

Sweat, data and liquid assets: the working body on the digital assembly line

superconductr

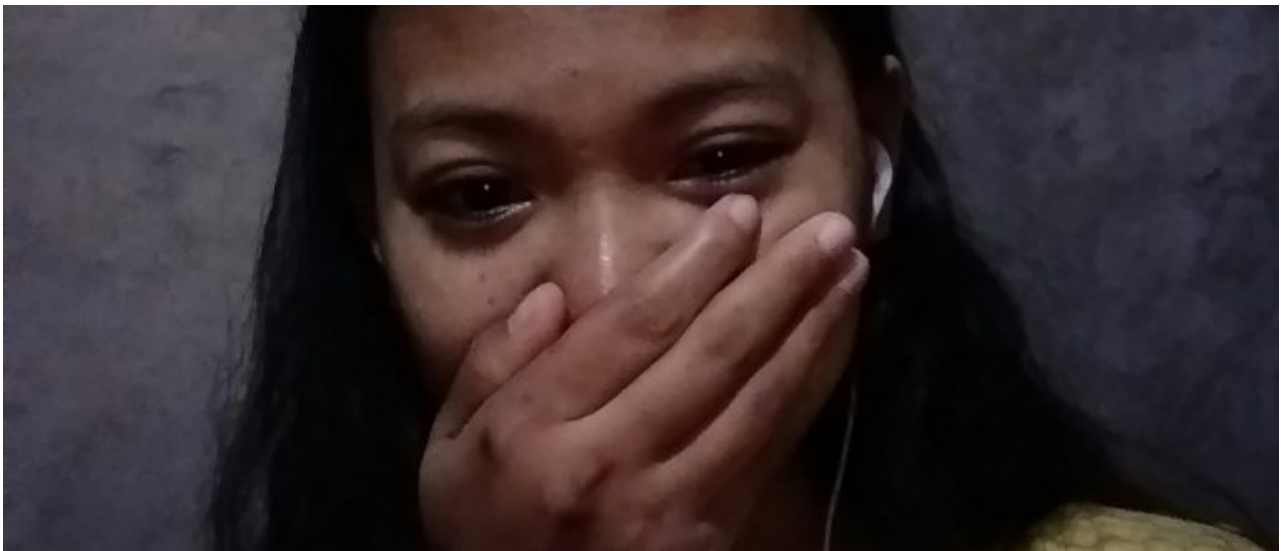
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Abstract

Sweat, data and liquid assets is concerned with the bodily aspect of online click work. The project consists of a series of short, open-ended texts written by workers on the platform Microworkers about their embodied experience of labouring as microtaskers. The questions workers were asked to reflect on relate to which parts of their bodies were currently active, what sensations they were noticing, emotions that they were feeling and where these were located in the body. In addition to the texts, workers were also asked to take images of a part of their body that they discussed in their writings.

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31895800

Online labour platforms connect buyers and sellers of digital service work, in what is often called the *gig economy*. The growth of these platforms has led to the emergence of a global labour market where any kind of work that can be performed with a computer and an internet connection can be bought and sold almost anywhere in the world. The work that is available on these platforms ranges from monotonous, repetitive tasks such as outlining certain types of objects in a continuously replenished series of images in order to train artificial intelligence algorithms, to high-skill, personalised services which include graphic design or software development.

Standard labour regulations and protections do not apply in this field: Workers are treated as self-employed contractors, platform operators tend to absolve themselves of any responsibilities towards their workforce by presenting themselves simply as matchmakers between workers and employers, and the ephemeral nature and international scope of employment relations make legal oversight difficult. Besides this, due to the global distribution of this kind of labour, workers in high-wage countries often find themselves in direct competition with those in low-wage countries, which leads to downward pressures on wages.

At the low-skilled end of this field lies the realm of microtasking or microwork, where more complex tasks are broken up into small fragments: simple, streamlined operations which can then be distributed through automated software in the form of individual jobs to be completed by workers. This means that workers often have little to no information about the wider purpose of what they are working on. At the same time, viewed from the side of employers, workers only appear as entries in a database, ready to be called up with a few mouse clicks in order to perform a task as and when needed, and discarded just as quickly once their work is no longer required. Here labour power, the human capacity to work, is reduced to an immaterial quantity that can be bought and sold with the ease of a liquid asset on a financial market. But, however immaterial it might appear when mediated through a digital platform, labour power still exists as a quality of a human body.

