

Crowdworkers, Social Affirmation and Work Identity: Rethinking dominant assumptions of crowdwork (*)

Citation: Idowu, A., & Elbanna, A. (2021). Crowdworkers, social affirmation and work identity: Rethinking dominant assumptions of crowdwork. *Information and Organization*, 31(4). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1471772721000014>

Abstract

Crowdwork is becoming increasingly popular as shown by its rapid growth. It is a new way of working that is conducted through global digital platforms where money is exchanged for services provided online. As it is digitally grounded, it has been assumed to be context-free, uniform and consisting of a simple exchange of tasks/labour from a global workforce for direct monetary pay. In this study, we examine these, largely Western, assumptions from crowdworkers' perspective and turn to a non-Western context to destabilise them. We adopt an inductive research approach using multiple sources of qualitative data including interviews, participant observations, documents review, observation of social media chat rooms and online forums. The study reveals that as they lack organisational, occupational and professional context and referent, crowdworkers rely on social affirmation in the construction of their work identity. They construct a work identity of who they are that cuts across the boundaries between themselves, the digital work they do and their social environment. This constructed work identity then frames how they do crowdwork and their relationships with digital platforms and employers. This study advances theories about crowdwork by showing that it is not context free, neither it is a simple exchange of labour. Further, it shows that the construction of a crowdwork identity in context plays a significant role in shaping the way this digitally-grounded work is conducted and managed. In doing so, it sheds new light on some of the taken for granted assumptions on crowdwork.

Keywords: Crowdwork, gig economy, crowdsourcing, work identity, new ways of working, digital labour, digital platform, Nigeria

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1 Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has influenced the creation of new ways of working and employment models collectively known as the gig economy. These new ways of working enabled by digital platforms include on-demand work and crowdwork (De Stefano 2015). *On-demand* work is work that is transacted online through digital platforms but is location-based delivered locally off-line and hence requires the worker to be physically present at the point of delivery. Examples of on-demand work include like TaskRabbit, Deliveroo and Uber. In contrast, *crowdwork* -which is the focus of this research- presents work that is transacted through and delivered fully on digital platforms and is web-based, where workers could be anywhere in the world as long as they are connected to the Internet and logged into digital platforms for work (Durward et al. 2016). Examples of crowdwork platforms include Upwork and Fiverr.

Crowdwork is rising in popularity and importance. While exact numbers of employees, employers and digital platforms involved in crowdwork are difficult to determine, different sources indicate increased adoption and rapid growth in both the developed and developing world (Berg 2016; Huws et al. 2016; Dølvik et al. 2018; Howcroft et al. 2018; ILO 2018)¹. Subsequently, international organisations such as the International Labour Organization, European Parliament and the World Bank among others have declared crowdwork as a new form of work (Kuek et al. 2015; European Parliament 2017) and a “major transformation in the world of work” (ILO 2018) that is currently subject to policies and regulatory consideration and review (Bogliacino et al. 2019; ILO, 2017, 2018). Also governments, in both the developed and developing countries, find it a potential source of employment and optimistically a possible new solution to reduce the proliferating unemployment problem across the world (Kuek et al. 2015; Zakariah et al. 2016).

Despite its rise in importance as a new way of working, research on crowdwork is still in its infancy, in particular regarding the understanding of the workers who perform the work, their experience and perception of themselves and their work. Few studies have been undertaken in this regard and they predominantly present Western perspective, by either focusing on studying

¹ Heeks (2017) suggests that over 70 million workers are estimated to have registered on labour platforms and Kassi and Lehdonvirta (2016) estimates 26% annual growth of use.

Western society (Wood et al. 2019) or by imposing a Western view driven from studying it in the West, treating all crowdworkers as one category despite their location in the world and life conditions (Idowu and Elbanna 2020). This dominating view implicitly or explicitly assumes that crowdwork is a straightforward, context-free and universally uniform exchange of labour against money, and that the conduct and meaning of work is uniform across societies. They take for granted the assumptions that: 1) crowdwork entails a straightforward transaction that simply comprises of purchasing tasks/labour in exchange for money; 2) crowdwork is a universal and context-free phenomenon because this assumed straightforward transaction occurs on global digital platforms and is centrally managed by their algorithms; and finally, 3) crowdwork involves uniform work where the conduction of tasks against money is a universally uniform activity across workers in different societies.

These assumptions have been shaped despite the lack of in-depth understanding of crowdwork workers experience of this new type of work and their perception of themselves in relation to it, from their own perspective. Indeed, beyond surveys and distant research methods, very little is known about crowdwork in general and in a non-Western context in particular (Graham et al. 2017). This misses the opportunity to conceptualise crowdwork, question the dominant assumptions and enrich our understanding of the dynamics of crowdwork under different conditions and contexts. Importantly, this lack of in-depth knowledge of crowdwork in context propels these assumptions even further, where they become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, the current lack of in-depth understanding of the lived experience of workers who perform crowdwork leaves these assumptions to be established and deepened without scrutiny (Deng et al. 2016a; Deng et al. 2016b). Furthermore, the current lack of deep understanding of crowdworkers' working lives disregards the fact that workers' lived experiences are key, in studying their work and how it is being shaped and conducted, and cannot be ignored if we are to take crowdwork seriously as a new way of working and major transformation in the world of work .

Against this backdrop, we acknowledge crowdwork as a new way of working and examine its assumptions. Therefore, we turn to a non-Western context to investigate crowdworkers' lived experiences and answer the research questions of: how crowdworkers experience and conduct crowdwork? And how they perceive themselves and who they are in relation to crowdwork? This shift in context from Western to non-Western society helps us destabilise the formerly

mentioned simplicity, universality and uniformity assumptions and allows us to examine crowdworkers' experience within their own context. In this regard, we examine crowdworkers in Nigeria. The country is the most populous and largest economy in Africa. It is home to about 190 million people with an estimated 43% of population either underemployed or unemployed (National Bureau of Statistics 2018). It has approximately 150 million mobile phone users and 98.3 million active Internet users in 2018 (Nigerian Communication Commission 2018). The country has attained a global notoriety as a haven of cybercrime, ranking third in the world as the location of perpetrators of cybercrime (Kshetri 2019; Ehimen & Bola 2010; 2013 Internet Crime Report, p.21). This particular reputation associated with the internet use in Nigeria could magnify and help us unravel contextual insights regarding crowdwork and crowdworkers.

We adopted an inductive research approach influenced by phenomenological thinking (Sanders 1982; Boland Jr., 1985, Wilson 2002). During data analysis, concepts from social identity theory emerged as an empirically relevant conceptualization of crowdworkers' perception of themselves and their work, hence we adopted it as a sensitising device. The findings of the study reveal that as they lack organisational, occupational and professional context and referent, crowdworkers in Nigeria rely on social affirmation for the shaping of their work. They construct a work identity that cuts across the boundaries between themselves, the work they do and their social environment. This constructed work identity, which is grounded in their social context, subsequently shapes how they do their work and frames their work conduct including their relationships with digital platforms and employers.

This study contributes to the literature on crowdwork by providing in-depth understanding of crowdworkers' experience in general and in particular the experience of crowdworkers in a non-Western context. It provides a novel perspective highlighting the role of the crowdworkers' local social context in shaping their work identity (perception of who they are) and in turn their conduct of the 'digital' crowdwork. In doing so, it critiques the assumptions that crowdwork is a context-free, straightforward transaction and uniform exchange of tasks/labour for direct monetary pay, and advances a theory of crowdworkers' management of their work in their own context. While the study focused on crowdworkers lived experience in the context of Nigeria, the findings invite reflection on the commonly held assumptions

regarding crowdwork. The study also contributes to work identity literature by examining a new way of working that is fully digital and hence lacks the typical structure and institutional framing associated with traditional workplaces. In this regard, it shows that the conduct of digitally-grounded crowdwork is much affected by workers' own social and cultural conditions. The study contributes to practice by providing insight on the experience of crowdworkers in non-Western societies. This could help policy makers, donors and international organisations in devising policies, training schemes and guidelines for promoting this new way of working. It also offers employers and digital platforms a perspective on the conduct of crowdwork which informs the building of healthy work relationships and could improve platform design to better support crowdworkers.

