

REB Guidance and Information Document

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Title	Online Surveys
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1) Purpose

This guidance document is meant to assist researchers who are using online survey platforms.

2) Definitions

See the MSVU **REB Glossary of Terms (REB.INFO.001)**

3) Notice to Researchers

The information in this document is for information and guidance purposes only. Each research study poses unique properties and/or situations that may require additional or different guidance than what is presented in this document. The information in this document is meant to provide general situational advice and does not constitute research ethics compliance in absolute form. If you have any questions, please contact ethics@msvu.ca.

4) Guidance/Information/Procedures

Researchers who use on-line or web-based survey tools are advised that under Nova Scotia provincial law, Personal Information International Disclosure Protection Act, it is illegal to store or access identifiable personal information of Nova Scotians **outside of the country without prior consent** (<http://www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/legc/index.htm>). Personal information refers to recorded information about an individual that may identify them. The Nova Scotia Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Review Office has, in its publication *Respecting Your Access and Privacy Rights: A Citizen's Guide for Nova Scotians*, March 2008, defined personal information as:

... any recorded information that uniquely identifies you, such as your name, address, telephone number, age, weight, height, hair colour, sex, race, religion, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, fingerprints or blood type. It includes information about your health care, educational, financial, criminal, and employment history. It also includes anyone else's opinions about you and your own views or opinions. These are not the only things that could be considered personal information. As long as a person could be identified by it, on its own or with other pieces of information, it is personal information.

If the survey is collecting personal information from participants then researchers should use survey tools hosted and serviced in Canada. MSVU strongly recommends that you use the MSVU-hosted survey platform, which is fully compliant as the survey data is kept secure and is stored and backed up in Canada. For more information, please go to [LimeSurvey \(msvu.ca\)](https://limesurvey.msvu.ca) . The survey tool is available, at no cost, to all MSVU faculty, staff, students.

Implied Consent

If the study is limited to an online survey, a cover letter may be used instead of a full signed consent form, provided that it includes all information needed by the participant to make an informed decision about participating in the research study. If you are using a cover letter instead of a full consent form, researchers should include the following (or similar wording) in the letter: “By completing the survey, you are consenting to participate in this research.”

For most survey studies, the cover letter or invitation to the participant should include all items that would be present in the Informed Consent letter. Where possible, the cover letter should also use MSVU letterhead. If you are unable to include any of these elements in the cover letter because of the study design, researchers must ensure that this is clearly described and justified in the research ethics application.

Non-Canadian Survey Platforms

It may be acceptable to use online survey tools located outside Canada (e.g., the United States, Europe) as long as participants have consented to having their information stored in a jurisdiction outside Canada (note: “click-through” consents are acceptable). If researchers are using an online survey tool to collect personal information, researchers must ensure that the survey tools are hosted and serviced in Canada before using.

If researchers must use a survey platform that is either housed outside of Canada, or is controlled by an outside vendor, participants must be fully informed of the fact that the data is potentially subject to the laws and regulations of that country (e.g., the Patriot Act in the USA). In such instances, the consent information must clearly indicate the location of the survey company’s server and include a description of any associated limits to confidentiality. The following is an example of a typical statement which can be edited to meet the needs of individual surveys:

This online survey company is hosted by a web survey company located in the USA and as such is subject to U.S. laws, in particular, the US Patriot Act which allows authorities access to the records of internet service providers. If you choose to participate in the survey, you understand that your responses to the survey questions will be stored and accessed in the USA. The security and privacy policy for the web survey company can be found at the following link: [\[REDACTED\]](#).

Please be aware that if researchers are conducting a survey on a highly sensitive topic (especially a politically sensitive one), the REB may determine that the use of a non-Canadian-based survey

tool is inappropriate.

Researchers who plan to use an online survey tool that is not housed in Canada, should contact the Research Ethics Office at ethics@msvu.ca to discuss the research project, proposed survey platform, and any potential consent issues. Researchers should be aware that the use of all non-Canadian platforms require annual reporting via the Office of President to the Nova Scotia Department of Justice.

5) Acknowledgements

The development of this document has benefited directly from similar documents made public by the Tri-Council, as well as several Canadian universities. In some instances, specific formulations drawn from these sources have been incorporated into this document. Specific iterations were drawn from the following:

- University of British Columbia - [Online Survey-GN.pdf \(ubc.ca\)](#) – retrieved August 2021

6) Modification History

INFO Number & Version	Key Changes	Effective Date
REB.INFO.504	Revised to a guidance document, formerly SOP.132. Updated to reflect current requirements and practices and revised for clarity	June 2022
REB.SOP.132	Original Version	June 2009

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