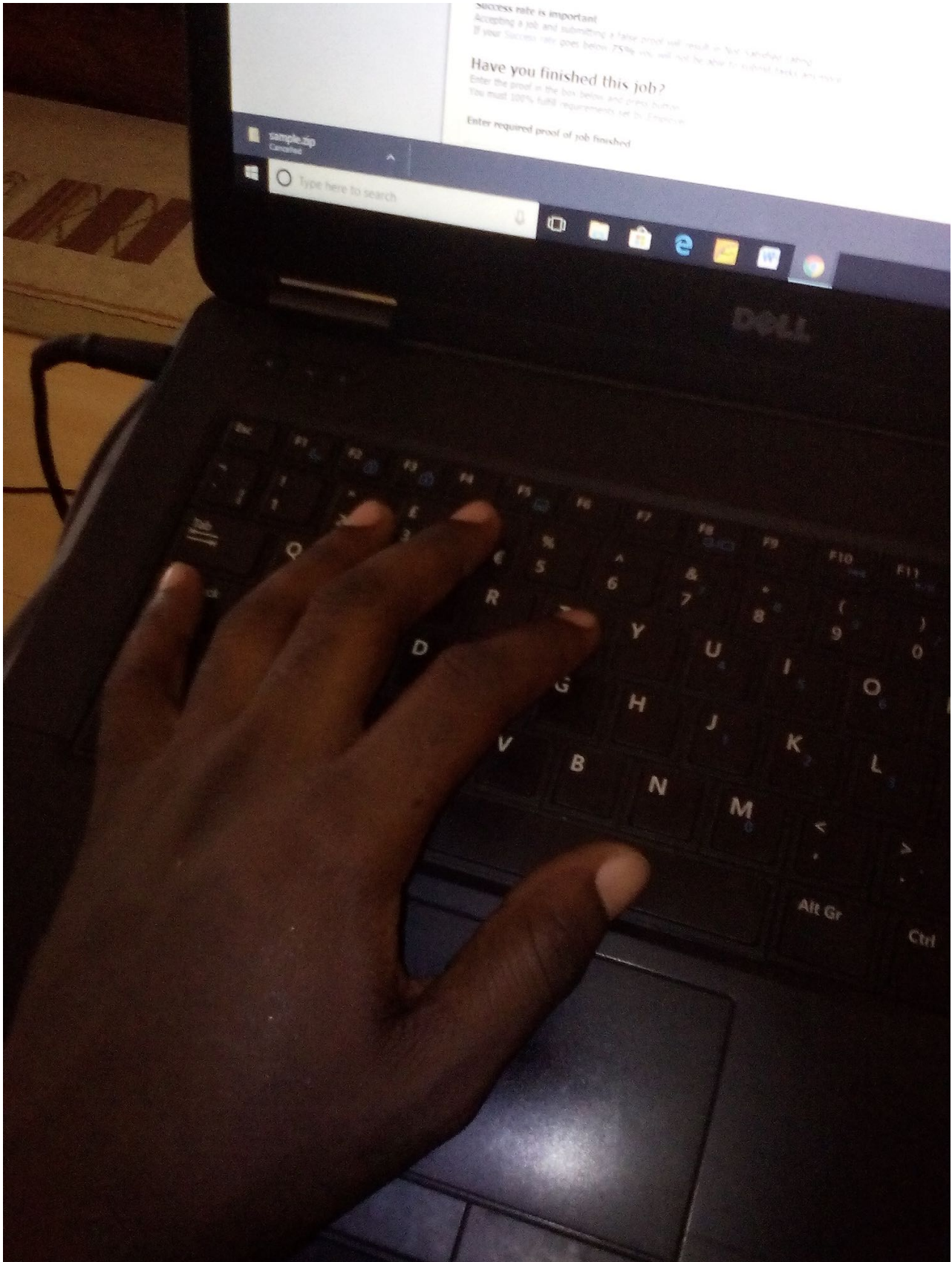
The embodied aspect of this type of work is what *Sweat, data and liquid assets* is concerned with. For this project, a number of workers on the online labour platform Microworkers have been paid US\$2.50 each to write a short open-ended text about their embodied experience of microtasking. Typical jobs on offer on Microworkers include tasks that ask workers to visit websites and conduct web searches, create Gmail accounts, download and test mobile phone apps, write blog posts or comment on YouTube videos, follow accounts on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, and answer surveys; with payments ranging from around 5 cents to US\$2.50 per task.

The questions workers were asked to reflect on for *Sweat, data and liquid assets* relate to which parts of their bodies were currently active, what sensations they were noticing, emotions that they were feeling and where these were located in the body. Besides the aim of drawing attention to the embodied existence of the worker, this focus on bodily sensation in the present moment is also reminiscent of the practice of mindfulness, a psychological technique derived from Buddhist tradition, which is regularly promoted in business self-help literature as an aid to self-optimisation for maximum work performance. In addition to the submitted texts, workers were also asked to take images of a part of their body that they discussed in their writing. Submissions included here are from Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, India, Italy, Philippines, Romania, Serbia, Tanzania, Turkey and Vietnam.



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How strange ... I'm in front of the PC for 5 hours and my left hand has become numb. The room is cold, but I think it's a circulation problem. Even the left foot moves a little and I can not get up. I'm sure: it's too much time that I'm sitting down to work, I have to go out a little but first I have to resume the blood circulation. I wait and look out the window. It has snowed and the mountains are covered with snow. I can almost feel the metallic scent of the snow and the eyes are annoyed by too much light. After 5 minutes I'm ready to get up. My whole body reacts but the feet remain numb and cold. I would like to walk, I have to walk! I do a quick check up of my body. Only the ears work well, maybe because I do not use them much at work. The nose is cold. My mood is neither happy nor sad ... as always. The sun's rays suddenly reach my window and my body reacts immediately. What a feeling of warmth and happiness that I feel. I get up from my desk permanently. Everything is back ok and I'm going to walk in the garden.