The paper is organized into six sections. Following the introduction, section 2 provides a background to crowdwork and crowdworkers. Section 3 discusses the concepts that grounded the analysis and explains the shaping of work and how it is conducted, including work identity and the social identity theory concepts of reflective appraisal, environment congruency and incongruence. Section 4 presents the research context and methods. Section 5 presents the findings of the study. Section 6 discusses the findings considering existing research while section 7 outlines the limitations of the research and suggests opportunities for future research.

2 Crowdwork and crowdworkers

Crowdwork is part of the gig economy and is a specific type of crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is a wide umbrella term that refers to organizations or individuals putting an open call on a crowdsourcing digital platform requesting public participation and benefiting from their collective intelligence to solve problems and find new ideas (Fedorenko et al. 2017). While crowdsourcing does not necessarily require financial remuneration, crowdwork is a particular type that presents a digital form of employment where participants provide labour and create digital goods in exchange for monetary pay (Durward et al. 2016 p. 282). The exchange process between workers and employers is governed by digital platforms. Digital platforms put workers in competition with each other through rating systems to support employers' selection. Some digital platforms use a bidding system for potential employees to bid on the fees they would charge for a given task. The latter is theoretically argued to provide conditions

for pushing crowdworkers to compete in a ‘race to the bottom’ towards the lowest end of the payment scale and encourage employers to push wages down (Ross 2012; Hill 2015). Crowdwork can involve micro or macro tasks. Microtasks are small, repetitive tasks requiring very limited skills to complete e.g. object sorting, audio transcription, image labelling and questionnaire completion. Macro tasks are time consuming complex projects requiring domain specific skills and are highly remunerated in comparison to micro tasks e.g., graphic designs, web development, app development, software testing, market research, product design and content creation. There are global platforms for work such as Upwork, PeoplePerHour, Fiverr, Freelancer.com that offer macro tasks mostly in the domain of IT services (Ikediego et al. 2018).

Despite the growing prominence of crowdwork, scholarly interest has focused disproportionately on the transactional relationship between workers, employers and work platforms from the employers’ and digital platforms’ perspective. This perspective pays attention to digital platform management (Zogaj et al. 2014), digital platform design (Deng et al. 2016a), digital control mechanisms (Saxton et al. 2013), quality assurance (Oleson et al. 2011) and organizational performance management including motivation, retainment and incentives (Difallah et al. 2014).

Crowdwork research tends to focus on Western contexts. When a non-Western context is examined, it is limited to topics focusing on examining the economic aspects of development it could bring to a less developed economy (Graham et al. 2017 ; Wood et al. 2019). In this regard, it is argued that crowdwork overcomes geographical borders, political barriers and eases the process of recruitment, which opens the opportunity for workers from developing economies to join what is believed to be a ‘global workforce’ (Manyika et al. 2015; Gillwald et al. 2017; Malik et al. 2017; Taeihagh 2017). Some authors warn against the possible exploitation of crowdworkers (Beerepoot et al. 2015; Berg 2015; Kassi et al. 2016; Lehdonvirta 2016). Studies also identify infrastructural and technological barriers that impede workers from joining what is perceived to be a ‘global job market’ of crowdwork (Graham et al. 2017; Graham et al. 2018; Wood et al. 2018; Wood et al. 2019). Hence, narrowing the focus when examining a non-Western context to only economic aspects, ironically reflects a possible Western bias on what work means in a non-Western context and for non-Western workers; undermining human capital including experience, habits and conduct and psychological capital including who you are (Luthans et al. 2004). It also underestimates the other roles beyond

economics- that work plays in any society including the social and psychological roles (Cole 2007).

Crowdwork is argued to promote micro-entrepreneurship (Dunn 2016; Kalleberg et al. 2016) as it offers workers flexibility of time, place and space to work. It also allows workers the autonomy in selecting the tasks they want to do, choosing their employers and the digital platforms they want to join and to have the freedom to create their own portfolio of multiple employers, multiple digital platforms and multiple jobs (Tidball et al. 2011; Hoßfeld et al. 2014; Zyskowski et al. 2015; Idowu and Elbanna 2020). These characteristics make crowdwork different from freelance, short contract and part-time based jobs in terms of being highly fragmented, fully digital and at arm's length from employers. They make crowdworking a new way of working worthy of close examination beyond the dominating sceptical views on labour exploitation, protection and examination of labour law and regulations (Felstiner 2011; Schor et al. 2017).

Crowdworkers are distant from employers and could have multiple employers at the same time. They are also distant from and do not belong to any digital platform as they subscribe to many at the same time. Hence, they are not members of any organisational, occupational or professional bodies that could define their work conduct, its boundaries and accepted behaviours. It is well documented that organisations, occupations and professions provide workers with codified roles, boundaries, communities of practice and leadership that shape workers' work identity (Riketta 2005; Riketta & Van Dick 2005; Sluss et al. 2007; Walsh et al. 2008). This developed and shaped work identity guides their work conduct as it provides a blueprint for workers that sets acceptable behaviour, guidelines for actions and a general framework for who they are in relation to their work and how to conduct their work and themselves at work (Petriglieri et al. 2018). In the absence of these typical institutional frameworks stemming from organisations, occupations and professions, it is not clear how crowdworkers find an anchor for themselves and their work. Currently, we know very little about crowdworkers' experience including their perception of their work and of themselves in relation to it. In this study, we aim to contribute to closing this gap by answering the research questions of how crowdworkers experience and conduct crowdwork? And how they perceive themselves and who they are in relation to crowdwork?

3 Work identity and environmental congruence

During data analysis, crowdworkers' perception of themselves and their work resonated with particular concepts from identity theory. Consequently, these concepts were adopted as a synthesising device to make coherent sense of the analysis. In this section, we discuss these concepts and their background to provide a cascade for the reader and not to represent the order of the research process.

Identity theory presents a diverse body of literature and different concepts have been used by diverse scholars "as there are communities of scholars" (Petriglieri et al. 2018, pp. 125-126). Information systems research is no exception, as different facets of identity theory were applied in different research, as the extensive review of Carter et al. (2015) shows. However, as the analysis of the collected data of this study highlighted the importance of the crowdworkers' social environment, we found concepts from social identity theory that emphasises social reflective appraisal, environment congruency and incongruency and people's configuration effort to provide a coherent insight into the findings (Stets et al. 2000; Jenkins 2014; Hogg 2016). This section explains these concepts.

Identity is "a self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question "Who am I?" (Ashforth et al. 2008, p. 327). On the individual's level, there are two prominent perspectives of identity; social identity and personal identity. Social identity conceptualises identity as "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." (Tajfel 1978, p. 63). Social identity presents "the shared social meanings that persons attribute to themselves in a role" (Burke et al. 1991, p. 242). It is reflexive as individuals use it as a reference point to assess the implications of their own behaviour as well as that of others and it is also a source of motivation for action, particularly actions that result in the social confirmation of the identity (Burke & Reitzes 1991). Personal identity is unique to the individual and involves their traits, abilities and interests and is beyond the focus of this study. Work identity is a facet of social identity that is particularly related to work and is developed in relation to work.

