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Stories About Crowdwork – Analysis of the Self-Representation of Crowdwork Platforms on the Internet**

Abstract

Crowdwork is often characterised by low incomes and insecure employment conditions. Nevertheless, the business models of crowdwork platforms require a sufficiently large number of crowdworkers. Like other markets, the market for crowdwork is socially constituted, and platform providers try to influence market activities by creating certain images of crowdwork. For platform providers, it is crucial to build a narrative that makes working on the platform attractive to potential crowdworkers. This article examines how platforms present themselves to crowdworkers. Therefore, the self-representation of German-language platforms is analysed. It can be shown that the narratives used and the stories told about crowdwork differ from type to type. Only some of the platforms describe crowdwork as a form of ‘real’ employment. These platforms obviously address (solo-) self-employed people, particularly those working in the IT sector or the creative industries. But even these platforms mainly describe crowdwork as an additional source of income. Especially when earning potential is low, a lot of platforms try to point out other advantages of crowdwork.

Keywords: crowdwork, platform economy, narrative competition, digital work
(JEL: J44, J23, J33, D22, D26)

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dynamic research landscape concerned with the impact of digital technologies on work and employment, and the mediation of work or ‘jobs’ via online platforms has received particular attention (e.g. Drahokoupil & Vandaele, 2021; Eichhorst et al., 2017). Following Kirchner (2019), crowdwork platforms can be understood as central actors in the organisation, structuring and mediation of digital work. They operate as hybrids that combine characteristics of both markets and organisations. Crowdwork platforms are faced with the challenge of mobilising a suitable labour force in line with the requirements of crowdsourcing companies and transforming this labour force into the highest possible quality

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of work (Kirchner, 2019, p. 8). This seems even more challenging considering previous research, emphasising that platform work often goes hand in hand with new forms of precarious solo self-employment (e.g. Meijerink et al., 2021; Schor et al., 2020)¹. With regard to the employment situation of crowdworkers in Germany, research indicates that crowdwork is primarily performed as a secondary income source with relatively low earning potential (see Mrass et al., 2019, p. 249; Schönefeld & Hensel, 2019, pp. 19ff.; Serfling, 2019). Obviously, platform providers are confronted with the dilemma of having to find a sufficient number of skilled workers, as their business model aims to benefit from network effects in two-sided markets on the one hand (Sanchez-Cartas & León, 2021). On the other hand, they are not able to offer these workers secure and decent earnings, career opportunities, etc. However, little attention has been paid to how platforms manage to mobilise workers for the crowdwork market in the first place. While there is already some research and empirical evidence on the socio-structural characteristics of crowdworkers and their working conditions, there is a significant gap in the research on the question of how platforms attract and motivate crowdworkers to work on the tasks posted and how they advertise the jobs they provide. The focus of this paper will, therefore, be on the role of commercial platforms in attracting workers to do digital work.

Our main premise is that platforms operate within a specific labour market and – like other organisations – have to find a sufficient number of workers to get jobs done and provide value for requesters. Here, platforms are not only confronted with fundamental coordination problems of work but also have to deal with the specific expectations of crowdworkers regarding this type of work. These expectations are influenced by what future revenues potential crowdworkers ascribe to this form of work. These “fictional expectations” (Beckert, 2016, pp. 61ff.) are shaped not least by how market actors present their activities and thus position themselves in the market. Like other organisations competing for workers in labour markets, platforms – in the sense of an active employer branding (Ambler & Barrow, 1996) – try to convince (potential) workers of their merits and make working on the platform attractive for them. In recruitment processes, the image of companies is a decisive factor for applicants to become interested in a particular employer (Lievens & Chapman, 2019).

Following this idea, it is necessary for platforms to create an image of themselves that makes registering on the platform attractive for a large group of potential crowdworkers. Platforms try to build such an image by using targeted descriptions or narratives of the work they offer. These “narratives provide a logic of action and populate the future with imaginaries that seem worth investing in” (Beckert &

1 This is also prevalent in the German context of such discussions. Not least due to methodological reasons (e.g. delimitation of the field of research), the following analysis refers to the crowdwork landscape in Germany.

Bronk, 2019, p. 9). In other words, platforms have an interest in setting certain narratives as signals for market participants (Mützel, 2007, p. 452) and “develop a ‘plot’ – a storyline of how an imagined future may unfold” (Beckert & Bronk, 2019, p. 9).

This article examines how platforms present themselves to crowdworkers and what stories about crowdwork they use, therefore. What earning opportunities or other advantages do they offer? How do they describe the tasks and jobs mediated? To answer these questions, the self-representation of 89 different German-language platforms is examined. It can be shown that the narratives or stories told about crowdwork differ from type to type. For example, only some of the platforms describe crowdwork as a form of ‘real’ employment. These platforms obviously address (solo) self-employed people, particularly those working in the IT sector or the creative industries, and present crowdwork as an (integral) part of their employment, e.g. on the platform 99designs: *“Get your self-employment going”*. But even these platforms mainly describe crowdwork as a source of additional income. Especially when earning potentials are low, a lot of platforms try to point out other advantages of crowdwork (e.g. community, social influence), as in the case of Globaltestmarket, which promises that work on the platform has an *“impact on the development of top companies’ products and services”*.

In section 2, we sum up key concepts and the latest research on the topic of crowdwork or platform economy. Furthermore, the theoretical framework (markets as narrative competitions) will be outlined. An overview of our methodological approach and our strategies for collecting and analysing our empirical data is provided in section 3. In section 4, we present our results on different narratives and stories of work that different types of platforms use to attract potential crowdworkers for the jobs they mediate. Finally, results are discussed, and implications for further research are outlined in section 5.

Crowdwork as a Form of Digital Work

Crowdwork is a new form of organisation in which work is distributed to the producing or performing actors via digital platforms. So, work tasks that were previously located within companies are now outsourced to a large number of performing external workers (the crowd). Part of the research on crowdwork focuses on the analysis of the strategies pursued by companies using crowdsourcing (Altenried, 2020; Mrass et al., 2019). Organisational advantages (e.g. time and cost savings), as well as challenges (e.g. reintegration of external labour into further value chains), could thus be observed.

However, crowdwork not only represents a one-sided profit maximisation strategy on the part of companies but also addresses crowdworkers’ expectations of work. These expectations include, for instance, gains in autonomy potentials related to employment biographies, working hours and locations. In addition to looking at

the conditions of employment and the interests of crowdworkers, it is also important to consider how the platforms present themselves as recruitment intermediaries of work.