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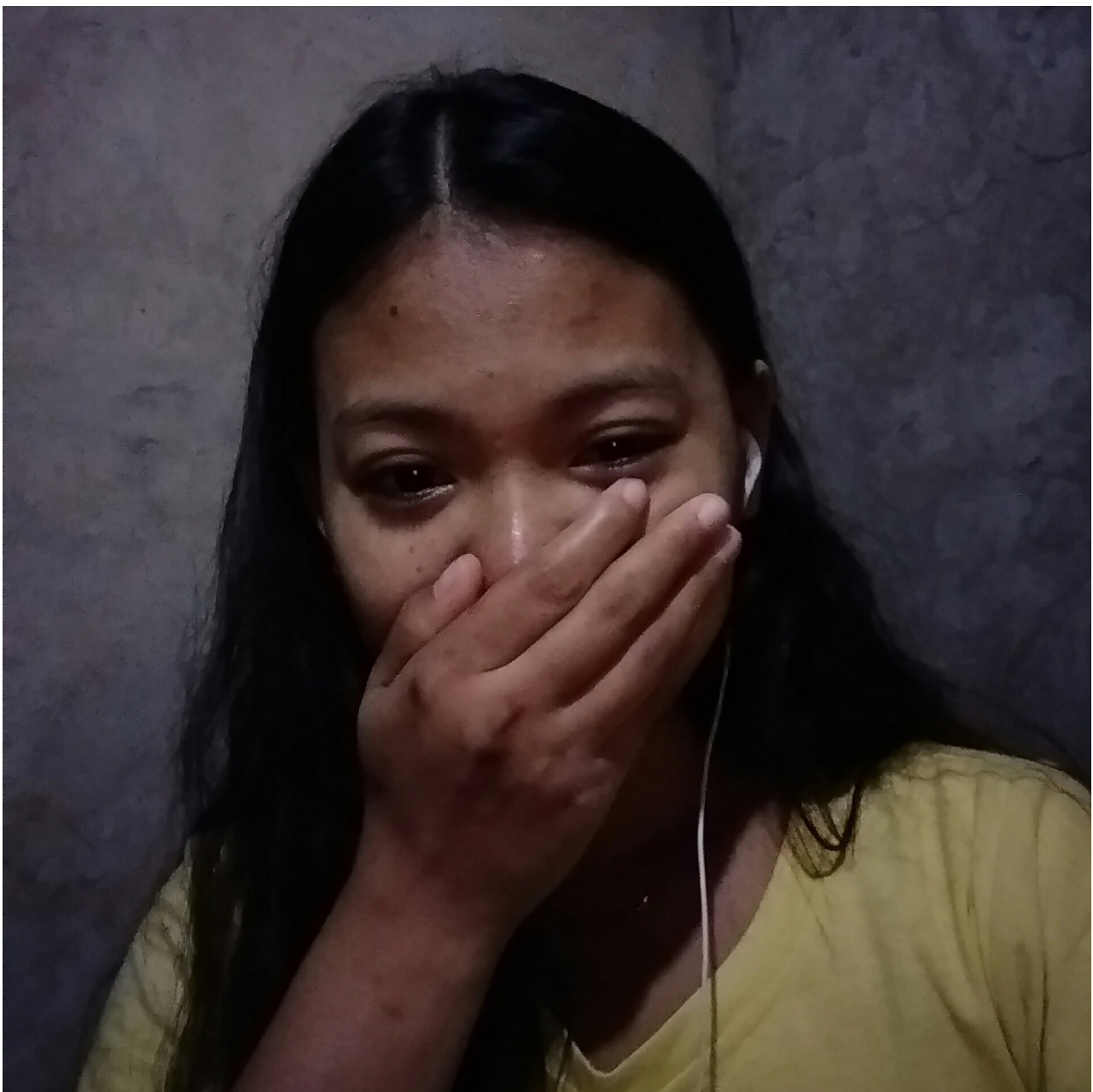
Microtask is like a normal job to me, and when working on my computer I get occupied with all concentration going to my hands, fingers, brain working non-stop and paying attention to my work. I make good use of my sight in every task I part take considering my fingers are the final work deliverer. Most of it I get in to work mood with my hands, eyes (sight) and brains are busy focusing on delivering. The feeling of sweating from the head, to hands and to my finger really captures the stress I have in mind/brain. I think carefully to make work easier and fast as possible. Considering the tension of beating time when you are at the edge of not delivering in time, such situation get me worked up to an extent of now sweating all parts of the body resulting in hands shaking, sweating and not being able to complete a task sometimes. Work mood, stress and fatigue are more on my mind, hands and my eyes. This is due to all my micro tasks are typing based and click/referral links, copying and pasting downloading and uploading, so not much is involved in movement.



32184046

After thinking and observing for a while, I got to a conclusion that my toes, waist, lips, forehead, eyes, mouth, and nose are active internally. Obviously, my hands work the most but they are working on the brain's instructions but the other body parts are just active internally. While I'm sitting and doing a task that requires more than the regular efforts, my legs keep on moving, I bite my lips, again and again, I keep on rotating my waist as I keep trying to think harder. I squeeze my forehead without even realizing it. Eyes are widened automatically because of some sense that I can't even explain, but I do think that it's because I try to focus more on the work I am doing. My nose and mouth are just working the obvious way, they should.

My lips get rough because of the continuous biting that is what I think the reason is. Another part is my neck, I do keep stretching my neck. The senses which are active my sight and my touching. I totally lose my hearing sense if I am really concentrated towards my work but if I am doing something that involves hearing than my hearing becomes extra sensitive and I get annoyed by all other voices around me. I never felt anything in my tongue buds ever while working on microtasks. I do smell whatever it is around me but I don't give any attention to them. I am really moody when I work, and my mood basically depends upon how well I'm doing, for example, if I'm doing my tasks well then I'm pretty happy and I would like everyone and feel good but if I'm doing some annoying work then I get annoyed by someone making any little noise around me and sometimes I do get annoyed even when people try to talk to me. I don't feel any other heavy moods other than getting really happy if I do a high paying job well and getting really sad if I'm not able to do a task well, or the electricity goes off and my work is dead.



31895800

In completing my works with microtask, I most of the time use my hands to type and also my eyes to read the texts on my phone or computer. My eyes and my hands are the most used body part and I couldn't feel any other part of my body because I'm concentrated with the work and the things in my brain, organizing what should I do. In doing my tasks I must be active and my thoughts must be positive especially for the tasks that I need to comment on some of the videos on YouTube, I must be open and never let any negative thoughts in my brain. If I feel that the video has a connection with me I say straight what I want to say and I feel that it's from my heart. But, there are others in which I just need to comment that I can't relate to so I just use my head to construct a positive comment and at times I am forced to lie but I just think that it's a part of the job, so I carry on. To wrap up things, I mostly use my sense of touch and sense of sight in doing my task. I must feel optimist and active while doing it. And I use my brain and heart while doing it.



32207981

The thing that I sense the most is my muscles tensing up, tensing up at the absurdity of the internet, of what it has become from a wild west of discovery, to a cesspool of interconnectivity and lack of anonymity, the picture represents my fingers locking up in frustration at the repetitive menial tasks that involve signing up to another useless niche service populated by today's internet users, so that I can earn a few pennies for future investment, to crawl out of mediocrity.