As social identity acts as a framework for people that guides their behaviour, individuals are actively engaged in assessing their environment and the reflected appraisals they receive from others. *Reflected appraisals* involve the evaluative response of other individuals and the self-

meaning assigned to them by those individuals. When the reflected appraisals are *congruent* with the self-meaning, the individual will engage in identity-confirming behaviour to maintain this congruency. When the reflected appraisal is *incongruent with the individual's self-meaning*, the individual will work hard to close this gap and restore congruency. Given their desire to fit into the society, individuals use a broad range of techniques to create, preserve or change parts of their identity in the face of social and reflective incongruence (Hatch et al. 2002; Kreiner et al. 2006). While doing so, individuals attempt to configure a coherent identity that gradually integrates favoured capacities, effective defences and successful sublimations (Erikson 1968, p. 159-163). Erikson (1968) explains that a successful *configuration* could occur through selective repudiation, mutual assimilation and absorption in a new configuration. *Selective repudiation* refers to a process of rejecting and/or suppressing certain identifications, *mutual assimilation* refers to synthesizing two or more identifications and merging them into one without rejecting either, and *absorbing identifications* is a process where different identifications are still seen as separate; none are rejected, and they continue to exist separately side by side in some sort of dynamic balance (Schachter 2004).

The above explains that social identity is a subjective perception of who we think we are in relation to the environment, and that work identity is constructed as employees become who they are (in terms of their actions; how to behave and dress, how to conduct themselves etc.) in interaction with their work environment and people at work (Stets et al. 2000; Jenkins 2014; Hogg 2016). Therefore, at work, the role of environment and situated context for identity construction cannot be overstated because identity is perceived as the result of the interchanges that an individual has with their organisational culture and others around them with whom they interact. In organisations, professions and occupations, different roles might demand different behaviours (Davies et al. 2008). Since individuals have to adequately fit into their organisational and occupational environment (Kovoor-Misra 2009), they may have to change and adapt identity in different circumstances and various environments (Davies et al. 2008; Schwartz et al. 2012). In this regard, individuals are active agents in identity construction as they attempt to find a more appropriate fit with a set of internal and/or external standards as they interact with the environment (Dutton et al. 2010). They are active in establishing, negotiating, regulating and presenting their work identity (Sveningsson et al. 2003; Beech 2008; Adams et al. 2012) and make effort in creating a sense of coherence, consistency and stability in their identity and behaviour (Brown 2017).

4 Methodology

4.1 Research approach and data collection

This research adopts an inductive interpretive research approach influenced by the philosophy of phenomenology. Phenomenology is an interpretive methodology that explicate the essence of human experience and brackets or suspends the researcher's own assumptions. This approach aims to study human phenomenon as experienced, valued and appreciated by participants within their own context suspending the researcher's own assumptions (Sanders 1982; Boland JR. 1985; Wilson 2002, p. 1). Thus, we approach the study with a focus on acknowledging and chronicling the experience and actions of crowdworkers as they perceive their crowdwork and themselves in relation to it. This approach provides deep insights on phenomena and is best suited to our exploratory research question (Klein et al. 1999; Walsham 2006). It allowed participants experience to be freely expressed and assigned meaning and therefore open data to be freely examined without the burden of the existing dominating assumptions. The research process involves different data sources, data triangulation, and examining empirical data against extant knowledge and theories. Data sources include face-to-face interviews with crowdworkers in three Nigerian cities, voice interviews, participant observation of work sites, participation in a closed WhatsApp group for Nigerian crowdworkers where workers included us, observation of open online blogs, observation of online discussion threads on social media including Facebook and Twitter. Forty-one (41) unique interviewees aged between 22 and 35 years were involved in forty-four (44) interviews. Emails were exchanged with several participants in order to clarify ideas, request documents or verify comments.

The respondents participating in this study have been selected through purposeful sampling, commonly used in qualitative research in cases where identification and selection of information-rich cases is required regarding a particular phenomenon of interest (Suri 2011). Our participants were selected to fit the research criteria before they were included in the study. The research inclusion criteria were: 1) participants are involved in crowdwork as a fulltime job for a minimum of two years. This is to ensure that they have enough experience and expertise to be a sufficiently reliable source that provides us with insight about crowdwork. 2) participants are workers specialising in IT and IT services (software programming, website

design, graphics design and mobile application development). This is in order to have one category of professionals that allow us to have rich insight into their experience. Also, the analysis of digital labour platforms shows that IT services and tasks present the majority of offered tasks on these digital platforms (Kässi et al. 2018).

All interviews were open-ended, falling between in-depth unstructured and semi-structured types of interviews and consistent with the “dramaturgical model” of qualitative interview (Myers et al. 2007). Dramaturgical model is the interpretation of “individual behaviour as the dramatic projection of a chosen self” (Goffman, 1963). The interviews were conducted in four phases. The first phase was unstructured and was carried out between December 2017 and January 2018 with a total of 6 participants where probing questions were asked about the participant’s experience of crowdwork in Nigeria. The respondents were open and articulate in the interviews, which helped us to gain insight into the experiences of crowdworkers and guided the further development of the research plan. In this phase, personal contacts were used to identify the first 3 participants and snowballing was used to identify the subsequent 3 interviewees. Snowballing is a widely used method applied to find ‘hidden populations’ with required characteristics which are difficult for researchers to access (Heckathorn 1997; Naderifar et al. 2017). To avoid the bias of snowballing, the rest of participants in the other three phases of interviews were recruited through different circles including a WhatsApp group and on digital platforms.

The second, third data and fourth collection phases were carried out between June - August 2018, October – November 2018 and June 2019, consisting of 18, 12 and 8 in-depth semi-structured interviews respectively. The questions in these interviews were focussed on understanding their social and work practices, behaviour, perception of self, activities they engage in, and how and why they engage in these practices. We also asked questions about their feelings and aspirations. Interviews lasted between 50-120 minutes with an average of 75 minutes, and the duration of follow-up interviews was between 10 minutes to 26 minutes. Overall, 12 participants are female and 29 male. The familiarity of one of the authors with Nigeria and the Nigerian IT industry enabled unconstrained, open and spontaneous conditions for the interviews, facilitating the quality of data collected (Myers et al. 2007). This provided an opportunity for in-depth conversations and allowed the emergence of new ideas and discoveries, enriching the quality of data collected (Soss 2015).

The data gathered from interviews has been continuously supplemented and triangulated with data collected from informal face-to-face conversations during participant observation visits to crowdworkers in Nigeria. Furthermore, we also visited crowdworkers' profiles on crowdsourcing websites, examining their feedback, their profile presentation and confirming some of their responses in the interviews. We also noted and observed different social media groups, blogs and followed some online discussions related to discoveries in our interviews. For this study, social media data were collected from Facebook and Twitter in particular posts and discussion threads regarding experience of crowdwork, the social perception of online work in Nigeria and people sharing their stories of police encounters. After obtaining explicit consent, we also gathered respondents' screenshots of discussions on closed WhatsApp groups, images of their workspace and work tools and artefacts.

4.2 Data analysis

After the interviews, pseudonyms were assigned to each interview participant to protect their identity and interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The analysis follows the inductive thematic approach where we let the data speak for itself as we initially followed an open coding approach (Hodkinson 2008; Vaast et al. 2013). Codes and themes were developed based on interview content and triangulated with data obtained from the other sources to enhance interpretive validity (Braun et al. 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). All codes and themes were developed and assessed through discussions amongst the research team throughout the four data analysis rounds described as follows. In understanding and interpreting crowdworkers' experience of crowdwork and perception of themselves in relation to it, we, as authors positioned ourselves as interpretive bricoleurs (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.5; Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991), piecing together the perception of crowdworkers' and the process through which this develops.