Characteristics of Crowdwork Platforms

There is a lot of research on the platforms themselves (for an overview, see Hertwig & Papsdorf, 2022). A number of papers deal with their legal forms, the content (of the work) and the different (working) relations with crowdworkers (Hensel et al., 2019; Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018). The basic principle of tendering and brokering jobs via “work platforms” (Schmidt, 2017, p. 6) is now used by a whole range of different (commercial) platforms. Apart from the fact that all platform types more or less share this basic principle, they sometimes differ quite significantly from one another.

There are work platforms that offer jobs that can be performed purely online (cloudwork). In addition, there are work platforms (e.g. Uber or Lieferando) on which the mediated work tasks have to be performed at a specific location². With regard to both cloudwork and gigwork platforms, a further distinguishing criterion can be whether the mediation is person-specific (e.g. on MyHammer, a portal for craft services) or directed at an open group (the crowd).

In this study, crowdwork platforms are defined as platforms that are characterised by three features: 1) work activities are (openly) advertised to a mass of crowdworkers on the platform; 2) the processing of the activities, or at least the transfer of the results and further handling of them (e.g. quality checks, feedback), takes place online; and 3) the platform exerts significant influence on the way in which the work is distributed and organised³. Hence, the mediation of location-based service provision via platforms (e.g. Uber and MyHammer) is not included.

In terms of content, the tasks mediated by the crowdwork platforms sometimes differ greatly. In current research, two groups of activities are distinguished here: The first group is formed by so-called microtasks. No special qualifications are required to process these standardised tasks (e.g. address research, image descriptions). The other group is formed by the so-called macrotasks. Specialist knowledge (e.g. foreign language skills) and creativity are usually required to complete these more complex and time-intensive tasks (Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2020, p. 12)⁴.

2 In the German context, the term 'gigwork' is used for this type of platform work – unlike in the English-language literature (Schmidt 2017, p. 18).

3 For a similar definition of crowdwork see Kirchner 2019.

4 Although crowdwork does not predominantly comprise unskilled tasks, the simple microtasks have received the most attention in the public debate as well as in research to date (see Schönefeld and Hensel 2019, p. 17).

Who is the Crowd?

As the analyses of existing platforms show, a broad landscape of intermediary online portals has developed here in recent years, offering a wide variety of solutions for different customers (usually companies). The reference to the distinction between micro- and macrotasks suggests that there are different skills required for handling these tasks. Various researchers have therefore asked who the crowdworkers are and under what conditions they work (see Piasna et al., 2022; Urzì Brancati et al., 2020).

Studies on crowdwork in Germany have shown that crowdworkers are usually quite young and often active on several platforms at a time. At first glance, the high level of education among crowdworkers is striking (see Serfling, 2019, p. 19). Contrary to other assumptions, fewer people who are otherwise disadvantaged in the labour market, e.g. due to low qualifications, seem to be active as crowdworkers. However, crowdwork is not the main source of income for the majority of those employed in this way (see Schönefeld & Hensel, 2019, pp. 17–19). It is mostly used to obtain (quick) additional income, although it is observed that earnings are relatively low.

The low-income prospects, in combination with the lack of (social) security and protection mechanisms on crowdwork platforms, lead to criticism of the working conditions of crowdworkers. Their work is seen as a form of precarious employment (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2021; Huws et al., 2018). So the question is, why do crowdworkers become active on these platforms, and what do platforms offer to the crowd?

What Do Platforms Offer to the Crowd? Theoretical Considerations on the Narrative Competition on Platform Labour Markets

In modern societies, employment is characterised by its institutional embeddedness. So, conditions and structures of work are significantly influenced by specific social institutions (cf. Beckmann & Spohr, 2022). In this context, institutions convey specific rules, norms and values as well as „cognitive frames“ (Beckert & Bronk, 2018, p. 25) and thus provide important points of orientation for actors. One of these work-structuring institutions is the market. Following (economic and market) sociological considerations, markets have to be understood as socially constituted (Aspers et al., 2022). This also applies to the market for crowdwork. Platforms offer specific social infrastructures that can be understood as “socially produced institutions, conditions and forms, and the hierarchical and horizontal ties between actors that enable work and trade” (Aspers & Darr, 2022, p. 823). However, the (labour) market for crowdwork is still relatively new and is also in a state of flux, as new platforms are constantly opening up new areas of business, while at the same time, the first platforms are discontinuing their operations or merging with others (see Schönefeld & Hensel, 2019, p. 15). So, the embeddedness of platforms and crowdwork in ‘traditional’ and more or less stable institutional structures is

thus relatively low. Against this background, finding roles and identities for market participants is important, especially in new and yet-to-be-established markets (Engels et al., 2008). This ‘positioning of oneself in the market’ can be understood as ‘narrative competition’ (Mützel, 2007). In other words, platforms are relegated to inform market actors (in this case, potential workers) about their offers and what kind of benefits working on the platform brings to them. To find a sufficient number of workers, platforms have to build up a certain image in competition with other platforms in order to attract workers. In the sense of ‘employer branding’ (Ambler & Barrow, 1996), platforms try to convince (potential) workers of their specific merits and make working on the platform attractive. In this context, platforms and their social infrastructures play an important role in shaping and structuring the crowdwork market (Kirchner, 2019). Ahrne et al. (2015) point out that market order is influenced and created, not least by organisations and their agencies. From an institutional perspective, platforms not only set certain rules and norms regarding market action. They also try to establish a cognitive frame to influence peoples’ actions and behaviour.

However, platforms cannot rely on ‘traditional’ images and activities in order to find and retain workers. So, common human resource management (HRM) activities and measures (like offering stable employment relations) seem to have their limits on platforms. Not only are workers self-employed (so there is no ‘traditional’ relationship between employer and employee), but workers’ demands and interests have changed and require new ways of attracting and retaining (potential) workers in the platform economy (Connelly et al., 2021; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). Previous research suggests that platforms are interested in creating certain narratives about the platform economy and the mediated work, for example, by highlighting freedom and autonomy as benefits for workers within the platform economy (cf. Schüßler et al., 2021) – knowing that this is a signal for organisational attractiveness (Schmoll & Süß, 2019). Based on assumptions of research on HRM and employer branding our argument is that platforms strive to be perceived as attractive organisations or ‘employers’ in the market. In this context, the “perceptions that potential applicants have of organisational attractiveness is formed by their individual perceptions of available information, which they receive from job advertisements, websites, brand advertising and stories [...] related to the organisation” (Elving et al., 2012, p. 358), or in our case related to the platform.

Whether someone will register on a digital work platform, whether he/she will make an effort to deliver good work results there, and whether he/she will be satisfied with the crowdwork and its working conditions depends not least on the “fictional expectations” (Beckert, 2016, pp. 61ff.) of crowdwork before starting with it. It is less relevant whether the later reality corresponds to the expectations. What is needed in the first step, however, is a belief in a particular ‘outcome’ of crowdwork (Beckert & Bronk, 2018). This can be influenced by linguistic images

(narratives) of platform work and related stories about how the conditions of performed crowdwork will turn out overall.

