

Crowdsourcing as a platform for social studies

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Peculiar features of crowdsourcing platforms are described. Advantages of crowdsourcing platforms as means for experimental research are presented.

Key words – crowdsourcing, microtask, online labor market.

Introduction

Recent emergence of crowdsourcing platforms – namely, those which function like online labor markets – can bring disruption into social research by diminishing costs of experimental studies, simplifying subject recruitment and accelerating data collection. In crowdsourced studies researchers appear in the role of employers who ask crowdworkers to solve their task for certain compensation; crowdworkers' responses are used as a data set of interest.

Exploitation of crowdsourcing in research studies

The main characteristic of crowdsourcing – which differentiates it from outsourcing or freelancing – is the distinctive role of the platform: a webpage or an Internet-based application that serves as an intermediary between a “crowd” and task requesters. Among different types of crowdsourcing, we focus on Microtask crowdsourcing, which is predominantly business-oriented and can be referred to as online labor markets.

Using crowdsourcing platforms to conduct experiments, an experimenter acts like a requester by posting his experiment in the form of a typical crowdsourcing task. The researcher might ex-ante introduce the task as an experiment or disclose it ex-post. Experimental data set consists of responses that workers submit and/or information on the task execution and submission process itself. Among microtask platforms the most suitable for running social studies are Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), Microworkers and oDesk. Following features make them convenient for running experiments.

Supportive infrastructure. Compared to laboratory experiments crowdsourcing platforms require less organizational issues and provide better supportive infrastructure – much of preparation time and costs can be saved.

Subject pool. Access to a large, if not endless, subject pool is among key advantages of crowdsourcing platforms. Experimenters do not need to search

for and recruit participants as crowdsourcing platforms take over this function with a number of accompanying services: prescreening of potential workers before allowing to enter the marketplace, saving information on users history, provision of communication channels and other.

Costs. Although experimenters have to pay crowdworkers for the task done and a small fee for platform services, these costs are much smaller than the compensation of travel expenses and participation fees in a laboratory setting.

Subject diversity. Crowdsourcing platforms also offer a more diverse subject pool than traditional recruitment sources. Workers differ on a number of dimensions: demographics, professional skills, cultural background etc.

Subject anonymity and identifiability. One of the useful and unique features of AMT platform is that all workers appear anonymous to requesters and are assigned an ID number. From the experimental point, this automatically solves the problem of collecting responses to sensitive questions. At the same time, the identification number can be used to track workers across studies and over time, thus allowing to conduct longitudinal studies.

Proximity to real-world environment. Crowdworkers might not know ex-ante about their participation in an experiment. Also, they are likely to work from office or home. This is of great advantage compared to laboratory studies which are questioned in their internal validity as subjects are said to behave differently in an artificial laboratory setting than in real life.

Payment. A rather technical, yet helpful advantage of using crowdsourcing platforms is simplicity of the payment process: experimenters place some money in escrow before posting the task, and a precise amount is automatically forwarded to the subject once his submitted work is accepted.

Successful implementation of crowdsourcing platforms was reported for demographic and political surveys, behavioral studies, experiments in the field of cognitive and clinical psychology [1,2].

Conclusion

Low costs of running experiments, simplified subject recruitment and accelerated data collection make crowdsourcing platforms attractive and promising for social research. Replications of classical experiments prove experimental validity of crowdsourcing platforms.

References

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