The first round of data analysis took place after the first phase of data collection. It involved open coding of full interviews and other sources of data including open online forums and social media, research notes and memos. The second round of coding took place after the second phase of data collection during which codes were related to each other and the surprising theme of 'social pressure' emerged. Grounded in our understanding from the analysis of these two rounds of data collection and analysis, we moved to the third round of data analysis where 'social pressure' was scrutinised in-depth and themes of identity conflict and confirmation. As organisational and management literature on identity is confined to

organisational boundaries (Petriglieri et al. 2018), we found the need to examine their origin in social identity theory which is wider in perspective and covers richer context. In particular, we found the concepts of reflective appraisal, congruent/incongruent identity, configuration and the associated action of individuals, to be relevant and more consistent with our data. They allowed us to conceptualise the behaviour of all the participants we interviewed, the data we collected and the themes we identified.

In the fourth round of data analysis, the concept of ‘social incongruent/congruent’ was related to social and work behaviour and we re-coded the data, focusing on the developed work identity and associated crowdworkers’ actions and behaviours in relation to their social, employer and digital platform spheres. Finding existing concepts and theory that could explain the phenomenon in a coherent way is consistent with previous inductive research that reported similar experience (Levina et al. 2003; Berente et al. 2012).

5 Research Findings

5.1 Flexible work and crowdworkers’ identity

The flexibility, freedom and autonomy associated with gig work were appreciated by crowdworkers when they initially adopted this model of work. They found the option of managing their own time and work, whenever and wherever they want, to be revelatory allowing them opportunities to attend to their social and family life. They found crowdwork to be a way to achieve a satisfactory work/life balance and attend to what matters for them. Hence their social identities associated with the roles of parents, siblings, children were taking prominent place in describing who they are and what the crowdwork means. These views have been expressed as follows:

“In my family, I’m the one my siblings and parents call when they need things done during the week, they call me because they know I can make time for anything if I want.... I drive my mother to the hospital every other week, I’m able to do this because of this work I’m doing” - Wale

They also found crowdwork an opportunity to restore and maintain the identity they found important to them. For example, a crowdworker’s relates his work to being a father as follows:

“this job has made me a more involved father.....I take my kids to school and pick them up after school, I cook them lunch and bring them with me here.....I couldn’t do that when I worked morning to night” – Luke

5.2 Social reflective appraisal

The flexibility of crowdwork and its association with the Internet has also brought about negative reflected appraisals from the crowdworkers’ social circles and from formal institutions. Internet-based work in Nigeria is socially and institutionally associated with crime and fraudulence. Indeed, the social and institutional taint of online work as fraud is deeply founded in the society since the famous “Nigeria Prince” email scam in the early 2000s where people across the world were defrauded. Since then, discussions in homes, news media and government authorities about the work on the internet has always been related to fraud and crime (Oriola 2005). This view has been repetitively substantiated in interviews and Apostle summarises it here:

“.. the general perspective [is that] everybody operating a laptop is a fraudster but they don’t care to really see what the person is really doing or understand what the person is doing with system, so they have this general perspective that this is a bad boy, this is a yahoo yahoo² [internet Fraud] person, this is a fraudster... even if its operating a word document or designing” - Apostle

Crowdworkers were experiencing incongruence between the work they do, the flexibility they appreciate and the reflected appraisal they receive from even their immediate social circles. This incongruency was eloquently described as follows:

“when my then fiancée told her parents that I do work online, they were furious and upset that she wanted to marry a fraudster.....it took a lot of explaining for them to understand that it’s a legitimate employment and not fraudulent” - Tunde

While the interviewee above managed to convince his parents-in-law of his integrity and the legitimacy of his work, many other crowdworkers we interviewed and read their online threads and posts could not face their social circles with such a negative image. The moral taint associated with Internet-based work is much more sweeping than workers’ ability to face it. They find the image associated with crowdworkers as criminals and fraudsters to be in conflict with their self-identification as people of good character, education and professional

² Yahoo yahoo is a local expression for Internet Fraud and Fraudsters.

knowledge. They also find that both digital platforms and remote employers do not provide the confirmation that could allow them to cope with this social taint. This is in contrast to literature regarding other occupations which are considered tainted and are stigmatised such as funeral directors, police officers, bail bondsmen, refuse collectors, social workers, debt collectors (Mawby & Worrall, 2013; Dick, 2005; Thompson, 1991; Davis, 1984).

This negative perception of crowdwork is also enforced by ongoing institutional campaigns to crack down on crime and the stigma associated with online work. People and police were vigilant to detect signs of online work and immediately consider it evidence of fraud. Consequently, neighbours could report their suspicions if they see someone who works online which is what happened in Hamza's case.

".....after some time, I discovered it was my next door neighbour that reported me to the police that I'm always at home on my laptop and just bought a car so I must be a yahoo boy³ [Internet fraudster]When I got to the police, I was handed a statement to sign that states that I was involved in fraud.....If not that I'm educated not to sign the statement, I'd be in jail" – Hamza

This institutional stigma was forceful. Many interviewees talked about random stops and searches by the police where smart phones, online banking, emails are considered enough evidence to get arrested. Below is an excerpt from an interview and an image from a closed WhatsApp group that depict this institutional stigma.

"I was arrested and detained for 3days.... The best thing is to not get into their net because they will find every opportunity to link anything they see on your phone to Yahoo-yahoo [internet fraud], this is not a country where you can assert any right...[the police] tell you to unlock your phone Even when I tried to say they can't check my phone, they said it's because there's evidence of fraud there and that's how I was arrested" - David

³ Yahoo boys is another local expression for Internet fraudsters



Figure 1: A crowdworker sharing his police encounter on a closed WhatsApp group

5.3 Seeking congruence through changing practices and adopting legitimizing artefacts

Instead of giving up crowdwork to resolve the incongruence between their identity and the surrounding reflected appraisals, crowdworkers find the need to reconcile these conflicts to achieve congruity of their identity with the social reflected appraisal as explained here:

“I’m an honest person... but working online is not something that someone like me is supposed to do, I can’t stop working because of that...I was unemployed for a long time, the best I can do is manage the situation”-Usman

To manage this incongruence, crowdworkers take actions to find better alignment with the social perception of how work should be done and how workers should behave. In this regard, crowdworkers adopt a range of artefacts that are typically associated with traditional office work in order to detach themselves from the socially tainted crowdwork. They rent office spaces and formalise their work by registering it as a small business. Some of these offices are shared with other crowdworkers, while others are separately rented offices or are added to an existing business. This interviewee summarises this course of action.

“What I did with a couple of friends is that when we started making little more money, we got this tiny office, registered our business as an IT firm. Each of us registered his own business, so we are basically 5 independent companies sharing an office. We work independently but share the office space, internet and some facilities. It’s an open space as you know. We present ourselves as

an IT company, if anybody come into our office, what they'll see is a couple of IT guys working on their computers in an office". – Ola

As they rent offices (take action to reduce incongruence), crowdworkers engage in further behaviours that are consistent with their public identity as office workers and affirms this identity. They adopt nonmaterial artefacts such as consistently following a standard office hour routine and also material artefacts associated with office workers such as dressing up in traditional work attire. Figure 2 shows a picture of a crowdworker in his physical office while on his mobile phone connecting to the digital platform placing new bids and managing existing ones. Emeka, a crowdworker outlines this practice:

"As time went on and I started making some money, I knew it was time to get a space outside of the house to work, when people see you at home all day without going out to work and you start buying expensive things, they will start suspecting that you are doing some fraudulent or illegal stuff..... I dress up and leave my house in the morning and come back in the evening like other people" - Emeka

As part of formalising their identity as businesspersons and legitimising their work, crowdworkers also tend to formally register their business. They adopt business artefacts to project and ground the new businessperson's identity, including creating formal business cards and headed stationary with company's name and its business registration number (ID). Simon expresses the artefacts he uses to create his business work environment as follows.

