Microtask crowdsourcing can both empower and marginalise workers

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As a society we have reached a point of social consciousness where the debate regarding the impacts of the Internet-based 'gig' or on-demand economy, commonly known as crowdsourcing (CS), is taking centre stage. One such debate concerns the need for new regulations and policies relating to the growing crowd worker population who engage in work on or through Internet-based platforms. As the drumbeats for regulating the on-demand workforce on these platforms grow louder, it is imperative that crowd workers' voices are heard and not drowned. Our work gives voice to the crowd workers by conducting deep analysis of their values in an increasingly prevalent type of crowdsourcing known as microtask CS.

The demand for this type of work is one of the most rapidly growing trends. Compared to regular jobs in a 'traditional' organisation, these microtasks are simple (e.g., can be completed in a matter of minutes) and are compensated with tiny monetary rewards (between $0.25 and $1). While microtask crowdsourcing can afford worker autonomy and flexibility, it can also make workers vulnerable to exploitation. Our work provides a rich description of an emerging paradox of worker empowerment and marginalization in these environments. We advance theoretical understanding of the societal challenges of this emerging phenomenon and offer a novel, ethical design perspective for incorporating moral import into this socio-technical work environment to counter crowd worker exploitation.

In our study, we analysed the detailed narratives of 210 crowd workers to reveal their underlying values attained from their engagement in Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). We conceptualised crowd worker value as a multi-faceted construct of nine human values — *access; autonomy; fairness; transparency; communication; security; accountability; making an impact,* and *dignity* — all of which are implicated in the structures of microtask crowdsourcing. The work involves four structures relating to:

- *compensation* (e.g., payment arrangements for crowdsourcing jobs),
- *task* (e.g., the properties of crowdsourcing jobs),

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- *governance* (e.g., CS work practices, standards and policies), and
- *technology* (e.g., IT infrastructure used to build the CS work environment).

As a medium of crowd workers' conduct of work, these structures have both empowering and marginalising implications on crowd worker activities. The crowd workers feel **empowered** when the structures enable choice (e.g., where and when to work satisfying the value of autonomy); they feel **marginalised** when the same structures restrict action (e.g., lack of communication channels that limit their opportunities to voice concerns).

Empowerment is manifested in the form of four cognitions — *meaning, self-determination, impact,* and *competence* — when the desired values are adequately implicated on the crowdsourcing platform. Empowerment through *meaning* is a common experience resulting from valuing open access to work opportunities. Empowerment through *self-determination* stems from the value of autonomy, when workers can decide for themselves what, when, where, and how to work. Empowerment through *impact*, arising from the value of making an impact on others and on society more generally, and through *competence*, ensuing from the value of access to diverse kinds of micro tasks, are valued by a small proportion of the crowd workers in our sample, but are nonetheless important to them.

Marginalisation emerges in four different forms when the desired values are not sufficiently implicated on the crowdsourcing platform. Specifically, marginalisation manifested in: 1) *economic marginalisation* (feeling exploited); 2) *institutional (policy) marginalisation* (feeling helpless in relation to job requesters and the CS platform); 3) *institutional (technical) marginalisation* (feeling constrained by platform technical functionalities), and 4) *competence marginalisation* (feeling de-skilled from doing simple and repetitious work). While the feeling of being exploited (economic marginalization) was perceived by a considerable majority in our sample, the other three perceptions of marginalization were experienced by a smaller proportion.

In summary, our survey respondents revealed multiple values in relation to their engagement in microtask crowdsourcing on MTurk. Yet, the extent to which their expected values are fulfilled varie**s** considerably. In instances when a value is fulfilled, crowd workers feel empowered; otherwise, they feel powerless and even exploited. Through this interplay between the values and dimensions of empowerment and marginalization emerges the duality implicit in microtask CS.

The duality is intrinsic to the lived experience of the crowd workers. The benefits of crowdsourcing are well understood by those organisations that seek the knowledge of 'the crowd', as is the flexibility provided to crowd workers by this new form of work opportunity. The dis-benefits have been less well known till now, and the duality we have uncovered needs, in our view, to be carefully considered in designing crowdsourcing platforms and policies so as to provide an even playing field. Thus, our study heightens awareness of worker marginalization in microtask CS, and offers guidelines for improving CS practice. Specifically, we offer recommendations regarding the ethical employment of crowd workers (including in academic research), and means of improving the MTurk platform design for greater worker empowerment.

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Notes:

- *This article is based on the authors' paper* The Duality of Empowerment and Marginalization in Microtask Crowdsourcing: Giving Voice to the Less Powerful through Value Sensitive Design*, MIS Quarterly*.
- *This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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