In the case of crowdwork, this means that platform providers try to convey a certain perspective on the activities they organise. One of the main channels for presenting their services and attracting potential crowdworkers is the platforms' websites. However, these descriptions are not neutral but aim to show crowdwork in a certain light. Platforms "discursively present themselves as an opportunity for workers to increase their autonomy, organise their own time, earn income and obtain other benefits (learning, self-development, meeting people, constructing networks), without bosses or restrictions, and according to the individual investment that each worker-entrepreneur makes of her time, skills, efforts, motivations and emotional commitment" (Haidar & Keune, 2021, p. 17). This fits in with findings that the classic functional mechanisms of gainful employment are being challenged by new forms of gainful employment, such as platform work. This is supported not least by the fact that companies are also rhetorically promoting the individualisation of work (Sheldon et al., 2019). Obviously, there are different narratives, understood as socially powerful patterns of interpretation, with which platforms (can) present themselves and the mediated work to potential crowdworkers. Following the considerations on narrative competition (Mützel, 2007), we refer to these presentations as 'stories' that platforms tell about crowdwork by combining specific narrative elements. However, which stories of digital work the platforms present and which expectations they try to address have not been the focus of platform research to date. The question is whether there is a more or less 'standard' story about crowdwork or whether there are different stories, each using specific narrative elements.

The expectations of market participants generated by these stories are sometimes what motivates them to participate in the market in the first place. With regard to the mediation of digital work, crowdwork platforms operate in a specific field that is extremely heterogeneous in terms of its composition and content. According to previous research, it is not only possible to distinguish between various fields of activity and corresponding work offerings. Platforms thus operate in a specific market where the interests of crowdworkers and their employment-related strategies regarding platform-mediated work are also extremely diverse.

Previous research indicates that crowdworkers show a wide range of individual motivations and interests that make this form of work appear attractive, even despite sometimes problematic employment situations (e.g. Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018; Durward et al., 2020; Brewer et al., 2016). The interest in exciting work content, learning new skills, and the desire for flexible and customisable work are sometimes decisive reasons for consciously accepting the imponderables associated with crowdwork. At the same time, however, these intrinsic motivations of potential crowdworkers must be matched by a corresponding offer on the internet in the

form of attractive crowdwork platforms that arouse their interest. According to Al-Ani and Stumpp (2016), commercial work platforms are therefore also oriented around the practices of peer-to-peer platforms such as Wikipedia. These deliberately rely on the equal collaboration of the people working on them, who thus get the feeling that they can significantly help shape the content they create. In contrast, the sole focus of the platform narrative on the promise of good earning opportunities that are not realised later could lead to a situation in which potential crowdworkers make their labour available on such platforms only to a limited extent (cf. Durward et al., 2020).

While there is some research on how platforms manage and organise their crowds in terms of making them a productive workforce, e.g. by using technical control options, rating systems and motivating work environments (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Jabagi et al., 2019), there is little evidence on platforms' personnel marketing and how they motivate people to participate via a platform in the first step. There is some evidence that attracting and retaining workers in the platform economy requires new ways of HRM and employer branding (Waldkirch et al., 2021; Duggan et al., 2020), but there is only little knowledge about the concrete personnel strategies of platforms and how they try to find and attract potential workers. In order to operate successfully, platforms must create a certain image of themselves and address the mediated work in a specific way that corresponds to the expectations of the crowdworkers in order to ensure the mobilisation and motivation of the crowd. On the basis of these findings, the research questions are: How do crowdwork platforms⁵ present themselves to (potential) crowdworkers? What kind of stories do platforms tell about crowdwork, and what content related to the platform-mediated work do they place in the foreground?

Reflecting on the mentioned heterogeneous motivations and employment orientations of crowdworkers, as well as the different types and business areas of platforms, we assume that different stories and narrative elements about crowdwork can be observed by looking at the platforms' self-presentations. In other words, the content orientation of the platform determines how the crowd is addressed. Two basic forms of platforms can be distinguished: microtask and macrotask platforms. The former offers simple jobs and tasks in various areas (e.g., product reviews and participation in surveys), but payment is mostly low, and no qualifications are required for work on these platforms. We assume that in the case of microtask platforms, a more unspecific address is chosen with a focus on the fun and uncomplicated nature of crowdwork, as platforms try to find a sufficient number of workers but need no specialists, professionals, etc. In contrast, macrotask platforms offer more complex work that requires professional expertise, so the professional dimensions of work and the influence of platform work on individual employment strategies and careers

5 In the following, the term (crowdwork) platforms refers in particular to the websites and the self-representations of the platforms that form our focus.

take on a disproportionately greater role in the stories and narratives here. Taking this basic distinction into account, the basic story about crowdwork also differs. In the first case, crowdwork is not presented as ‘professional’ work. Since the earning prospects on microtask platforms are comparatively low, such platforms are more likely to try to highlight other aspects, such as a low level of effort that must be expended to complete the tasks. In the case of forms of crowdwork that require certain (professional) qualifications, the platforms address ‘professionals’ and ‘self-employed’ and offer them support in carrying out their work. Accordingly, more complex tasks are likely to be placed closer to gainful employment, and therefore, specific advantages of participation in crowdwork are highlighted for people with certain qualification profiles. Accordingly, we assume that the platform’s stories about the work mediated differ, not least depending on the assumed interest and expectations of the (potential) platform workers. If platforms need to find highly skilled experts, professional dimensions of work may be more important for the story plot, while information about concrete earnings might attract those workers who strive for ‘quick cash’.

Sampling and Methodological Approach

For this study, a research design was used to qualitatively analyse the websites of crowdwork platforms. When asked how platforms address potential crowdworkers, it is clear that this usually happens on different channels and that the platforms’ homepages are only one of many advertising and information options (e.g. social media channels)⁶. Nevertheless, the final registration as a crowdworker takes place via the websites of the platforms, and potential crowdworkers receive the most detailed descriptions of the functions, earning opportunities and rules of the respective platforms. In order to address the question of how crowdwork platforms present themselves to potential workers and how they describe the tasks they offer, access via their respective websites appears to be the best approach.

Sampling

Current studies show that it is very difficult to determine the exact empirical extent of crowdworking (number of active crowdworkers, number of crowdwork platforms) – with the result that calculations and estimates differ, sometimes significantly (Serfling, 2019; Huws et al., 2017). This is not least due to the dynamic and unclear nature of the field. Among other things, it is barely possible to identify the total of cases of online content. For instance, new platforms are constantly emerging, ‘old’ platforms are disappearing, and existing providers are merging.