"My business is registered; I have the CAC [company registration] certificate hanging on the wall somewhere in my office.....I have normal office stationaries.... business cards, letterhead and ID card"
-Simon

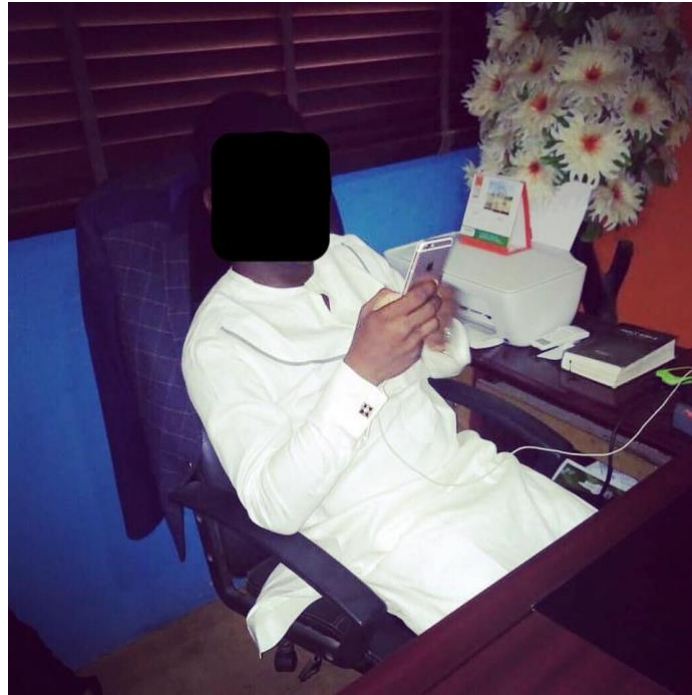


Figure 2: Picture of a crowd worker in his office space

Crowdworkers find the changes they make in creating a work identity of a businessperson important to resolve the incongruence between the reflected appraisal they received from their social environment and the work they do as crowdworkers.

While crowdworkers engage in this elaborate plot of constructing an identity of formal businesspersons, their family and friends are also engaged in furthering the affirmation of this public identity. Seun explains how his parents enforce his public identity.

“My parents tell their friends that I develop software for international clients, they don’t mention online or internet at all, I just go with because of the poor reputation of Nigerians on the internet when it comes to making money..... they understand what I do but are not proud enough to tell people I get my Job online” – Seun

Crowdworkers also find the adopted identity of businesspersons not only more socially accepted but also more institutionally palatable. David summarises this view as follows:

“If you meet the police on the road and they ask what you do, I have a business card and ID card for my business... if they ask where I work, I have an address to show them. This is how to stay safe over here because these police are crazy” - David

Apart from having legitimizing objects, they also rid themselves of any evidence of their work like smartphones that show foreign payments, remove memory cards from their phones and

avoid going out with their work laptop. The following statements from interviewees confirm this.

“.... I try to back up all my work on the cloud storage then delete all of them from my phone’s memory or my memory card” – Odion

“To deal with the police harassment, when you are going out you tend not to go out with your laptops and your smartphones, the best way, and the smart way to do it is go with a smaller phone (Non-smartphone), because at any point in time when you come about them they might be in mufti (or) uniforms, they will go through your private things, they will go through your emails, and the moment they start seeing transactions, even your bank statement...that is a very, very bad idea, the whole day will be wasted, you will be charged with different offencethe best way to avoid them is if you are going out don’t go with your smartphones and don’t go with your laptops.” - Ayodeji

“I simply don’t go out with smartphone because I have too much there for them to frame as evidence of a crime. Unless I’m going to work, or visiting a place I know, I leave my phone and go with my wife’s phone” - Ahmed

Female Crowdworkers revealed that their experience of crowdsourcing is different because none of the female respondents in our study engaged in these actions. Female workers work from home, use their mobile phone and computers without suspicion from family, neighbours or police. They find that there is no stigma associated with them doing crowdwork and that being in the house doing work is congruent with the expectations of their social environment. Blessing for example shared this view saying:

“I don’t really face much challenges like guys, because I’m a female and people don’t really see me as a threat when it comes to those kinds of things. They see the guys as a threat, because when it comes to online scam, they think of guys not the female...so they don’t really put too much attention on me”- Blessing

When male respondents were asked about this, they revealed that males are viewed as violent and more prone to engage in fraud. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a male participant asserting this point.

Tunji: there is a word for men – “Yahoo boys”, do you know the name for female internet fraudster?”

Interviewer: no

Tunji: Exactly, there’s no name for it. So, you’ll understand why they will have a better experience, where’s our equality. You only hear of yahoo boys, there’s no yahoo girl?

Crowdworkers find that there are no tactics they can use against the incongruity with their social environment, the moral taint involved, and assert their crowdwork identity. However, they hope that social understanding and acceptance might happen for them as it happened with bloggers in Nigeria. The following is an example of this hope.

“There is a famous blogger in Nigeria Linda Ikeji, she bought a \$2million house some years back from her blog, and it made news and a lot of people heard about it and started understanding that people make money from blogging, but that’s where it ends, wish we could get our own Linda Ikeji.”-
Toyin

5.4 Remoulding the self and becoming a ‘regular worker’

The cumulation of practices, engaged in by crowdworkers to address the incongruity in their identity with their social environment, had created a new identity as businesspersons that detaches their work and ‘self’ from the taint socially associated with crowdworking. In doing so, crowdworkers chose to select, adopt and embody the projected identity of a professional and suppress any identity related to crowdworking. This identity adjustment is expressed here by Azeez:

“I wouldn’t say I’m a crowdworker or digital worker, I prefer to say I’m a business owner who just happens to meet his clients on the internet... I have a business with a functioning office where I work, internet workers don’t have that, there’s nothing about me that says internet worker. Calling myself a digital worker is a disservice to myself and everything I’ve worked for.”

The sentiment by Azeez is consistent with Erikson’s (1968 and 1975) identity configuration by selective repudiation and Schachters (2004) explanation that, identity configuration could be based on choice and suppression, where one identity is chosen over another and people remould their lives in order to fit their thoughts and behaviours to this selected identity, while the other identifications are rejected and/or suppressed. The chosen identity by Azeez is the constructed identity of an entrepreneur and business owner while the identity of crowdworker or digital worker is unreservedly rejected and suppressed.

In rejecting being identified as crowdworkers and remoulding their work practices to suit a businessperson’s identity, workers believe that the new identity is not just for the public but a reflection of who they have become. The business artefacts being put in place bolster this understanding of their identity, and the practices they are engaged in are believed to have

created a clear differentiation between themselves and the socially controversial crowdwork. Together, they allowed crowdworkers to draw a parallel between themselves and traditional workers and distance themselves from any association with being crowdworkers. An example of this view is as follows.

“Regular workers have to be punctual and be on time to work and similarly we also have to follow deadlines religiously. Like regular workers, we also deal with clients and we also have to provide customer service. Like regular workers, we also have our place of work” – Seun

However, other crowdworkers admit that while they cannot publicly declare that they are crowdworkers and have to adopt a social narrative where they look and behave as business and office workers, they keep their crowdworker’s identity as a private matter with their close circles. This means that those workers chose to embody an adaptable identity to suit their social situation including one for the public and the other private (Schachter 2004). Wale for example describes this adaptation saying:

“I don’t tell anybody I make most of my income online except for my parents and sistersTrust me, you don’t want to be put in the same basket as those guys [Internet fraudster],clearly to myself, I know I’m an online worker but if you ask me outside, I’ll be telling you a different story.” -Wale

5.5 Crowdwork: conduct and relationships with digital platforms and employers

5.5.1 Adapting crowdwork conduct to constructed work identity

Crowdworkers recognise the need to continuously maintain their identity as businesspersons⁴ by ensuring income stability. An interviewee explains this point of view:

“You can’t tell people you are in business when you have no money, they’ll ask you whether you’re not getting paid”

In fulfilling the need for economic stability and maintaining the social appearance of successful businesspersons, crowdworkers become more focused on economic gains. Hence, they bid for as many projects as possible on the digital platforms despite the nature of the tasks and the

