

APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGY OF QUALITATIVE COMPONENT

The data presented in this article was generated as part of a three-year, multi-stage, mixed-methods research project investigating the global platform economy. Embracing a sequential research design (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007), the most comprehensive empirical phase sought to elicit data on the lived experiences of online freelance workers or ‘micro-providers’ by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out in face-to-face settings with the providers during seven months of fieldwork in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa taking place between September 2014 and December 2015. The countries represented are from Southeast Asia and Africa, and are all lower- to middle income countries that are regarded as emerging economies: the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria.

Sampling of micro-providers through online platforms

In qualitative research, sampling strategies are not as much concerned with questions of ‘representativeness’ as with questions of conceptual fit (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 29). For interview studies, Morse (2012) highlights the notion that qualitative sampling should be representative of the phenomena rather than of the population. These conceptualisations of sampling guided the participant selection and recruitment process. As an outcome, the first participant inclusion criterion was active membership of any online labour market platform operating in the six countries listed above.

Ultimately, we recruited micro-providers who bid for work through the following platforms: *oDesk*, *Elance*, *freelancer.com*, *PeoplePerHour*, and *v lance.vn*. Many participants sought work through several platforms at once. Micro-providers’ experiences captured by the

interview data thus also included engagement with additional platforms such as *iWriter.com*, *guru.com*, *rev.com* and others.

The second participant selection criterion devised was that the work performed should constitute low-skilled tasks that did not require any formal qualification. The sampling strategy, however, in accordance with contemporary methodological theorising, was “fluid and emerging throughout [the] research design, from research questions to data analysis” (Beitin, 2012: 243). This fluidity, for example, pertained to work categories included in recruitment search processes facilitated through the various online platforms identified. This was because the task ontologies employed by platforms were non-exhaustive, unclear and/or inconsistently used by clients and providers alike, as early stage fieldwork and interviews revealed.

Furthermore, we often found that providers were not specialising in only one category of work, such as data entry, but often performed any type of work they had the skills to do. In addition, micro-providers with many years of experience often sought to upskill themselves in order to meet the skills demands of platform clients, allowing them to be considered for the types of jobs they observed were most frequently offered at higher rates. As an outcome, the range of worker experiences generated through the semi-structured interviews span from low- to high-skilled tasks. The majority of participants, however, engaged with tasks such as blog/article writing, search engine optimisation, data entry, virtual assistant services, transcription, lead generation and email handling.

Finally, we sought to ensure a rough gender balance among the participants. These criteria were then applied to select and recruit micro-providers for interviews.

Recruitment of micro-providers for interviews

The actual process of recruiting interview participants is a stage of the qualitative research process that remains under-reported and under-theorised (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015). Yet, it is “both time-consuming and personally and professionally challenging” (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015: 725), and key methodological and validity concern for studies employing the method of qualitative interviews (O’Connor & Madge, 2017). As indicated above, in the sampling and selection process we explicitly harnessed the platforms as tools for recruitment. In particular, the platforms’ search engines were valuable tools for exploring trends and identifying providers in the geographical locations of interest. Furthermore, many platforms offered a wide range of additional information on worker characteristics, such as the amount of money earned through the platform; their hourly rates; the number of hours they had billed; their level of English language skills – and importantly, information on when they were last active on the platform.

For interview research relying on recollections of everyday experiences of online work, specific tasks, client relationships, and similar information, the likelihood of generating high-quality of data is higher if the events and experiences in question have happened more recently. The conscious use of the sociotechnical affordances of the platforms as tools for selecting and recruiting participants enabled the representation of a broad “variety of positions in relation to the research topic” (King & Horrocks, 2010: 29).

To invite micro-providers to participate in the research interviews, the research team posted tasks on the four online platforms mentioned. The task descriptions provided information about the research project, questions relating to informed consent, and clarified that participation was voluntary, and should not be seen as a job. To further make that point, it was emphasised that no feedback (reputation score) would be left as an outcome of the participation. Expenses for transport would be reimbursed, and participant would receive \$6

as a token of gratitude; the latter was not conditional on the following through with the interview, and would be paid to anyone accepting the invitation. The tasks were “hidden”, meaning that only individuals manually selected as outlined above were able to access the task description and accept the task.

Nonetheless, a key validity concern was ensuring that participants genuinely perceived the interview situation as research participation, and their role as that of informant rather than someone performing a paid task. This was achieved by means of building of relationship and trust. A one-off encounter and interaction would inhibit the more genuine building of rapport and relationship between researcher and participant. To facilitate continuity and the building of rapport, we devised a research process and protocol that ensured that participants engaged with the lead interviewing researcher (Hjorth) in various ways prior and subsequent to the interview itself. In most cases, the researcher and the participant had exchanged several rounds of emails, platform chat messages and SMS messages by the time they met face-to-face. Repeated exchanges of emails, messages and artefacts have been found to effectively help build rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Seitz, 2016). Artefacts shared by participants included materials such as their CVs, LinkedIn and other professional or personal social media profiles, personal blogs, microfinancing campaigns, and similar. When possible, these were used as prompts during interviews, and included as contextual data in the analysis phases.

Interview protocol

In total, 107 emerging economy micro-providers were interviewed, in the Philippines (N=12), Malaysia (N=5), Vietnam (N=19), South Africa (N=19), Kenya (N=29) and Nigeria (N=23). All interviews were carried out in English, in some instances with support from a

local research assistant/interpreter. Most interviews lasted around 1.5 hours. Informed consent was ensured by means of an information sheet and consent form.

An interview guide was used to provide overall structure to the interviews, resulting in a semi-structured interview design. The interview guide covered the participant's socioeconomic background, educational and employment history, experiences and practices related to working through online labor platforms, family and social networks, engagement with technology, and personal aspirations. Follow-up questions were used to probe topics further, and the majority of the interviews were spent discussing the participant's experiences and practices related to online labor platforms.

Approach to qualitative data analysis

The interviews were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed. An initial analysis phase took place in the form of reflection in debriefing meetings among the research team after individual interviews and fieldwork periods. A more formal analysis phase took place after the fieldwork was finished, when the interview transcripts were read and excerpts coded in NVivo using Miles and Huberman's (1994) notions of first- and second-level coding. The initial coding resulted in hundreds of first-level codes that were partly descriptive (eg., socioeconomic background, platform preference) and partly theoretical (reflecting literature on global sourcing, economic geography, and labor sociology that informed the overall research project). The initial codes were then merged into higher-level codes in an iterative process.

In this article, the purpose of using interview data was to augment the findings from quantitative analyses, offering convergent validation (triangulation) as well as increasing the "analytical density" (Fielding, 2012) of the research with rich, noisy data, which is not formally generalizable, but helps to offset some of the limitations of the quantitative data and

provide context for its interpretation (Bryman, 2006; Neff et al., 2017). This was achieved through a third analysis phase that consisted of identifying higher-level codes relevant to the questions addressed by the quantitative analyses, examining the first-level codes they encompassed, and reviewing related transcripts for context. This resulted in a narrative that outlines participants' experiences and practices related to the questions addressed by the quantitative analyses, which is juxtaposed in the article with the quantitative results and finally synthesized with them into a "negotiated account". The top-level codes used in this analysis are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. TOP-LEVEL CODES USED IN THE ANALYSIS

<i>Top-level code</i>	<i>Excerpts (including lower-level codes)</i>
Formal qualifications and educational trajectory	192
Employment history and trajectory	254
Online work history and entry	248
Motivations for doing online work	111
Reputation/feedback systems	244
Perceived influences of geography	259
Discrimination	164
Platform design, policies and practices	36

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