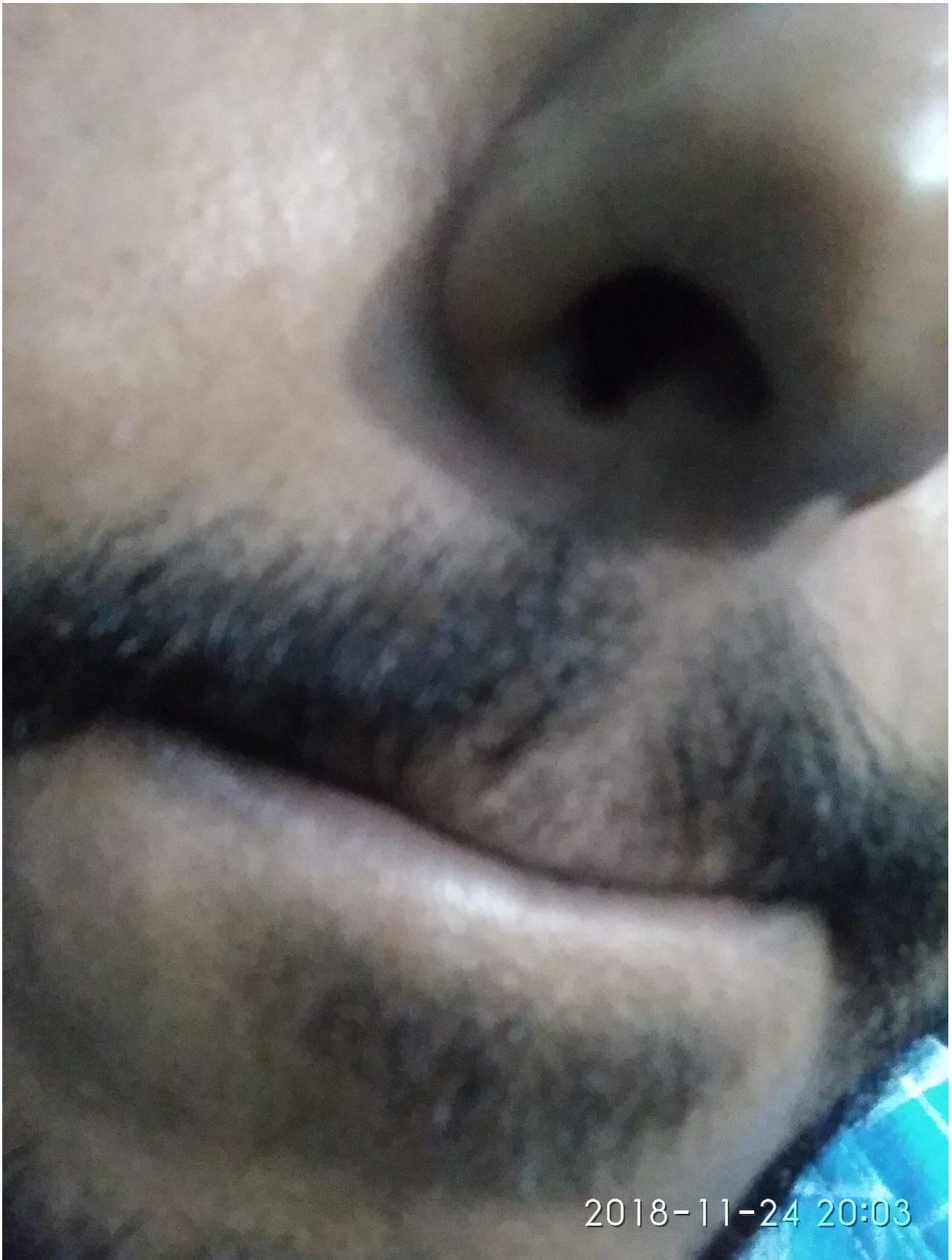


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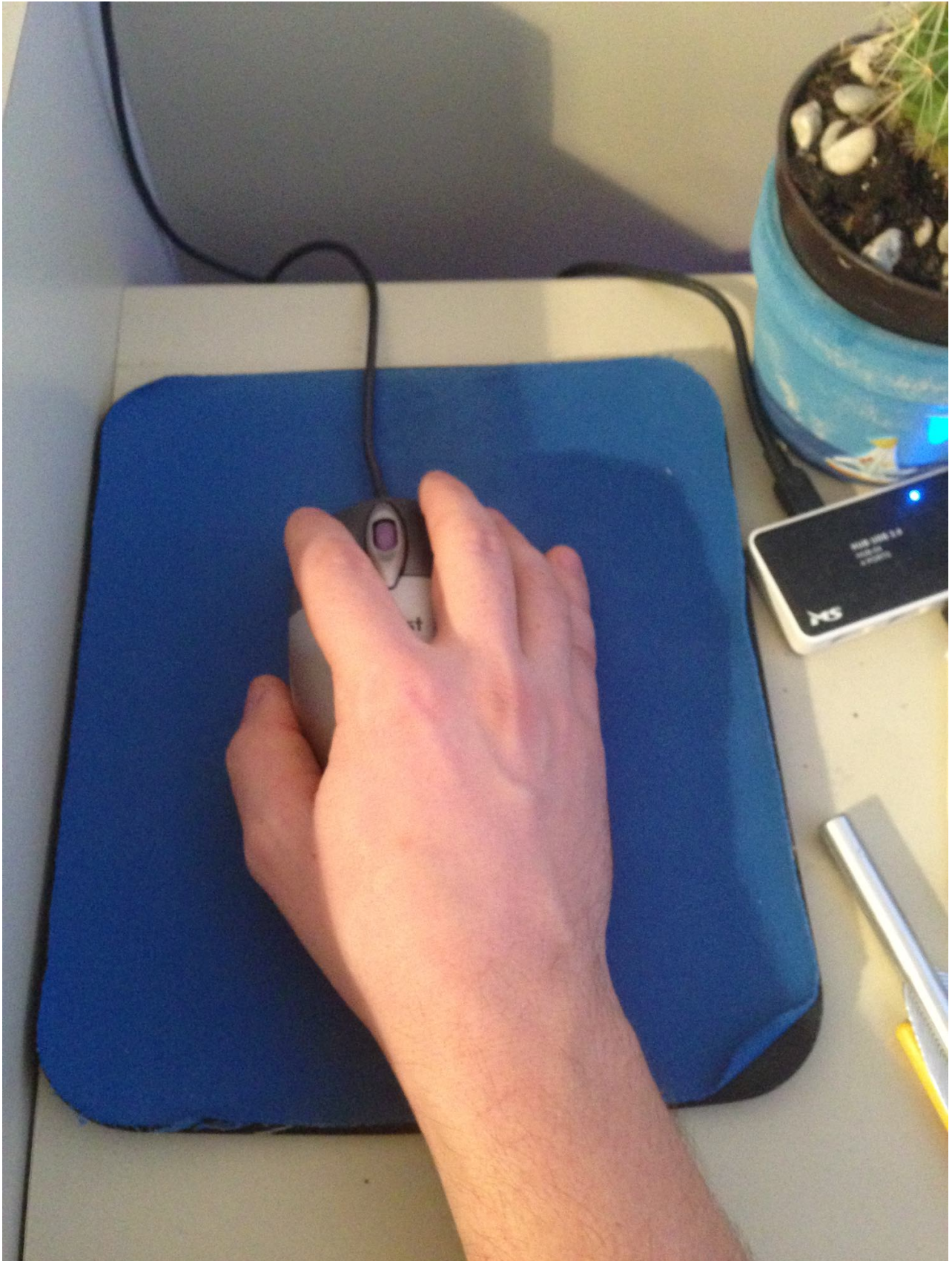
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Doing microtasks is not easy. Every day you are exposed to your computer/phone completing all the task that you want to do. Writing reviews, downloading apps, commenting, posting, sharing and more. With that so much task to do, your mind, fingers and eyes are working tirelessly just to have that task completed. The mind should have comprehend all the equation, information and data that gathered in order for the succession of the task. But wise man says “No Forever”, exposing all day all and night to the computer which emit radiation takes a toll to my whole body. After I have done at least 20-30 jobs, the hurtling comes. My back pains, my finger, my eyes, my legs (cause you know I was siting in a swat style even I have chair). Let me tell you this, the pain can only be notice when you have stop what you are doing. I don’t know why but I think it is my drive, my devotion to complete the task made me invulnerable to that pain. But all in all the hard works, pain, the suffering are worthy when you got to know that all the tasked you were submitted were rated “Satisfied”. Just a tips for me, Patience is Virtue..



31895851

I am an unemployed person who use microtasks in internet as a source of income. Whenever I start doing a job I usually sit in room take my mobile and start doing jobs. Mostly the main parts of my body that are active during doing these tasks are my eyes, fingers, leg and obviously the brain. If there is time bound job which, for example a 120sec job I will be tensed and my eyes will be mostly open without usual blinking. Also I used to bite my lower lip due to the stress involved. I have observed that my sense of sight will be very active these times and I can proofread each task very effectively than normal times during doing micro jobs. There is an increased pulse rate in my heart during this time because I am stressed. My legs will also be restless in these times. My mood during this time will be usually complexed consisting of various thoughts of myself getting the task accomplished and also the money I am going to get which can sometimes affect the accuracy of my completion of the job. After completing the job, I will usually have a mood of an athlete who complete his race (usually happiness). The photo I am going to include is the way I bite my lower lip during stressful less time micro jobs.



32182965