⁴ For more into the career trajectory of crowdworker, see: Idowu, A. & Elbanna, A. (2020) ‘Digital platforms of work and the crafting of career path: The crowdworkers’ perspective,’ Information Systems Frontiers. DOI: 10.1007/s10796-020-10036-1.

required skills. When the jobs get awarded, they subsequently act as business owners and outsource them to other crowdworkers for a profit. These practices shape their business ownership identity; they help them in running as a business and ensuring different sources of income. The following quote, from Dele, summarises this:

“...what I do is because of my high rating on these platforms.... I can bid on a lot of projects and be successful in many of them. Most part of my day does not involve developing software, it’s mostly bidding for projects, communicating with clients, people I outsource the work to, and doing administrative work of managing all the moving parts....I bid on any projects I can, not only software projects. If I can get someone else to do it, I’m bidding on it.....Then I give it out to other people to do it at a lesser price so that I can make profit from it...on some work I make between 50 and 60 percent profit”

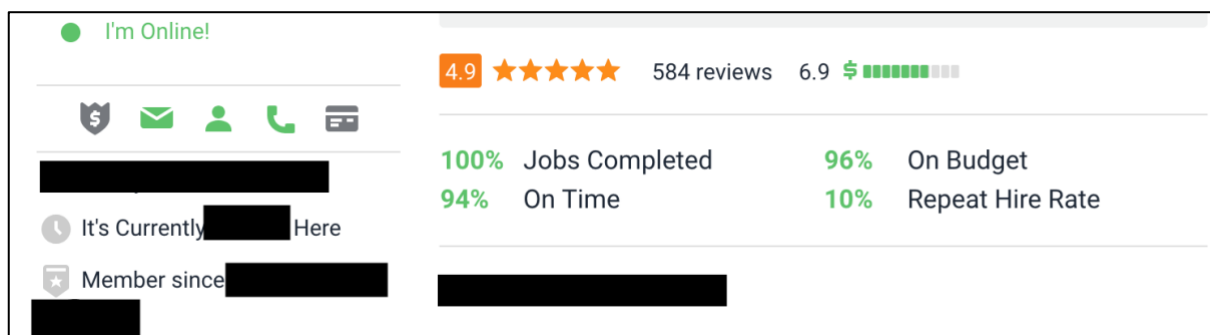


Figure 3: A snapshot of a crowdworker profile (December 2018)

Figure 3 (anonymised to protect worker’s identity) shows a crowdworker’s profile working on the platform for only a year but has completed 584 software development tasks, averaging 1.6 tasks per day. This confirms workers revelation of task outsourcing. The tasks that are contracted from the platform are being outsourced to other digital workers by reposting on the digital platforms, assigning them to fellow crowdworkers they know and professionals who have the required skills but are not engaged in crowdwork. Workers reveal the preference of outsourcing to local professionals and fellow crowdworkers.

“I prefer to give my work to other freelancers [local crowdworker] like me and to software developers around here.... it’s only in extreme cases that I repost work back to the platform” - Ola

As their work on the platform changes from only bidding and getting tasks, to bidding on as many tasks as possible and outsourcing, crowdworkers’ daily work becomes more managerial.

This includes communicating with and managing digital platforms, employers and other crowdworkers, keeping records of different workers and their skills and also keeping records of tasks, payments and profits. These changes are reviewed here:

“...a majority of time now is spent doing everything but coding, I’m basically a project manager now. My job is to take care of the clients[employer] and workers...I’m the intermediary between the workers and the client(employers), so I manage the seamless relationship.... I have daily spreadsheet to manage my deliveries, talent spreadsheet where I put list of people and their skills, I have another spreadsheet of all my present projects, people responsible for them, deadlines and so on” - Seun

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
	Task Code	Client	Project Brief	Skills	Client delivery	Delivery time	Submission time	Programmers	Bid	Paid	Profit
3			project relating to weighing bridges	Java, C++	07/10/2018	12:00:00 PM	05/10/2018		\$500.00	\$330.00	\$170.00
4			Design, develop, install premium Latest Magento eCommerce online store with mobile app	Magento, Mobile App Development, Website Design	07/10/2018	2:00:00 PM	02/10/2018		\$900.00	\$470.00	\$430.00
5			Accounting software developed in C#; Accounts Payable	C#	07/10/2018	2:00:00 PM	04/10/2018		\$200.00	\$150.00	\$50.00
6			Windows software that had developed, now i would like to turn it into a phone app.	Android, C# iPhone, Windows Mobile	07/10/2018	7:00:00 PM	05/10/2018		\$400.00	\$340.00	\$60.00
7			Lead Management software build - Lead Management & Nurturing	Python, Desktop Architecture	07/10/2018	8:00:00 PM	05/10/2018		\$335.00	\$235.00	\$100.00
8			Excel Software Compatibility Matrix	Excel	07/10/2018	11:00:00 PM	07/10/2018		\$60.00	\$40.00	\$20.00

Figure 4: A spreadsheet of daily task delivery of a crowdworker

Figure 4 shows an example of a spreadsheet kept by one of the crowdworkers. It presents a typical business management record of tasks, responsibilities, deadlines, cost and profit.

5.5.2 Defining work ethics and creating work-self boundaries (ethics and bounded morality)

As they become business owners, workers believe that this work identity should be demarcated to guide their work conduct and provide a blueprint for acceptable behaviour on the digital platform and with employers. In this regard, crowdworkers revealed that they set firm boundaries between their business (crowdwork) and their personal conduct. Crowdworkers pointed to instances where the work that is being offered on digital platforms is not illegal but against their personal conviction. In these instances, they suppress their personal ethics in favour

of what is believed to be consistent with business owner identity where financial gains and profits are the measures of success. The following quote summarises this:

“Business is business, I have to do what I have to do or else I won’t survive.... It doesn’t make me a bad person, on the contrary it makes me a good businessman”- Omreore

Consistent with their new identity as business owners and professionals, crowdworkers also note that they should keep their focus on delivering tasks. One of the crowdworkers conveys this saying:

“I know some of the software I do is going to be submitted to schools by students, but the internet is not the place for moral superiority, I don’t tolerate this kind of thing personally but when I’m working it’s just a job that needs to be done” - Simi

The above statements show that in the absence of organizational, occupational or professional structure, norms, socialising and guidance for identification, crowdworkers draw clear boundaries between their business ethics and their personal ethics. In other words, unlike in traditional employment where employees are influenced by and conform to the organisational identity and ethics, crowdworkers apply self-regulation that is consistent with the work identity they construct for themselves.

To sustain their work, increase their opportunity and income on the digital platform, crowdworkers engage in managing digital platforms and their recommendation systems. They understood how the ranking algorithm works and find that the algorithms on digital platforms rate the workers partly on the basis of visits to their profiles, and this rating impacts the platforms’ recommendation systems, and hence their chances to be recommended to employers and get work on the platform. They play the algorithms on the digital platforms by renting BOTs to increase the traffic on their profile and hence increase their ranking on digital platforms, so platforms’ recommendation systems automatically advance them to employers.