6 Some platforms do not even use social media for advertising work but run their own social media channels. One example is the YouTube channel of the design platform 99designs (<https://www.youtube.com/user/99designs/>, accessed on May 29, 2019).

Following Meier et al. (2010), a multi-step sampling strategy was used for the present analysis to identify all relevant and currently active crowdwork platforms:

- 1) Platforms mentioned in previous research were included in the sample – if they met our definition of crowdwork platforms and if they were still active at the time of data collection.
- 2) Relevant forums by or for crowdworkers⁷ were used to identify additional platforms.
- 3) Various keywords were used to search for further crowdwork platforms via common search portals.

Thus, specific keywords based on already known platforms and content were used to search for further online content or previously ‘undiscovered’ platforms, and the sample was supplemented accordingly (Meier & Pentzold, 2010, pp. 136f.). For methodological reasons and against the background of the already existing complexity of the field, a large number of crowdwork platforms and corresponding online content, the case selection was limited to German-language platforms.

Data Collection

Due to the heterogeneity of the subjects of this study and the different structures of the platforms’ websites, which vary in their scope (in terms of subpages, links, etc.), the aim was to collect a comparable data sample. This means that similar content and presentations had to be included in the survey for all the platforms considered. The selection of the content to be included was based on the question of the analysis. It is about the self-portrayals of the crowdwork platforms and their narratives on the work mediated in each case within the framework of a narrative competition for the crowdworkers. The starting point was always the start pages of the platforms, which provide the most important information (from the platform provider’s external perspective). Since it is of interest to this study how the platforms address the crowd in concrete terms and how they present the work to them, in addition to the landing page and the information it contains, subpages and, in part, FAQs that explicitly address (potential) crowdworkers were also taken into account. In total, the data set thus included 243 images of the web pages (start page and corresponding sub-pages) that were coded. The images or ‘screenshots’ of the respective web pages contain all the texts to be found there. These were included in their entirety in our analysis. The graphic presentation (e.g. fonts, font sizes), as well as any audio files, videos or photos also stored on the websites, were not interpreted. In addition, we collected 92 more images of web pages that contained the terms of use and similar descriptions of the platform rules or operating instructions. However, these were not included in the coding.

⁷ Microjobbing.de is an example of such a forum where information and experiences on different platforms are discussed (accessed on February 27, 2019).

The procedure described for identifying relevant content and selecting cases made it possible to compile a comprehensive sample of crowdwork platforms that go beyond the platforms that have been processed or mentioned in research to date. We were able to identify 89 German-language platforms that meet our definition of crowdwork and crowdwork platforms and which were active in this form at the time of data collection⁸. Some 51 of these platforms are headquartered in Germany. The 'size' of the platforms in the sample, measured by the number of crowdworkers registered (according to the self-disclosure on the platforms' websites), ranges from platforms with a few thousand registered crowdworkers to platforms with millions of registered crowdworkers. The sample includes platforms from all areas of activity mentioned in the research to date.

Data Analysis

The focus of the analysis is on the platforms' websites. Against the background of the specific challenges of online data (e.g. heterogeneous forms and styles of websites), 'online content analysis' (Welker et al., 2010) was selected for the methodological treatment of the research question. This is a method oriented around the toolbox of 'classic' qualitative social research with the qualitative content analysis long established there (Mayring, 2000), but explicitly oriented and adapted to the research of online content such as websites.

For the content analysis, relevant categories were formulated in advance on the basis of theoretical assumptions about the object of study and with reference to the findings of previous research on the topic⁹. These categories include technical aspects of the homepage (e.g. information on registration options for clients and contractors), but above all, they focus on the various content presentations on the platforms with which the work mediated there is advertised. Based on the basic distinction between microtask and macrotask platforms and the target groups of working people (and their interests) presumably focused on by the platforms (e.g. 'quick cash' vs. career advancement, building and expanding networks), we assume specific stories resp. combinations of different narrative elements. In order to capture these different stories along the platforms studied, we distinguish the following categories:

- *Earning character*: Among other things, the platform economy promises low-threshold opportunities to earn (some) money. Especially for people striving for 'quick cash', concrete information on earnings might be the basis for deciding whether or not to register on a platform. One focus of the evaluation was on

8 The data was collected in the period from October 2018 to March 2019. The software MAXQDA 2018 was used for data collection and analysis. Our results and the quotations in section 4 refer to the status of the websites at the time of data collection; any subsequent changes on the platforms' websites were not taken into account.

9 This procedure is based on the approach of 'thematic coding' according to Hopf (2016).

representations that say something about the ‘earning character of crowdwork’ (e.g. crowdwork as a main or sideline occupation, earning opportunities).

- *Employment-related strategies*: Another focus was on the individual crowdworkers’ strategies and motivations regarding crowdwork. Here, for solo self-employed people, it is likely to be of particular interest what opportunities platform work offers in the sense of professionalism and regarding advances to one’s own career. To this end, the representations on the websites were examined according to various employment-related strategies (e.g. building and expanding qualifications or customer networks).
- *Motivations*: Furthermore, we looked at descriptions of crowdwork that addressed the individual motivations for it (e.g. enjoying the tasks, doing interesting work, and being part of a community).
- *Flexibility and autonomy*: In addition, we looked at the extent to which the platforms refer in their presentations to the options for implementing individual demands regarding work structures (working hours, work locations) and the extent to which they explicitly emphasise the implementation and realisation of subjective labour potential.
- *Gamification elements*: Last but not least, we looked at which gamification elements (e.g. ranking systems, competitions) are used to advertise and present work on the platforms.

In the first step, the categories were used to code our empirical data before an overview of all cases and related codings gave an impression of how the different content or narrational elements found on the platforms are distributed across the material. On this basis, we analysed the different content and grouped those platforms that not only make use of the same specific content elements but also address potential crowdworkers in a similar way.

The Self-Representation of Crowdwork Platforms

With respect to the self-representations of the platforms, a basic typology of platforms can be identified: On the one hand, there are platforms that tell stories of crowdwork as ‘casual jobs’, while on the other, there are platforms which place the work they mediate in the context of ‘professional employment’ (cf. Figure 1). This typology of platforms is not constituted by the activities mediated there but by similarities in their presentations: the use of specific narratives to describe crowdwork. Nevertheless, a closer look at the assigned platforms shows that they are similar in terms of the object of their services. This supports our thesis that the content orientation (e.g. unspecific microtasks vs. complex freelancer jobs) and the target groups of working people presumably focused on by the platforms (unspecific crowd vs. professional experts) determine how the crowd is addressed. The group of casual-jobs-platforms (39 % of all platforms investigated) is characterised by the fact that

the main aim here is to earn some money quickly and easily – with tasks that are easy to perform and without any further prerequisites in the form of verifiable qualifications, work experience, etc. In contrast, the focus of the platforms in the area of ‘professional employment’ (39 % of all platforms observed) is placed much more strongly on job-related dimensions and perspectives of work by explicitly asking for concrete qualifications and skills. Here, the prospect is less of ‘quick money’ and more of building up a network of customers and project partners that will pay off in the future. Between these two poles of platforms’ personnel marketing strategies and related stories about crowdwork, there are also platforms on which the activities to be mediated are described as an opportunity for a more or less fixed secondary income and thus exhibit characteristics of both types. This group of secondary-income-platforms contains 16 platforms (this corresponds to 18 % of all platforms observed). A closer look at the content presented on the respective websites reveals further variations on this basic distinction.