I am waiting for jobs to come up. Here it is! I have been assigned this evening, with other 1478 workers in data service group on microworkers.com, to do the data collection work. I know that only maybe at most 50 of them will accept it and start working. I will be paid 4c per task to find contact details on given websites. Email or some contact form I have to find. I know I need at most one minute to do one small task. There are 683 tasks available in this job. I have to be fast. I will use some predefined tricks to faster my work. I will block all ads and videos and similar heavy data with Google Chrome extension to speed up websites loading time so I can find emails somewhere quickly. I have done 6 tasks in 5 minutes. Not bad I thought. That is 24c so far. I can see that other workers are working too. 77 tasks have been submitted so far. I have to be faster if I wish to earn one dollar from this particular job. After 22 minutes no more positions are available for me to work on this job. I have submitted 28 tasks. 4c times 28, well that is over a dollar. Good job. Dollar and 12c in 22 minutes. Well, ok. I have to stand up because my back hurts. The toes on my hand hurts me. I have done so much copy and paste work that I did not breathe properly in these 22 minutes. I am waiting for a new job to show up... In the meantime I will eat something.



31923730

I have to admit that I feel a bit bored when I'm solving most of microtasks. Basically it's not that bad, because it allows me to listen to the music at the same time, also, I can talk to my friends and so on. When it comes to more demanding tasks, things are completely different. Most of attention is focused on solving the task, and the only sounds I can hear is the sound of the keyboard and sound of clicking the mouse. My eyes are focused on the details on the screen and synchronized with the movements of my hands on a mouse or

keyboard. In case that time is a limiting factor, all of this could involve a mild panic. Generally, then I face a robot. Fragrances, sounds and other senses are either in the background or completely subordinated to what I am working on. If there are many such tasks, I begin to feel tired and deconcentrated... and then we return to the beginning of the story... again, I can hear background sounds, music, I think about the text of the song, the scents also turn my thoughts away. In essence, as with every other job, as the dictum says, “while working on a machine, a man becomes a machine too”. In other words, there is no room for many emotions, unless the task involves listening to a song, watching an interesting clip, etc. For example, this task urged me to think about many things, it was not boring or fatigued, but it is an rare example...