“The way the site works is that apart from the reviews, the algorithms works in a way that if it sees that you’re having regular visits to your profile, it assumes that you’re an expert and that’s why you are having many profile views, so anytime someone search for maybe “Php” or “Java” on the platform, it brings your name to the top of the list and through this, employers assume you’re the best... you just have to pay \$10 for some of these guys in India, they let the BOT visit your profile continuously and it works well, I’ve used it 3 times” - Femi

BOT manipulation for ratings seemed to be an acceptable practice as a practical way to increase rankings and opportunities to get jobs on digital platforms. Crowdworkers are, however, quick to point out their strong personal ethics and justify their adopted business ethics. For example, they cite the virtual and material aspect of the algorithm as a justification to playing it as no harm is being caused to people. As one of the crowdworkers remarks:

“..I’m a straight forward person to deal with, I try as much as possible to keep my integrity intact, but this is an algorithm, I’m not hurting anybody, I’m just trying to get ahead ...” - Olawumi

It was revealed that some male crowdworkers created their online profiles as females. They add profile information using a female name and picture. They do this to increase their chances of getting jobs on the platforms since they believe that employers tend to trust and hire women more than men. In doing so, crowdworkers don’t only devise ways to manipulate the algorithms, but also manipulate employers, by male crowdworkers presenting their profiles as female. Ayodeji describes this practice:

“when starting out the best thing to do is to create a female account, because in the world today we tend to pity females, not really pity them but when [you] have male or a female, [employers] always give the female preference over a male, so when you create a female account. ...although depending on the need they would rather give it to a female than a male. Imagine a data entry expert who is male, and the other who is a female, they would rather give it to a female than give it to a male at some point in time, so to create an account we tend to use a female profile” - Ayodeji

Crowdworkers knew the digital platforms rules and told us that contact with employers outside the platform is discouraged and they should use only the chat, video and voice call features of digital platforms in communicating with an employer. However, they try to conduct business outside the platform in order to reduce their costs and bypass the digital platform’s imposed per job charges and commissions. Another crowdworker remarked:

“I work with employers outside the platform....it’s not encouraged but I do it anyways, the platform commission is too much, they take 10 to 15% off my income and even if I don’t get paid for a job, they still charge me upfront before anything. I meet the employers on the platform and then sometimes transfer our business outside the platform” – David

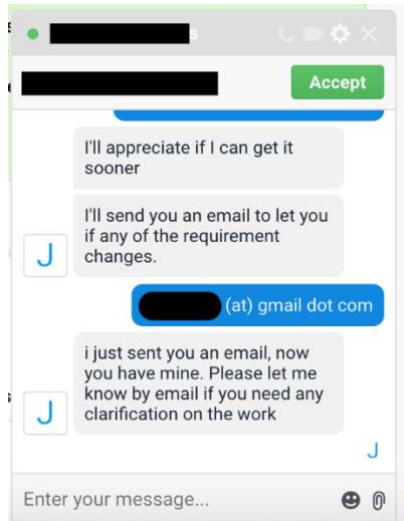


Figure 5: A crowd worker sharing email address with a new employer

Figure 5 shows an exchange between a crowdworker and an employer where the crowdworker breaks the rules and shares their email address.

In addition, crowdworkers engage in practices of renegotiating terms of agreement with employers in the middle of the project; workers do this when they feel that they have negotiating power. Our respondents, being software developers, know that by the nature of their work it is difficult for a software developer to continue the unfinished coding of another developer, hence when in the middle of a task, they are able to renegotiate because the power dynamic has shifted in their favour at this point. While workers recognise this as unethical, they justify it by the need to get payment during the job and the only way to run their crowdwork business. Simi expresses this view as follows.

“When you start a project, you negotiate and normally, you don’t get paid until work is completed and the customer is satisfied, in some case that may be 6 weeks or 2 months and during this time, I need money. What I do is call the employer and tell him to renegotiate and threaten to quit if I’m not paid for the work I’ve done. I know it’s not a good thing to do but that’s my best negotiating condition. If I quit, he’ll have to get a new developer to start from scratch.... Most times they agree” – Simi

6 Discussion and Contribution

Crowdwork adoption in developed and developing countries is rising in popularity (Berg 2016; Huws et al. 2016; Dølvik et al. 2018; Howcroft et al. 2018; ILO 2018) and different international organisations have declared it as a new form of work (Kuek et al. 2015; European

Parliament 2017; ILO 2018). However, research and theoretical development in this area is still in its infancy. In this study we questioned the taken for granted assumptions that crowdwork is a straightforward, context-free and universally uniform exchange of labour against money, and that the conduct and meaning of work is uniform across societies. These assumptions largely stem from the digitality of crowdwork, its management through global digital work platforms and the domination of a Western perspective. We examined these assumptions in the context of Nigeria to destabilise these assumptions and challenge their Western origin. Therefore, we questioned how crowdworkers experience and conduct crowdwork? And how they perceive themselves and who they are in relation to crowdwork? Through inductive analysis, we found concepts from social identity theory to provide a coherent explanation of Nigerian crowdworkers' work experience, perception and conduct.

The study reveals that the digitality of crowdwork brings about an ambiguous new form of work. It lacks anchoring in organisational, professional and occupational structure as well as organisational norms and socialised practices. The latter presents the typical ground for the formation of work identity and conduct (Riketta 2005; Riketta & Van Dick 2005; Sluss et al. 2007; Walsh et al. 2008). In the absence of the typical sources for the formation of work identity, crowdworkers find themselves responsible for defining who they are in relation to crowdwork and in turn defining the contours of its conduct. The following sections discuss the research findings and contribution in the context of Nigeria and our broader understanding of crowdwork.

6.1 Crowdwork in Nigeria and the role of the social environment

The study reveals the extent of the negative social perception of crowdwork in Nigeria which is acquired from the cybercrime reputation associated with online work. While the international taint associated with Nigeria's cybercrime has been sufficiently documented (BBC 2017), our study identifies the substantial local stigma associated with any internet engagement and internet-enabled employment including crowdwork. It shows that people go as far as looking over each other's shoulder for signs of continuous computer usage in order to report it to the authorities.

Owing to this pervasive taint, crowdworkers experience incongruency between their digital work, self and their social environment. This creates a need for crowdworkers to reconcile themselves, eliminate incongruence, align with and adapt to the Nigerian societal expectation

of work. Thus, they discreetly and confidentially benefit from the possible flexibility of crowdwork in advancing other roles in their lives such as being a parent or carer for elderly parents. However, they engage in series of practices and adopt different artefacts to construct work and self-identity that is congruent with the social expectations of how legitimate work should be conducted. These practices and artefacts in turn influence crowdworkers shaping of their work conduct which impacts their relationships with employers and digital platforms.

To resolve the incongruency with societal expectations, Nigerian crowdworkers configure their work identity by either choosing to maintain separate public and private identities or selecting and embodying a single identity. Some crowdworkers engage in selective repudiation to suppress the identity of being crowdworkers, and deliberately abandon the flexibility that comes with it in order to completely adopt the socially congruent identity of office workers and entrepreneurs. This choice corresponds to the societal held belief in Nigeria that respects formal workers as higher and more educated earners (Haywood & Teal 2010) and the high legitimacy of entrepreneurship in Nigeria, where entrepreneurs are esteemed, admired and respected (Nnadozie 2002).

In identity literature, people engaged in tainted work in traditional work resign to defend, ignore or normalize the taint (Ashforth et al. 1999, Ashforth et al. 2007; Vaast et al. 2015). Interestingly, Nigerian crowdworkers do not use these defensive strategies in relation to society but disassociate themselves from the digital work itself that causes it. They find a ‘higher-order’ identity to adopt in order to fit into their social environment (Schachter 2004; Erikson 1968).

Other crowdworkers keep their work as a private secret to be disclosed only to friends and close circles. These crowdworkers change and adapt their identity based on their environment and in interaction with people (Earley 1993; Kenny et al. 2011). They compartmentalise and habituate the identity that they deem fit, in each social context, in order to create some sense of congruence and coherence with societal expectations. This enables crowdworkers to effectively inhibit adaptable work identities i.e. a public identity of being a business owner and office worker and a private work identity of being a crowdworker. It solves the problem of identity conflict that is usually emergent in the incongruences between two or more identity domains and hence allows Nigerian crowdworkers to embody and enact a form of social code switching without social conflict.