Figure 1: Typology of the Crowdwork Platforms Studied¹⁰

casual jobs		secondary income		professional employment	
PANEL PLATFORMS		TESTING PLATFORMS		FREELANCE PLATFORMS	
American Consumer Opinion	MeinungsOrt	Applause	TestingTime	IT/software services	
Casa Doe	meinungsplatz	RapidUserstests	TestRitter	4freelance	free-lancer.eu
Consumer-Opinion	Meinungsstudie	test IO	UINSPECT	4scotty	Freelancer-Österreich
custlab	mingle	Testbirds		bettertalk.to	GULP
Dialego Panel	MOBROG	INNOVATION PLATFORMS		dasauge	projektwerk
empfohlen.de	MultiValue	atizo	Innovationskraftwerk	expertlead	Smartjobr
EntscheiderClub	my iyo	Crowdwerk	Phantominds	Freelancer.Net	twago
Future Talkers	OneOpinion	HYVE Crowd		Freelance-Market	Uplink
GfK Consumer Panel Projects	OpinionBureau	VARIOUS MICROTASK PLATFORMS		freelancer	Yeeply
Globaltestmarket	Talk Online Panel	clickworker	Crowd Guru	freelancermap	
Hi-epanel	Toluna	Crowdee	WooWee	Texting	
hiving	Trendfrage.de			content.de	TextMaster
i-Say	TrendsetterClub			greatcontent	TripsByTips
Marketagent.com	YouGov			Lass-andere-schreiben.de	WorkGenius
LOCATION-BASED MICROTASK PLATFORMS				Textbroker	
appJobber	roamlr			Translation	
BeMyEye	ShopScout			crossMarket	TranslatorsCafé
Clic and Walk	Streetspotr			lengoo	
Mobeye				DESIGN PLATFORMS	
				99designs	DesignCrowd
				brandsupply	designenlassen.de
				Crowdsite	glamya
				designContest	LogoArena

Source: Own Illustration

Casual-Jobs-Platforms: Earning Some Extra Money From Time to Time

The group of platforms on which casual jobs are mediated comprises a large part of the platforms studied, with 35 out of a total of 89 cases. These platforms generally

¹⁰ In addition to the crowdwork platforms listed here, there are three special cases that cannot be clearly assigned to one of the presented types: ibbü (marketing and customer service), BluePatent (research on patents) and expertcloud (telephone hotlines).

try to attract as many participants as possible. However, there are significant differences between the platforms within this group in terms of details. Regarding the self-representation of the different types of platforms, two subgroups can be identified. One group is that of panel platforms, which provide (among other things) online survey panels for market research purposes. The second group comprises platforms mediating location-based microtasks.

Panel Platforms

This group comprises a total of 28 platforms in the data set. However, the websites in this group are similar not only in terms of the content of the activities they offer (i.e., participation in surveys) but also very similar in other respects. It is quite clear that although payment for participation in surveys is important in this group (27 platforms), this payment is by no means close to that of professional employment or even fixed, regular additional income. These platforms do not use any formulations that could put crowdwork in the context of 'traditional' gainful employment – even the term work is avoided. The narrative of paid work as a reliable, regular source of income is not used in these stories about platform activities.

*"Expenses are paid for filling out the questionnaire on the internet. [...] It is important to mention that this is not an income."*¹¹ (Multivalue)

On 21 of these platforms, remuneration via rewards is advertised in addition to monetary earnings (e.g. gift cards for online stores). The specific amounts that can be earned by participating in surveys are also mentioned comparatively frequently. Often, remuneration is based on some kind of score-keeping. Crowdworkers receive points or a score for a processed survey, which they can convert into cash payments, bonuses or even donations as soon as a certain payout threshold is reached.

"Your time is valuable, and that's why you get paid for every survey you complete. Every time you complete one of our online surveys, you earn points that you can redeem for cash or gift cards" (Meinungsort)

Overall, the earning potential on panel platforms is quite low, especially since many of these platforms also limit the number of surveys to be completed per month by a panel member in order to guarantee sufficient panel quality.

Accordingly, the platforms do not advertise participation with amounts of income to be earned either. Rather, it is emphasised here that the surveys are interesting and exciting and that participation in the panel can influence the development of products and services of important companies (found on 21 platforms). Occasionally, the social relevance of survey participation is also emphasised.

11 Here and in the following, we have translated the German-language quotations used for the evaluation – regardless of whether an English-language version also exists on the platform's homepage.

"The paid online surveys you participate in have a direct impact on the development of top companies' products and services." (Globaltestmarket)

Overall, small sums or gift cards can be acquired on the panel platforms with little effort and without requiring special skills or (professional) qualifications. In most cases, crowdworkers do not have to apply for jobs but are specifically invited to participate in surveys on the basis of their user data (e.g. sociodemographic characteristics).

Location-Based Microtask Platforms

A group of seven platforms are relatively similar to these panel platforms in terms of content but with some concise differences. These platforms can be described as 'location-based microtask platforms' because they are all providers that use smartphone apps to deploy crowdworkers for location-based market research purposes. This is achieved by directing tasks such as photographing supermarket shelves, conducting test purchases, etc., to the crowd via the platform's apps. One difference to the panel platforms is that the location-based microtask platforms address contractors (i.e. the potential crowdworkers on six platforms) as well as clients (on five platforms) equally on their websites. However, when addressing potential crowdworkers, these platforms also emphasise that the tasks they offer could easily be done in one's spare time.

"Complete tasks while shopping and get paid for it" (ShopScout)

The platforms represented here stress the narrative that crowdwork could be done on the side, e.g. during leisure or everyday activities (e.g. shopping). This emphasised simplicity is additionally linked to the reference to fun and (monetary) rewards. Again, there is no indication that the platforms will create employment opportunities comparable to gainful employment. However, the platforms Appjobber, ShopScout and Streetpotr¹² refer to the fact that crowdworkers can obtain part-time jobs here. At least implicitly, this wording offers some kind of regular additional earning opportunities. This is a clear difference to the panel platforms. On all seven location-based microtask platforms, payment for the activities advertised is an important aspect; in each case, this involves monetary remuneration; unlike on the panel platforms, scores or bonuses are not widespread here. Common to both platform types is the emphasis on the low-threshold character of crowdwork.

