Amazon Mechanical Turk

IRB Considerations

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“The Mechanical Turk” chess playing automaton
Amazon Mechanical Turk

HITs
Human Intelligence Tasks

Workers
People who complete HITs

Requesters
Post HITs for workers to complete
Amazon Mechanical Turk

- Workers are paid small sums of money for each task they complete
- Typical pay ranges from a few cents to a few dollars
- Depends on task complexity and length
Amazon Mechanical Turk

• mTurk was designed as a crowdsourcing platform for business – not a research platform

• This makes mTurk unique among online survey platforms

• Leads to unique challenges
• Academic researchers have widely adopted mTurk as a research platform
• Easy, cheap way to recruit large numbers of subjects quickly
Who are mTurk workers?

N=3,370

51% Male, 49% Female
88% under the age of 50, 41% under 30
77% white, non-Hispanic
51% have a college degree
How often do Turkers work on mTurk?

- Every Day, 63%
- More than once a week, 32%
- Once a week or less, 5%

Source: Pew Research report “Research in the Crowdsourcing Age”
Ethical and regulatory concerns with mTurk as a research platform
mTurk Ethical Concerns

- Low pay is the norm
- Asking workers for identifiable information violates Participation Agreement
- Steep learning curve for new requesters
Turkers’ Hourly Pay

- Less than $5, 52%
- $5 to $7.99, 39%
- $8 or more, 8%
- Refused, 1%

Source: Pew Research report “Research in the Crowdsourcing Age”
mTurk Worker IDs

- All mTurk workers have a “Worker ID” that is supposed to be anonymous.
- In reality, worker IDs are not anonymous.
- A worker’s Amazon.com profile can be accessed via:

  www.amazon.com/gp/profile/[worker ID]
Steep Learning Curve

• It’s difficult to fully understand mTurk worker culture
  • Dynamo worker collective can help
• Easy to underestimate how serious workers are
  • Due in part to low pay
Workers are VERY serious about mTurk
mTurk Regulatory Concerns

- Requiring workers to complete all tasks in order to get paid
- Impossible to know if a subject is under 18 years old
- Waiver of Documentation is required
Common complaints to the IRB from mTurk workers
Our IRB receives more complaints from mTurk workers than from any other research population. Complaints tend to be very detailed. Workers are very persistent.
Common Complaints to the IRB

• Most common complaint type is a HIT rejection
  • Workers do not get paid if a requester rejects their HIT
  • Rejection lowers the worker’s HIT acceptance rate
Sample Complaint #1

- HIT rejection
- Task was a 50-minute survey that paid $5
- HIT rejected due to not checking a box on consent form
- Three similar complaints about this study
- I advised researcher to accept all HITs, pay the subjects
Sample Complaint #2

- HIT rejection
- Photo/text matching task
- Researcher believed subject wrote a computer script to complete the task quickly many times
- Subject began harassing researcher and the IRB
- I advised researcher to:
  - Accept the HITs
  - Pay the subject
  - Throw out their data
Helpful links

• Amazon Mechanical Turk: www.mturk.com
• Dynamo worker collective: www.wearedynamo.org
• Dynamo Guidelines: www.wearedynamo.org/guidelines
• Turkopticon: https://turkopticon.ucsd.edu