32181845

I'm writing this task by sitting in my room. It is morning 9.33am. So I am feeling very refreshed and the atmosphere is cool today. My legs are bit freezed also there is heavy chill wind outside. Also I think the blood circulation to my legs are slow at this point. My heart is beating slow at this point. Maybe because I was sitting still from early morning. I'm typing very fast with my fingers. I enjoy typing this. So it is a kind of new feeling. So there is no pressure on my fingers. Basically I love typing. So my fingers are strong. I'm hearing music right now. It is an Indian Hindi song. And it is like a pop song. So my mood is good today. My eyes are bit annoyed by the screen light. Because it is dark inside my room and windows are closed. My overall body is energetic today. My body wants to feel some fresh sunshine at this point. After completing this task I want to go outside my room. So that I can get some fresh air and sunshine. My legs desperately wants a walk. Also I want to get my legs bit hot. I'm attaching the photo of my leg. Which is cold and I'm sensing it is not sending any signals to my brain. Maybe with the lack of blood circulation. It was fun doing this task. Kind of new expey. Never thought about doing such a task.



32187698

I complete tasks from my desktop computer especially at night for money of course. Sometimes I complete tasks with the lamp off so I will not be disturbed of potential visitors. When they do not see the light on my windows they think I'm sleeping and leaving. I need quiet to concentrate on tasks, some tasks, YouTube comments for example. Sometimes I hear a whizzing in my ears, is the blood pressure that increases from so much tension and concentration. YouTube comments require all my neurons to make some comments that I do not believe but as long as they are paid I pretend that I'm interested. But it's also a good part in this, through these videos I discover some interesting ones, for example discovered Poppy videos, weird and interesting creature. When I do tasks at night with the lamp off I wake up in the morning with sting and red eyes. It's not healthy to sit at the computer with the light off. I have emotions every day when I open the site if my tasks have been approved or rejected, is like a chest pressure, like after an school exam before the notes are displayed, but fortunately only a few have been rejected during the time and those who rejected my complete tasks without a detailed explanation, I put them in the exclude list and I reported to the Microworkers staff because I felt cheated. It was not about the 10 cents lost but I was bothered by the fact that they disregarded me, that they treats me like a slave, I do their job well and I'm not paid they think can escape unpunished. A few days ago I have done tasks worth 2 dollars and a was so excited. When I put myself in bed to sleep, about an hour before I fall asleep I made plans in my mind for my enrichment. I calculate that if I make 2 dollars a day in 10 days I make 20 and in a month 60. Quite a lot of money for me. I fell asleep happy. Next day I was anxious to enter the site to make my 2 dollars like in plan. But time passed and there was no task good for me. I ended the day with only 5 cents and that's how my plan of enrichment fail. The next day I made over 1 dollar but I did not make big plans anymore. Overall I like Microworkers even if I have few tasks a day, it's better than none and it's not the fault of the site that I was not born in the U.S.A where I would have received many more tasks I suppose.



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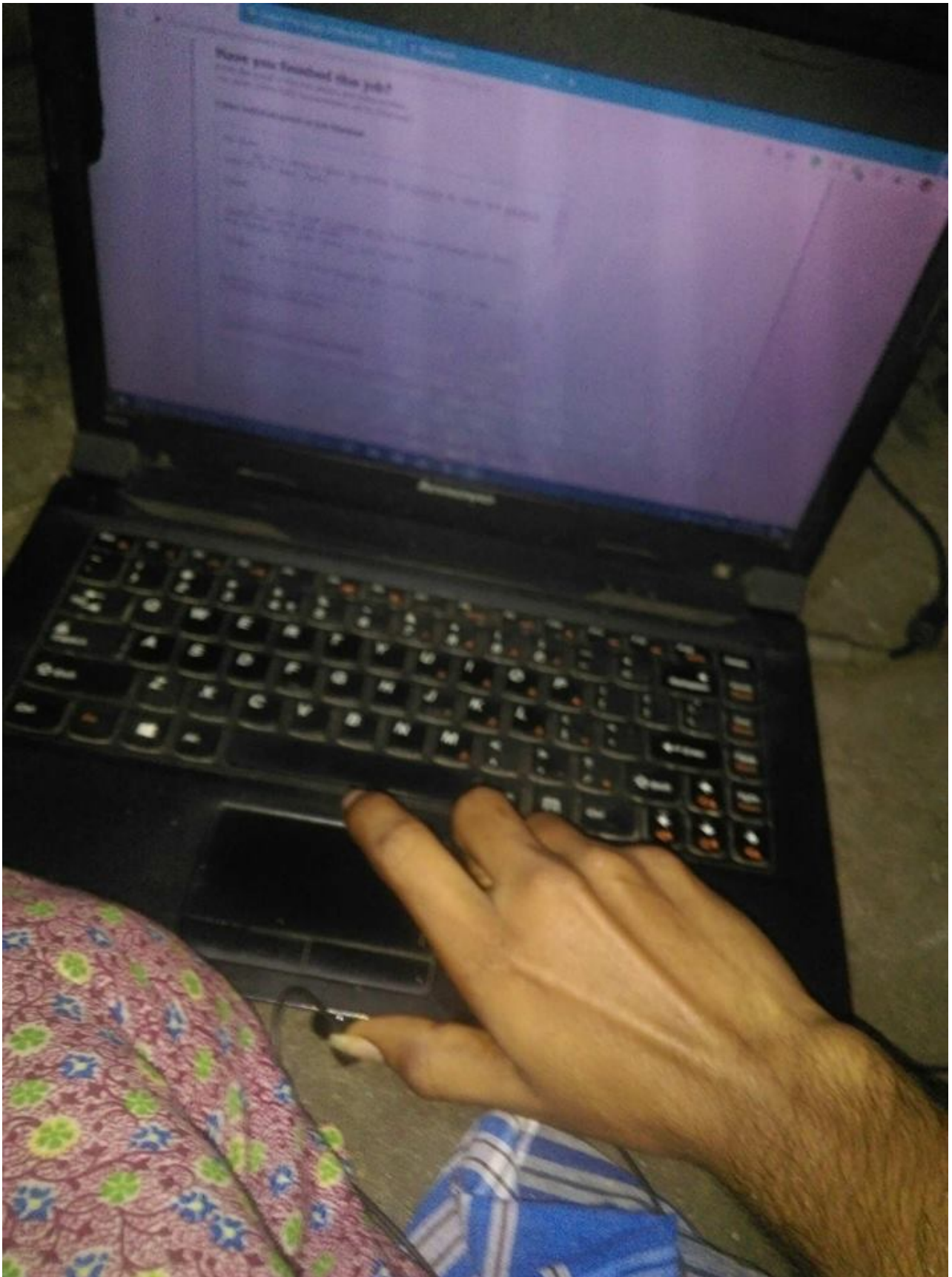
When I complete microworkers tasks the parts of my body that are mostly active are my eyes, brain and hands. Every task requires attention to details, fast typing and navigation skills. The emotions accompanying these relatively simple activities are overall mild and repetitive. However when you perform a task you aim at satisfying the employer's requirements and when you achieve good results (especially when being added to employers' favourite list) followed by higher ranking the latter gives a feeling of inner satisfaction for job well-done. Another emotion that can be outlined and generally present in the time when you complete such micro tasks is relaxation and a peace of mind as whenever you do these online activities it's generally from the comfort of your home and at your own availability without the usual stress associated with 9-to-5 jobs and the transport to the physical work place. One major disadvantage of microworkers tasks is that there are so easy and free of any particular skills or expertise that there is no flavour of exciting challenges and personal development into the role. Therefore, with time you perceive it as something mechanical and routine.