12 During our data analysis the platforms ShopScout and Streetpotr announced that they would merge into one platform in the near future (<http://www.beshopscout.com/shopscout-und-streetpotr-2/>, accessed on May 5, 2021). However, our evaluation and the presentation of the results was performed separately for both platforms.

Secondary-Income-Platforms: Additional Income in Various Fields of Activity

Between the platforms for casual jobs and platforms for professional employment (see Figure 1), there are 16 platforms that are each very similar in terms of content but cannot be clearly assigned to one category or the other. These platforms can be found in the following groups: testing platforms, innovation platforms and platforms offering various microtasks.

Testing platforms

The seven crowdwork providers gathered in the group of testing platforms primarily organise software tests and usability tests of websites, online stores, etc., via their platforms. At first glance, the testing platforms' websites are initially aimed at potential clients. In this context, they primarily highlight the advantages of quality and efficiency achieved through crowdwork compared to traditionally organised software testing.

The advantages of crowdwork for customers are described by the platforms, particularly as the organisation and addressing of *"certified experts and real end users"* (Testbirds). This also indicates which groups of people the platforms are trying to attract as crowdworkers: On the one hand, no special prior knowledge is required (initially) to accept work assignments as a crowd tester. On the other hand, the activities advertised, unlike the microtasks on the casual-jobs-platforms, cannot be done on the side during leisure activities. In some cases, additional programs the crowdworkers must use to record their activities during the tests must be installed for the internet browser. Tutorials or training courses with which the crowdworkers are supposed to learn how to conduct good quality software tests can also be found on the testing platforms. In return for this commitment, the testing platforms offer crowdworkers the prospect of monetary compensation, *"safe money"* (test IO), for the work completed via the platform. Compared to other 'simple' crowdwork activities, they thus offer relatively high earnings.

In addition to the earning opportunities, testing platforms also emphasise the customisability of crowdworking to the personal requirements of crowdworkers. Crowdttesting is described in particular as an online activity that can be performed *"comfortably from home"* (Rapidusertests). In addition, the testing activities can be easily reconciled with any other (main) employment, as there are *"flexible 'working hours'"* (Testbirds), with each crowdworker deciding for themselves whether to work *"during the day or in the evening"* (Testbirds).

Overall, it can be stated for the testing platforms that crowdwork is presented as an option offering a potential secondary income adapted to individual needs. The test platforms thus use the narrative of self-determined work for their stories about crowdwork. This is complemented by the emphasis on the seriousness of the

platform activities mediated, which would enable a reliable (monetary) additional income. However, the platforms do not advertise this form of crowdworking as being able to serve as a main source of income. The platform TestingTime even assures its clients: *"We make sure that our test persons do not become pro-testers"* (TestingTime).

Innovation Platforms

While the testing platforms are thus primarily aimed at crowdworkers in part-time jobs, another group of five innovation platforms in the zone between casual jobs and professional employment are also aimed at people who want to expand their customer networks as self-employed persons through their platform activities. The exact nature of these self-employed activities, whether they are engineers, designers, etc., remains open on such innovation platform websites. Additionally, these platforms emphasise that they are looking for *"creative minds"* in particular (Atizo; Hyvecrowd). The tasks mediated via innovation platforms consist of proposals to be developed by the crowd for various ideas, problem solutions, product innovations or even tourism campaigns. Four of the five platforms represented here emphasise the social relevance of these activities, especially if they involve not only new consumer products but also, e.g., concepts for the further development of local public transport or similar projects.

While the emphasis is on concrete earning opportunities and individually designable work structures on the testing platforms, these aspects play no role on the innovation platforms' websites themselves. According to the information provided by the platforms, regular income is also less likely to be expected here. The central remuneration mechanism in innovation crowdworking is through advertised competitions for which only the contribution named as the winner is 'paid'¹³. The value of these prizes varies greatly depending on the level of competition. On the one hand, non-cash prizes and *"interesting invitations, contacts and meetings"* (Innovationskraftwerk) are the winning prizes, while other competitions offer cash prizes of several thousand euros (both to be found on Phantominds and Hyvecrowd). What is striking about innovation platforms is the reference to a narrative of 'community' that constitutes the crowd of platform workers: the members of these platforms would work together on ideas and projects. The platforms describe themselves as moderators of this exchange: *"We keep the crowd happy and ensure the necessary spirit – so that the community is a real group and everyone is pulling in the same direction"* (Crowdwerk). In this way, it is claimed that crowdworkers can benefit from each other: *"Your skills grow with the support of other crowd members and a real active collaboration"* (Hyvecrowd). What remains unclear is the target direction of any further development of individual crowdworkers. Initially, the quality of the work results on the platform seems to be the main focus.

13 Depending on the platform, the second- or third-placed competitor is paid as well.

Various Microtask Platforms

On another four platforms, the employment opportunities provided are again presented as a side job with which an additional income can be realised. The activities advertised here can be described as various microtasks. The activities of crowdworkers on platforms such as Clickworker range from participating in surveys (similar to the tasks on panel platforms) to taking photos of specific locales, landmarks, etc. (similar to the tasks on location-based microtask platforms), address checks or writing text (especially SEO texts¹⁴; similar to some of the tasks on the texter platforms; see section on 'Freelance Platforms').

Payment for the tasks plays an important role on all the websites of these microtask platforms. So, the stories told here about crowdwork are not about interesting activities or the autonomy of crowdworkers in terms of working conditions and working times – but about the aspect of earning money. Concrete monetary amounts are also promised; in some cases, this is also done implicitly by listing images of user profile examples (e.g. at Crowdee). Although the individual microtasks are usually only remunerated with small amounts, the platforms' descriptions of these work opportunities point out that they are "*well paid*" (clickworker) and that crowdworkers can therefore "*earn a nice sum very quickly*" (WooWee). The platform Crowdee even promises payment "*guaranteed not below minimum wage*". As an advantage of crowdwork as a side job, these platforms point out that the advertised activities are easy to do and can also be done flexibly in terms of time and location.

In summary: In contrast to 'casual-jobs-platforms', the target group of potential platform workers is often more clearly defined for 'secondary-income-platforms'. Even if specific professions are not always addressed, at least workers with certain affinities (e.g. in the field of IT/software) are sought by the platforms. Innovation platforms explicitly address specific experts in some cases, and stories about crowdwork are more oriented towards narrative elements that emphasise professional dimensions of work. Nevertheless, these professional dimensions of crowdwork and the benefits of platform work for workers' individual development and careers are not necessarily at the forefront of the platforms' personnel marketing strategies in this group of platforms – unlike the 'professional-employment-platforms' described below.

