Using Online Participant Platforms to Further Your Research
Introduction - Online Research Platforms

• Each platform is both a participant pool & a research administration tool
  • Consider representativeness of target population & setting
  • Platforms’ idiosyncrasies affect their usefulness for your research

• Frequently model real-life frictions, thus fewer d.f.’s in generalizing inferences?
  • Pools are diverse, multi-tasking is common, reputation concerns & social norms are present

• The “professional subject” issue
  • Motivations to participate, concurrent participation (unknown moderators), nonnaïveté
    • Do your findings apply only to serial participants, those with some vector of attributes, etc.?
  • Internal validity: deception to participate?

• Platforms differ in susceptibility to these issues, tools to resolve
Mechanical Turk

• **Potential Subject Pool Size:** 100,000s (disputed), ~50% US citizens
• **Approximate pay rate for 15 minutes (per participant):** ~ $1-$1.50, including fees
• **Great for:**
  • Studies targeting non-sophisticated decision makers, e.g., workers, investors
    • Reasonable financial literacy, motivation, education
  • Studies requiring large samples
    • Speedy, low cost, pool size increases with demand
• **Not so great for (or at least take caution):**
  • Studies requiring specialized knowledge or some other particular attribute
    • Limited quality controls, so screening is mostly up to you
  • Studies using well-established tasks
    • Nonnaïveté, concurrent participation is essentially assumed
  • Studies requiring interaction (strategic or cooperative) or trust
    • Possible but difficult to program, potential for cross-talk through message boards
• **Tips/Features for this Platform:**
  • Tasks not completed quickly often aren’t completed at all
  • Don’t pay too much or too little! Avoid “Masters”
  • Premium for research surveys, but services exist to skirt this issue
Crowdflower

- **Potential Subject Pool Size:** Very large, but difficult to assess
- **Approximate pay rate for 15 minutes (per participant):** $1 - $2, including fees
- **Great for:**
  - Studies requiring large samples with simplistic tasks, e.g., validating surveys or measures
    - Built-in QC to evaluate worker performance, real-time worker satisfaction feedback
- **Not so great for (or at least take caution):**
  - Middleman for other crowdsourcers, don’t expect independent samples
  - “…the platform is not designed for these kinds of surveys…” i.e., the research we normally do
- **Tips/Features for this Platform:**
  - Except for validating measures, I wouldn’t use Crowdflower
Prolific

- **Potential Subject Pool Size:** Approximately 49,000 worldwide and 13,000 U.S. Citizens
- **Approximate cost for 15 minute study (per participant):** $2.00+, including fees

- **Great for:**
  - Studies using international participants
    - 147 countries represented, easy to select P’s from specific countries
  - Studies with specific demographic requirements
    - 62 built-in categories

- **Not so great for (or at least take caution):**
  - Studies requiring a very large sample
    - Subject pool is relatively small compared to some other options

- **Tips/Features for this Platform:**
  - Good platform for preventing repeat participation
  - Allows you to submit your own prescreening questions
Qualtrics Panels

- **Potential Subject Pool Size**: Likely around 30+ million

- **Approximate cost for 15 minute study (per participant)**: $5-$50+, depending on how specialized of a sample you need. Note that participants often receive much less than this.

- **Great for**:
  - Studies requiring experts
    - e.g., they will work to find you auditors, managers, etc.

- **Not so great for (or at least take caution)**:
  - Anything else - at least relative to other options
    - Fairly expensive, although participants receive very little
    - Non-transparent recruiting

- **Tips/Features for this Platform**:
  - Commit in advance to not “previewing” or replacing responses
  - If using specialized participants, include detailed questions to verify their background/experience
Facebook

• **Potential Subject Pool Size:** 1.7 billion active monthly users worldwide; 185 million in the U.S.
  *although users aren’t going to Facebook with intent to participate in studies*

• **Approximate cost for 15 minute study (per participant):** Large variation depending on your ad filters (≈$0.25 per participant that clicks through + payment for actual participation)

• **Great for:**
  • Studies with very specific demographic/interest requirements

• **Not so great for (or at least take caution):**
  • Quick recruiting
  • Long and/or tedious studies
    • Facebook users aren’t worried about their “reputation”, so studies need to be motivating and short to keep participants interested

• **Tips/Features for this Platform:**
  • There is no built-in payment system, so you have to do more of the legwork yourself
  • Google Wallet gives you an easy way to pay participants upon completion of a study
  • For simplicity, may instead be preferable to do lotteries for prizes instead of compensating all participants
Making the Most of These Platforms
a.k.a., “What should we see more of in accounting research?*

- More multi-experiment papers
  - Pinpoint processes from different angles

- More longitudinal studies
  - These platforms make it fairly simple to follow participants over time at low cost, with less risk that they’ll talk to each other than with student participants

- Richer qualitative information
  - Use these platforms to hire individuals to code responses, or to gather descriptive information

- Get more creative with your studies!
  - Facebook, in particular, is a setting where you can get participants to download apps, play embedded “investment games” over time, etc.

*Disclaimer – just like panels on “trends and future research”, this is likely biased towards my own preferences