31895953

When I do microjobs my fingers and hands are most active part of the body. I feel cold on my fingertips, and sometimes it seems to me that my fingers are insensitive to external stimulation. I often feel the thorns along the back of the body. Sometimes I feel the stiffness in my fingers and such a feeling occurs to me along the spine. I also feel stiffness in my neck and cold in my palms. Sometimes it also happens to feel pain in the legs, most often when I sit long. Then it happens to be very cold all over my body. The senses of touch and sight are the most active senses when I work microjobs. I also noticed the sharp sensation of the smell. My

mood is mixed and depends on how successful I am deal with tasks. I often feel positive excited, joy and hope, especially when I successfully solve some task. I feel positive excited, joy and hope in the stomach and in the chest, sometimes on my face too. But sometimes I feel fatigue in my eyes and nervous in my temples. I also sometimes feel desperate, especially in the throat and around my forehead.



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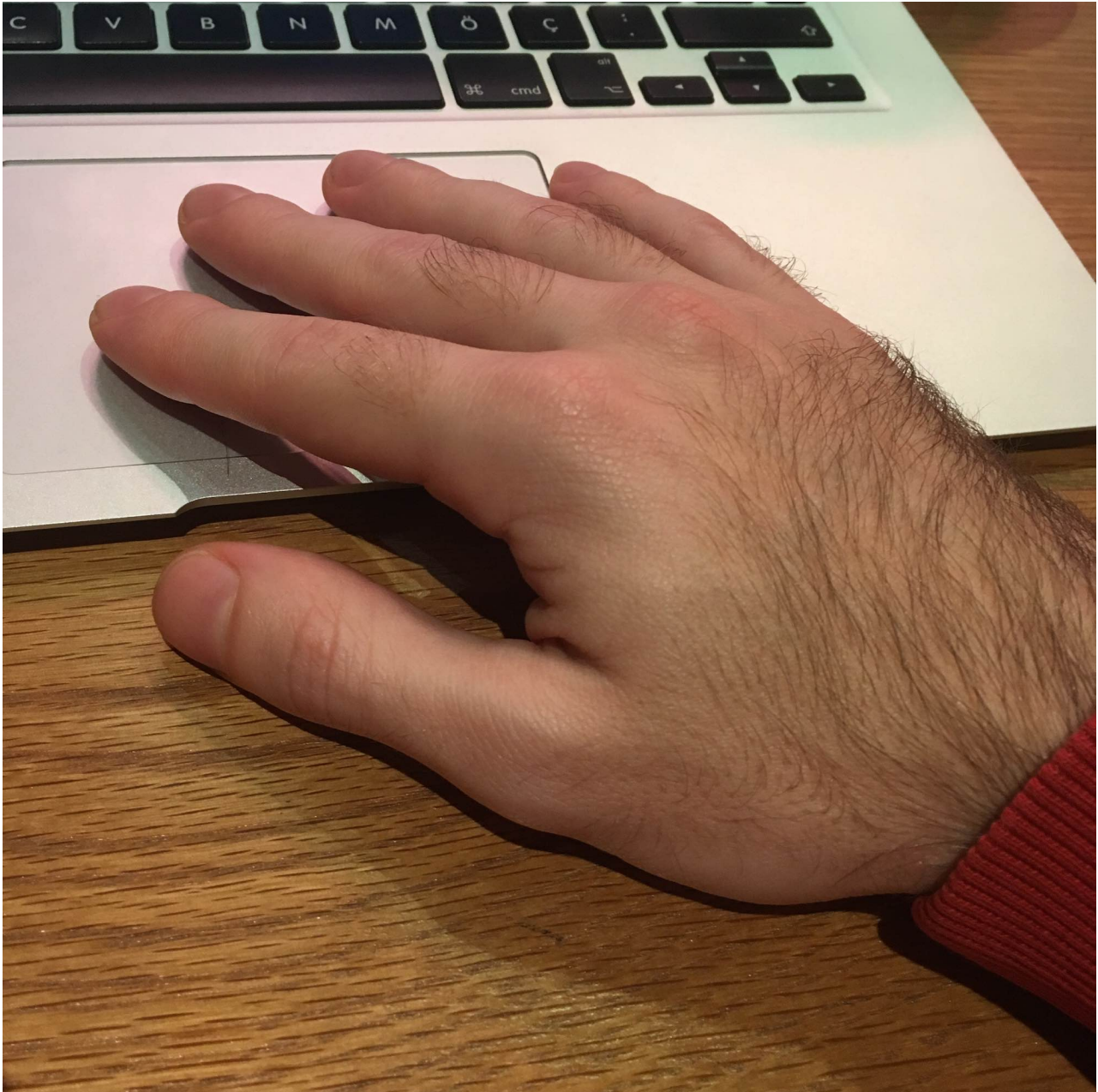
32198071-5

