Can I use MTurk (www.mturk.com) for online data collection?

Use of any online data collection tool must be evaluated by the IRB on a case-by-case basis. The mturk site serves as a front-end that can connect prospective employees/research participants to employers/researchers. The site was not designed with research such as yours in mind, in all likelihood. Rather, it was created as a means by which “micro-tasks” could be presented to a large and willing audience of potential employees. That it has become increasingly common as a “research gateway” represents an evolution of the tool, and one that IRBs are keeping a close eye on. Like any tool, it must be used with caution and with the utmost care for the rights of research participants.

When using mturk.com, please bear in mind that it is (as of this writing) a subsidiary of Amazon.com, and captures all of the information about its users that Amazon captures. The privacy page (https://www.mturk.com/mturk/privacynotice) makes it very clear that information mturk has about its users includes (but is not necessarily limited to) names, email addresses, and telephone numbers. In order to use mturk and get paid, your prospective participants must also provide the system with their social security number. In other words, mturk knows a great deal of identifying information about your participants.

In order to protect your participants’ privacy, then, you cannot collect any sensitive information within the mturk site. For purposes of our IRB, anything you might ask as part of a typical research process that goes beyond what the owners of mturk.com would otherwise know about your participants qualifies as “sensitive information.” As such, any actual surveys, questionnaires, or other research materials must be hosted on a site other than mturk.com (e.g., surveymonkey.com, qualtrics.com, psychdata.com). You can link to such sites as part of setting up your HIT on mturk, and data collected on those sites will not be accessible to or archived by the owners of mturk. In the interest of caution, whenever possible, create hyperlinks to external websites using the secure transfer protocol (https://) rather than the standard, non-secure transfer protocol (http://).

The IRB does not explicitly regulate the amount of payment that can or should be offered to your participants via mturk. In deciding on an appropriate amount to offer for your task, please keep in mind both the length of time required and the relative rigor of the task, as these are factors that we will be considering in reviewing any mturk-related submission. A two-minute task that offers a reward of $5, for example, clearly constitutes a situation of excessive inducement and would be viewed by our IRB as potentially manipulative. On the other hand, a sixty-minute task that pays only $.02 would constitute exploitation of your participants, and also be viewed as problematic. Please provide a rationale for why the level of payment you have chosen for your study is appropriate, based on what you are requiring of participants in terms of both time and effort.