Professional-Employment-Platforms: Crowdwork as Part of Solo Self-Employment

A fundamental characteristic of platforms that can be classified as 'professional employment' is that the employment-related dimensions of work and the reference to the corresponding interests and strategies of (potential) crowdworkers play an

14 SEO texts are a form of online content that is optimised for better findability of the texts by common search engines (SEO stands for search engine optimisation).

important role in the platforms' self-portrayals. Here, the assumption formulated in section two that the orientation of the platform determines how the crowd is addressed becomes particularly clear. Regarding the platform's personnel marketing strategies and the related stories about crowdwork, we observe that the often complex activities are described as 'real' employment, and the employment-related advantages for the (potential) crowdworkers are emphasised.

Freelance Platforms

This group of 'professional-employment-platforms' primarily includes the so-called freelance platforms. Here, offers of project orders and work tasks are combined with offers of services and work skills. A total of 27 freelance platforms are spread across three main areas of activity: IT/software services (17 platforms), texting (7 platforms) and translation (3 platforms).

All three subtypes of freelance platforms are characterised by the fact that the presentation of crowdwork directly addresses the employment strategies of potential crowdworkers. Here, the advantages and possibilities for the realisation of individual motivations and strategies within this form of employment are emphasised in the platforms' stories, including, e.g. narrative elements like autonomy, community and self-realisation. The emphasis on the fact that these are paid activities and that there are no references to rewarded activities (e.g. in the form of gift cards) on the platforms also underlines the nature of the work organised via these platforms in terms of somehow 'real' employment.

In this context, platforms often present their added value for crowdworkers by emphasising and referring to the opportunity to access a large number of interesting jobs and customers quickly and easily via the platform. Platforms point out that it is possible to get orders "*faster and more constantly*" (freelance.de) and that they offer a chance "*to be found by searching companies*" (Freelancer.Net).

"freelance.de offers you access to a comprehensive project and freelancer database without mediation and without commission on the conclusion of the contract. Initial contacts between freelancers and project providers are possible via freelance.de, as are applications for advertised projects" (freelance.de)

Furthermore, with regard to the profit character of the offered work, it is pointed out that through the work on the platform, there is the possibility to build up a (fixed) customer network and make a name for oneself in the respective field of activity. In this context, it is emphasised that crowdworkers who were previously able to win over customers through the quality of their work "*repeatedly [receive] direct orders from customers*" (Textbroker) via the platform. On Twago, too, it is emphasised that one can "*easily find new customers*" via the platform, and Bettertalk holds out the prospect of being able to "*expand one's individual network*" through crowdwork.

The possibility of (permanent) networking with clients as well as with other freelancers is emphasised and presented as an advantage of freelance platforms. They hold out the prospect of being able to exchange information as a crowdworker with customers but also with other freelancers and thus constantly expand one's individual network of contacts to potential clients and project partners and use them for individual employment-related strategies:

"Always stay up to date on the Freelancer.com marketplace and stay in touch with your clients." (Freelancer.com)

In this context, content.de states that crowdwork can be pursued as a fixed component of one's individual employment biography and that the platform has an interest in long-term relationships (on a freelance basis) with the crowdworkers, who are called *"permanent authors"* (content.de).

The promotion of crowdwork as an integral part of the self-employed activity of crowdworkers is also shown by the fact that concrete professions or occupational fields are more or less clearly named on the platforms, and the importance of specific skills and abilities is emphasised¹⁵. Particularly on the texting and translation platforms, there are presentations that refer to required subjective skills and hold out the prospect of further developing one's individual labour potential. Thus, the stories on platforms here include, not least, narrative elements related to self-optimisation. In this context, the Textmaster platform, for instance, asks for crowdworkers who *"specialise in certain fields"*, and there are platforms that specifically ask for *"expertise"* (content.de), *"writing talent"* (TextBroker) or even *"proven professional experience"* (WorkGenius). In the case of the translation platform Lengoo, the possibility of further developing individual workforce potential is also emphasised, and (potential) crowdworkers are promised training and further education measures:

"We offer regular webinars to bring you up to date on a particular technology or topic." (lengoo)

In addition to the concrete reference to (the development of) specific qualifications and skills of crowdworkers, there is also a particular focus on the topic of professionalism on the texting and translation platforms. The activities on the platforms are accordingly presented as 'classic' freelance work, and many of the platforms found here explicitly address *"professional authors"* (Textbroker) or *"journalists, writers, [...] editors"* (content.de). On the other freelance platforms, there are also specific offers aimed at *"web design freelancers"* (twago) or *"IT freelancers"* (Uplink). In contrast to mentioned 'casual-jobs-platforms', the target groups of potential workers seem to be clearly defined in the case of these freelance platforms. Thus, addressing

15 In this respect, the texting and translation platforms differ from those in the IT and software services sector. Although the latter also refer to specific professions and fields of work, the reference to specific subjective labour potentials is raised less frequently.

specific professions and the focus on elements emphasising the professional nature of crowdwork is one of the main narrative elements of the story plots here.

Design Platforms

A fundamental distinction within this group of 'professional-employment-platforms' is the way in which the work is distributed or organised. On the one hand, there are platforms on which work activities are openly advertised and then distributed to the crowd or individual crowdworkers via various mechanisms (e.g. crowdworker profiles and application procedures). On the other hand, there are some platforms where the distribution and organisation of work is primarily competition-based. The eight competitively organised platforms in the group centred on professional employment included in the sample are found almost without exception in the area of 'design'¹⁶.

Here, competition is the central mechanism for the distribution and organisation of crowdwork, and scores and/or ranking systems are often found as an expression of competitive control. Even more than on the other freelance platforms, the advantages for the client are emphasised on the design platforms in this context. Particular emphasis is placed on the efficiency and quality advantages of the competitive organisation of creative tasks via the crowd. For example, it is pointed out that a large number of designers submit corresponding design proposals, and the contractors can thus select the most suitable result from a large number of proposals (paying for the winning design only). Platforms' stories reflect these competitive structures as possibilities to reach individual market success and, by this, refer to more or less meritocratic narratives emphasising the individual striving for success. The incentive to enter these competitions as a designer and prove oneself in comparison with the other designers seems to be the opportunity to build a reputation as a designer:

"You can create an amazing list of performances on Crowdsite that clients can trust." (Crowdsite)

Consequently, just as on the other platforms in the field of professional employment, individual work potential or its further development plays a role. For instance, the platform DesignContest advertises the opportunity to improve design skills by working on the platform, and 99designs also refers to improving individual skills by participating in design competitions. This is linked to the prospect of gaining (new) clients through the platforms and gaining access to a large number of work orders. In other words, it is emphasised on the platforms that additional orders can be acquired here and that it is possible to establish and expand customer relationships.