My are always open I'm blink for minute my eyes are always search for easy tasks. I'm lazy to type a words so I just open notepad put some important words and names, but needed for some tasks I will type it. My two or three fingers only working a lot of time. I can't use table for use laptop I'm sleeping position to take a tasks. Sometimes my heartbeat is increased because lowest time to complete jobs the like time 0.40 seconds and lowest number of tasks when I click the task its shows "all position full" its little I'm depressed. I just feel very very happy when I get my first payment for 25 dollars. Microtasks sometimes give a good feel after complete the tasks and I feel really really worst depressed for your job is declined or rejected its feel me stressful so I will selected tasks to do it.



32182214

My ears are active always as I always listen to music while working because it blocks out the other excessive input that could overwhelm me and keeps me calm. I cannot stop listening music as it is an important part of my life. So I like my ears more on my body and is very active all the time. To hear harmonious and soothing music signifies prosperity and pleasure I believe. I'm expressing my emotions in a positive way through listening to music. Music serves to heal the soul. And I also believe hear discordant or out of tune music in my dream signifies unhappiness, lack of harmony, and troubles in doing works.



31895967

As I decide to sit in front of my computer and start working, I generally feel happy and excited by thinking about my life in near future. I try to imagine accomplishing my objectives and focus on my work at that moment. Although it sometimes becomes difficult to be patient and put the necessary effort in that work, it is obvious to me that completing unfinished tasks give better feelings and change my mood positively. By

the time another microtask is completed, I feel stronger and more secure. These positive feelings spread throughout my body. Being able to sustain such work discipline means beating an enemy called procrastination and improve my life satisfaction as a better version of myself. If I ever get disappointed by facing an unexpected difficulty and getting stuck in a specific task, it gives a little anxiety that I feel increasing effects in my eyes as well as stomach area. While I am mentally focusing on the single task I am on, I am physically looking at my monitor (or monitors), using my mouse and keyboard with my both hands and arms or take notes to a paper in order to help me complete the task sooner and successfully. Between the tasks, I change my sitting position, do a little self massage by touching my neck, shoulders, fingers or do body stretching exercise which improve my performance and keep me away from possible pains in my back and neck area. I either listen to a list of concentration music or hear my keyboard tapping, notebook fan sounds in the background which motivates me without any distraction.



32183666

When I work on microworkers.com, most of my activities and senses came from my brain, arms, finger, eyes, ears. Firstly, when I started to work, I spent 5 – 6 hours a day without any break time. My stress build up day by day. As a result, I had a headache. It's such a weird feeling, too. Like there's this heaviness on my brain. It's just like there's a density that fogs up my brain and makes me want to cry. Recently, I have read an article about How to Take a Break From Work. I have tried their methods and I feel better now. Secondly, I like watching videos on YouTube and Microworkers has many tasks from YouTube. But i share my working-room with my brother and I don't want to annoy him, I have to use my earphones 2-3 hours a day. I have long had problems with my sense of hearing. Recently my back feel really bad. It may also include significant degrees of physical discomfort or pain that might arise either from sitting without moving for extended periods of time. Finally, Using PC keyboard and mouse for extended periods of time make my arms and fingers feel the same pain. Microworkers.com not only gave me good feelings but also gave bad feelings. There're five things I wanna say: 1.The Microworkers site has a professional and attractive layout and it's easy to navigate. It definitely made a positive impression on me when I first visited and I found it easy to browse through the Microworkers jobs. 2. Some of the jobs pay better than on other sites. Watching YouTube tasks are also my favourite tasks. I'm super happy if I see these tasks on my dashboard. 3. Sometimes I have to wait too long to find another new tasks. The tasks aren't usually updated and 50% of them are creating Gmail account. I'm so boring when I see this. A couple of times tasks (that I have completed) have not produced a confirmation code. I feel really angry about these scam employers. 4. About minimum withdraw, I can't access any of my earnings until I reach the minimum withdrawal rate, which is \$10 with PayPal and \$22 with Payoneer. Given the scarcity of jobs on offer, making money can be relatively slow on the Microworkers site. 5. In my opinion, Microworkers is one of the best micro-tasks website. Now I can earn 60 – 100 dollars per month on this site. For me, it's really awesome. Because in my country, you can do many things with 100 dollars. I'm super happy with my bonus income from microworkers.com. I can pay my bills, take my girlfriend go shopping....



32185957

When it comes to working microtask I think that the most important parts of the body are the fingers and the head, the mind. I like to type fast and when I do write some material I like to be quick and at the same time, I like to be creative and innovative in the same fashion. Oh well, sometimes I do not get a fortune with the tasks that I like to do so generally with time I hope that MW will have more tasks where we can show our creativity. I feel good and happy when I am able to make some jobs done and earn the money for the job that I like to do. One thing that really affects my job here is the hunger for success. I could possibly make a mistake here and there during the time but oh well we are just humans at the end. You know what is the best feel? When I see that I got rated well and got a special thank you from the employers, in those moments I literary feel that dopamine is reaching my brain and I feel really well, there is nothing else that could make me feel the same way.

About the author

superconductr is an artistic research project into conditions of on-demand labour distributed through digital platforms. This involves interventions that utilise existing digital labour platforms, participation in activism for precarious labour rights, and theoretical investigations. The name superconductr refers to Michel Foucault's description of power as the conduct of conduct, which here also takes into account conduction as the transmission, control and mining of data streams in networks that facilitate the capture and extraction of value from human labour power. superconductr is a project by artist Matthias Kispert.
www.superconductr.org