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From Hobby to Dependence: How Young Workers Become Embedded in Online Labor Platforms

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Building 19, Room 610, Waseda University

Prior research on platform labor has focused primarily on the work precarity experienced by workers on location-based gig platforms. This study extends these insights to online crowd work—a form of platform labor that expanded rapidly during the pandemic in South Korea—where workers perform data labeling microtasks to produce training datasets for AI systems. Departing from prior studies that examined platform workers' attitudes and behaviors in a cross-sectional manner, we explore how young workers' relationships with online labor platforms evolve over time. Drawing on longitudinal interviews with 37 young workers conducted over three years, we find that participants were initially attracted to online labor platforms for their perceived flexibility, autonomy and fairness. However, as they became more engaged, they underwent a process of trust-building, strategic agency development, and gamification, which ultimately led to a deepening commitment to the platform. We conceptualize this process as the development of worker' dependence on online labor platforms and discussed its broader theoretical implication for understanding control and autonomy in platform labor.

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