16 One exception is the platform 'glamya', which offers photo retouching and other services and thus belongs less to the field of design than to the more general field of creative work. Nevertheless, the platform is very similar to the design platforms in terms of its structure and the content presented.

"But the great added value of the platform definitely lies in the opportunity to acquire new customers." (Designenlassen.de)

In this respect, the descriptions of the design platforms and the other freelance platforms are similar: in both cases, the opportunity to develop one's individual skills and the chance to build up a network of customers is emphasised. In common with many other freelance platforms, design platforms also play an important role in terms of payment, and they often advertise concrete earning opportunities and offer the prospect of financial rewards for crowdwork.

In conclusion, it remains to be noted that the presentations on the platforms are frequently linked to the suggestion that (potential) crowdworkers can successfully implement individual earning strategies via their work on the platform, as stated on the platform 99designs: *"Get your self-employment going"*. The platforms in the field of professional employment are thus obviously aimed at people who are (in part) involved in the aforementioned fields of activity already represented on the platforms and who are willing to use the potential of crowdwork as a (more or less fixed) part of their solo self-employment.

Discussion

The business models of digital (labour) platforms are based on the fact that the platforms succeed in matching demanded services or activities with platform workers. For this, they depend on a sufficiently large number of platform workers who are willing to carry out the requested work activities for the platform. In this basic requirement, platform labour markets do not differ significantly from other labour markets at first glance. For the platforms, it is important to present the platform activities to the platform workers in such a way that they are willing to provide their labour for the remuneration offered (direct monetary payments, but also flexibility, building contacts and skills, etc.). However, a look at the state of research shows that crowdwork is often accompanied by difficult working conditions. In most cases, only low incomes can be earned with this form of solo self-employed labour, and workers are in unfavourable positions of power vis-à-vis the platform companies, which tends to lead to poor working conditions and a negotiating advantage for platforms. Furthermore, platforms often implement small-scale technological control of work by means of algorithms and rankings, which is largely non-transparent for workers. Last but not least, workers are confronted with unilateral rules for platform use. It is this structuring function of platforms that distinguishes the platform labour market from other labour markets (cf. Hertwig & Papsdorf, 2022).

Accordingly, there seems to be a gap between the (problematic) working conditions and structures offered on the platforms, on the one hand, and the need for a sufficiently large number of potential platform workers in each case, on the other hand. So, the question arises: How do the platforms try to motivate people for the work and bind them to the platforms? However, the strategies used by the platforms

to attract (potential) crowdworkers have not yet been the focus of attention. This is where our study comes in.

The analysis started with the theoretical idea that platforms are in a narrative competition for the interpretative sovereignty of what constitutes 'good' and, thus, attractive platforms. For the recruitment of platform workers, employer branding is also necessary for platforms to convince potential workers of the advantages of this new form of work. The platforms, therefore, try to give themselves a certain image and thus be attractive to workers by telling specific stories about crowdwork. Thus, we examined platforms' self-representations to find out what kind of stories they tell and which narrative elements they use to put the mediated work in a certain light. The results show that there is not one single resp. 'standard' story about crowdwork, but that different platforms each tell different stories, using and combining different narrative elements in a specific way. Nevertheless, it can be seen that similar narrative references are made within the identified platform types and that the stories about crowdwork, in some cases, only differ from each other in nuances.

Research has shown that platform work is diverse and heterogeneous in its working conditions (Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2020) and that there are now many different use cases for the application of platform work. These cannot be divided solely into work carried out on-site and work that can be done purely online, but platform work also differs in terms of the complexity and content orientation of the respective work. On the one hand, there are simple activities for everyone that can be carried out without significant knowledge, but on the other hand, there are complex work tasks that can only be performed by employees with specific (professional) qualifications. Because platform work is often embedded in hybrid employment constellations, it is accompanied by different subjective levels of importance. For example, the income generated via platforms is mostly used for short-term consumption desires by those who additionally pursue regular employment. In contrast, for platform workers without additional (dependent) employment, this income is also important for earning a living and for their social security. How is all this (skill differences, individual interests, areas of activity, etc.) reflected within the stories that platforms tell about crowdwork?

It turned out that platforms with similar stories about crowdwork are also very close to each other in their portfolio of offerings. For example, we were able to show that those platforms that mediate freelancing activities refer to the self-optimisation opportunities and development possibilities for the self-employed. In contrast, microtask platforms consistently refer to the simplicity of crowdwork and the fun of participating in it. It is thus noticeable that the narratives about crowdwork differ according to platform type but that the individual platforms then differ from direct competitors rather in nuances. The expectations that are aroused among crowdworkers through such narratives are thus likely to be similar in each case.

Instead of a narrative competition that emphasises differences, there seems to be a convergence towards uniform narratives about crowdwork in the platform economy – while at the same time, there are large differences between different types of crowdwork.

At this point, the most important distinction with regard to the stories and narrative elements platforms use to describe the work offered is that between occasional tasks and work in the context of professional employment. However, such a distinction has not yet been systematically taken up in previous research on crowdwork platforms. For a discussion on working conditions, the impact of crowdwork on employment structures, etc., this distinction is especially important, and a focus on ‘professional crowdwork’ seems appropriate in this context. It should also be noted that the majority of platforms do not suggest that crowdwork can or should function as a sole form of employment. It is much more common to find indications that crowdwork appears to function as an element of hybrid employment constellations. The current focus on platforms that frequently mediate various microtasks and the subsequent diagnosis that crowdwork can hardly generate a living wage does not sufficiently take into account the fact that, from the platforms’ point of view, the completion of microtasks is by no means associated with a regular income. Rather, the platforms describe these types of crowdworking as activities to be done occasionally in one’s free time.

Conclusion

The results of this study are therefore important for further research as well as for the social treatment of the topic of crowdwork. Schüßler et al. (2021, pp. 9ff.) point out that platforms should be understood as a “multi-faceted relational structure” that interacts in an environment of market, government, and civil society actors. For a deeper understanding of the constitution of crowdwork markets and the positioning of the respective actors, it is necessary to look at the reception of the stories discussed here. Subsequent questions would include how crowdworkers perceive and classify the narratives created by the platforms. It would be interesting to know how successful (different) platforms and their specific stories about crowdwork are at recruiting potential crowdworkers. Likewise, in this context, it would also be necessary to examine the contracting companies and their role in competition via the market narratives. Last but not least, the question arises to what extent the stories platforms tell may contribute to a normative undermining of social institutions in the field of labour regulation and social security (cf. Schor & Vallas, 2023; Beckmann & Hoose, 2022) if crowdwork is described as ‘not real work’.

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