol file.

CIPSHI accesses the electronic instrument as part of their evaluation. Therefore, you must erase the database before participants access the instrument.

C. Recruitment and Informed Consent Process

1. State how you will contact potential participants in the protocol. Out of respect for the privacy of individuals, you must not use or receive private contact information from third parties without the potential participant's permission.

2. Distinguish between the use of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.), messaging services (e.g., WhatsApp) or email lists in the process of contacting potential participants. Also, distinguish whether it is a public or private space.

3. If you are going to use a standard informed consent form that requires the signature of the participant, explain how you will do this and whether you

will require the person to have resources or applications to process a digital signature or scan and send the signed document.

4. Request a **waiver** to alter or modify the standard process for obtaining consent—, which requires obtaining participant signatures on an informed consent form. This waives the requirement for signatures and replaces the standard informed consent form with an information sheet.

5. Specify how you will deliver the informed consent form or information sheet to the individual. Note that you could do this through the invitation to participate or include it in the online instrument. In this case, you must include the boxes so the person can click whether they agree or not to participate. Only those who consent to participate should go on to answer the questionnaire.

D. Informed Consent Form or Information Sheet

In addition to the standard elements required by CIPSHI, informed consent forms or information sheets for online surveys must also contain the elements detailed in this section.

1. In the **Risks or Discomforts** section, include whether the person must download any application or program and whether there are any costs involved. State that there may be additional fees for the consumption of mobile data or internet connection.

2. In the section on **confidentiality**:

   a. Note that research studies involving information transfer over the internet must not be considered anonymous. Distinguish between confidential handling of data and how you will disclose results. Meaning whether you will be publishing data with identifiable information or publishing it anonymously.

   b. If you need to collect the e-mail address, IP address (Internet Protocol address) or any other identifiable or geolocation information of the device from which the information was sent, state so and explain its purpose or use.

   c. State whether, in addition to key research personnel, third parties such as technical staff or developers of the instrument or tool will have access to the data. Consider that there are people who authorize the use of instruments, scales or tools if they can also access or use the data.

d. Include the following warning: *The information you share electronically on the device (computer, cellphone or other) or platform you use may be tapped or reviewed by third parties. These individuals may have legitimate or illegitimate access to the device and its content; like a family member, employer, hackers or intruders, etc. In addition, the device you use may keep track of the information you access or send electronically.*

3. Indicate whether you require contact information and whether you will follow-up with invitations to other phases of the study, information reports, incentives or raffles or giveaways, etc. Explain whether you will request this information on a separate form and whether or not contact information will be linked to the responses.

4. In the section on **rights**:

   a. When explaining the voluntary nature of participation, instruct on how to terminate participation in case the application requires the person to log out of the platform or if the user simply needs to close the window.

   b. When informing the person that they have the right to receive a copy of the consent form, add a note exhorting participants to save or print the consent document.

E. Training - CITI Program

We recommend you read or revise the module on Internet Use that can be found in the CITI Program's training on research with human subjects (https://about.citiprogram.org). The module (titled "Internet-Based Research") can be found in the English version of the "Human Subjects Research" course. Instructions for registering for the CITI program and how to identify the course can be found on CIPSHI's website under "CITI Program".

In addition, learn about the design of the questionnaire so that it is appropriate for the characteristics and needs of potential participants and to ensure the principle of autonomy or the decision to participate voluntarily. Voluntary participation includes the decision to withdraw at any time or to stop answering questions.