In the context of Nigeria, the negative social perception of online work and by extension crowdwork creates a necessity for crowdworkers to engage in different identity work to reconcile themselves, eliminate incongruence, align and adapt with the societal expectation of work. The situated societal context of where work is conducted thus dictates how work is framed, presented and work identity constructed. The absence of organisational, professional or occupation identity not only creates an identity vacuum but a challenge to fit this new form of work within the social framework. As a result, crowdworkers are left to develop their own strategies.

The study also shows that the taint associated with crowdwork is not extended to female crowdworkers. As a result, they are not exposed to the same social pressures as male crowdworkers. Their crowdwork is indeed congruent with societal expectations of them, consequently they do not need to engage in practices of fitting their work into the social environment. This finding confirms further that the social context where work is conducted takes prominence in influencing the construction of crowdwork identity, including how crowdwork is conducted and the relationship between crowdworkers and digital platforms and employers. This finding sheds doubt on the rhetoric surrounding crowdwork as boundaryless, crossing geographies and cultures stemming from its digital ground (Berg 2015). We will discuss the implication of this finding on the conceptualisation of crowdwork in section 6.4.

6.2 Crowdworkers in Nigeria and entrepreneurship practices

The study reveals that crowdworkers engage in entrepreneurial practices to ensure income stability to validate and maintain their publicly adopted identity as businesspeople, entrepreneurs and office workers. There are increasing calls in academia and public spheres for workers in the digital economy to be classified not as self-employed but as employees in order to enjoy fair pay, labour protection and job security (Graham 2017; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Huws et al, 2009; Pinsof 2015). However, our study shows that Nigerian crowdworkers are actively pursuing entrepreneurial identity. Based on social pressure and the need to achieve social congruency, crowdworkers in Nigeria adopt the identity of entrepreneurial businesspersons. They enact this identity renting office spaces and taking on traditional working routines and artefacts that hold symbolic meaning. In doing so, they emphasise this work identity (action, behaviour, conduct) (Gosling et al. 2002; Bartlett 2005; Rehman et al. 2005; D'Adderio 2008; Berlin & Carlström 2010). In order to maintain this

identity for the long term, they engage in roles like creating employment, managing people and engaging the use of entrepreneurial tools to manage their work. While dealing with taint is a consequence of the social environment where Nigerian crowdworkers operate, developing crowdworkers' work identity in general should be given clear consideration in academic analysis and policy development. Policy makers, donors and international organisations that promote crowdwork should expand their programmes from only encouraging more people to adopt it towards infusing a sense of pride and belonging to international work domains and international standards of work. Policies, training schemes and guidelines for promoting this new way of working should also include identity building and public messaging to improve its reputation.

6.3 Crowdworkers and work codes

In conducting and organising their work in their social context in a way that is socially congruent, crowdworkers find the need to not only affirm their social and work identity but to also ensure its long-term viability. Thus, they become entrepreneurs, exploiting the opportunities available to them and striving for growth (Fox 1994). In this regard, they adopt practices to circumvent platform algorithm and control. For example, they commission the use of technological tools to increase their reputation on the platform to trick the platform's recommendation system in order for the latter to endorse and recommend them to employers. They could also accept and conduct tasks that could be used by employers for gaining unfair advantages like writing code for college students. In doing so, they separate personal convictions from work conduct, focusing on economic gains and maintaining the adopted identity and the social affirmation that is associated to it. These practices of crowdworkers seem paradoxical considering their endeavours to avoid the cybercrime and fraud reputation associated with crowdwork in Nigeria. However, it is consistent with the notion of entrepreneurial rule breaking; a well-documented habit of entrepreneurs outsmarting the system, and compromising ethics for business success (Fisscher et al. 2005). This affirms the research findings that conducting crowdwork is context dependant. It also highlights that in understanding how crowdwork is conducted, research can follow the footsteps of entrepreneurship research and "look beyond the rules that [they] break to the kinds of characters, businesses, and societies that are involved" (Brenkert, 2009, p. 449). In this regard, the research finding offers employers and digital platforms a perspective on the conduct of crowdwork that informs the building of healthy work relationships. Digital platforms could

consider improving platform design to better support crowdworkers beyond the narrow approach of algorithmic management.

6.4 Crowdwork beyond the assumptions of being transactional exchange, context free and uniform

This study extends the literature on new ways of working through providing in-depth understanding of the new domain of crowdwork. New ways of working literature has considered the design of work spaces and influence of technology (Dale et al. 2007; Kingma 2018) and other new digitally-enabled organisational work including mobile work, paperless offices, flexible and third workspaces and coworking spaces (Kingma 2016; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte et al. 2016; Bouncken et al. 2018; De Vaujany et al. 2018). It consistently depicted a Western view of “blurring the boundaries between work and private life... [where] work always wins” and that workers repurpose social spaces at home in third spaces or intermediate spaces (Aroles et al. 2019, p. 4). In contrast, our research shows that in crowdwork, it is not inevitable that ‘work always wins’ (Gold et al. 2013). It reveals that crowdwork presents an ambivalent new way of working (NWW) that blurs the boundaries between work and social life and creates ambiguous relationships between employers, digital platforms and workers. Our study shows that in the studied context of Nigeria, ‘social life’ wins (not work). Indeed, in the absence of the traditional anchors of work identity including work structure, organisational, occupational or professional frameworks which are important referents for how work is managed and conducted, this study shows that crowdworkers rely on social affirmation to form their work identity and conduct. Hence, they construct a socially accepted image of who they are that cuts across the boundaries between themselves, the work they do and their social environment. This constructed social image, in turn, frames the work they do and their relationships with digital platforms and employers. Indeed, it shapes various work practices on the platforms, with employers and in their social context. Unlike previous research, our research shows that some crowdworkers deliberately decline, the well assumed temporal and spatial flexibility of conducting the work ‘anywhere’ and ‘any time’ enabled by the digitality of crowdwork, in favour of a more socially respected and accepted practices of having a physical office with routine office hours. They adopted a range of physical and symbolic artefacts legitimising and validating their adopted work identity (Rehman et al. 2005; Berlin & Carlström 2010; D’Adderio 2008). In addition, our study goes a step further to

examine the implications of the adopted work identity and associated practices and artefacts on the conduct of crowdwork, including management of work and relationships with digital platforms and employers as detailed in section 6.3. This specific form of identity work is potentially relevant to other work contexts and settings where workers have to engage in such a reconciliation.

The study also contributes to the conceptualisation of crowdwork; an area that is currently lacking theoretical development and in-depth understanding of workers involved. It provides in-depth understanding of how workers conduct this new way of working. Importantly, the findings refute the Western held assumptions regarding its universality as a context free, simple and uniform exchange of labour against monetary pay. It shows that crowdwork is a context dependent phenomenon and that the context of crowdwork has implications on the way it is conducted. Methodologically, this shows that as we switch to a new contradictory context, away from where assumptions are being held, we can discover the weakness of the assumptions.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, our study was carried out in the context of Nigeria, where Internet-based work held a particularly negative connotation. The extent, intensity and possible occurrence of unease about Internet-based work could of course vary across national cultures, history of Internet use and different experiences. There are likely to be societies where Internet-based work hardly carries any taint or negative social appraisals. This provides one reason for the social meaning of crowdwork to be further investigated. Moreover, future research could adopt a comparative approach to shed light on the social meaning of crowdworking and the embeddedness of this new way of working across different societies. Future research could also adopt different strands of practice theories to further highlight the social and material practices involved in crowdwork. Considering the interpretive nature of the research, the findings from this study can be generalised to theory and not to population (Walsham 1995). The findings related to women participants cannot be also generalised given the small number of women participants.

Finally, this paper provides a rethinking of the assumptions of crowdwork. It shows that shifting the context from where the assumptions were originated could destabilise them and

bring about fresh views. This approach allows new insights and conceptualisations to emerge beyond those taken for granted. We hope that our research informs and inspires a new stream of research that embark on the theorisation of crowdwork as a new way of working.

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