

The Impact of Gift Card Payments on MTurk Workers



Alexis Chávez



The Impact of Gift Card Payments on MTurk Workers © 2024 by Alexis Chávez is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Suggested citation: Chávez, A. (2024). The Impact of Gift Card Payments on MTurk Workers. Edited by M. Miceli, A. Dinika, K. Kauffman, C. Salim Wagner, & L. Sachenbacher. Creative Commons BY 4.0. Retrieved from <https://data-workers.org/alex/>



INTRODUCTION

While not intended to be a conclusive report, this research draws attention to the existence of Amazon gift card deposits as the sole payment method for some of the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers, depending on the country where they are located, how they are embedded into the platform, and the ways they have found to overcome these barriers.

I applied to work on the platform in 2012, looking for opportunities to work remotely to avoid work-related expenses and get paid in stronger currencies. I live in Venezuela, and even though crude oil prices were high and our economy is strongly related to them, I had a sense that things weren't going to last.

In 2015, things changed quite a bit. I was waiting in lines for food and medicines, there was an economic hardship and scarcity of products, and that's when I received an email from Amazon saying I was accepted for being a worker on the platform. It took me by surprise, as I did not remember applying until I saw that email and decided to take the chance.

I found out that all of my payments would be deposited into my amazon.com gift card balance instead of my bank account and that it would be my only option.

At the time, I was grateful just to have the opportunity to work on the platform. I reached out to Amazon, asking them if I could be paid into my bank account.

Even though I wasn't getting paid with actual money, I decided to stay because it would be a way to have a side income and help me have funds on the side that could be used to buy things for me and

my family and keep my money for basic needs and emergencies.

Several years later, in October 2019, I was wondering if this was related to demographics, and decided to ask Amazon again about payment methods other than gift cards, to which they responded, “We hope to offer additional payment services to our international Workers in the future, and I’m sorry that we’re not able to do so now.”

By then, I already knew some of the strategies workers use to exchange their earnings for actual money, but I have always avoided any possible violation of Amazon’s Terms of Service out of fear of being suspended from the MTurk platform. Still, I fully understand workers like me have different situations and needs, and I truly think we should have the right to decide what to do with our earnings.

I follow one set of [terms of service for how I am being paid](#) and another for [how I can spend my gift card balance](#).

While grateful for the opportunity to buy things for my family and me, and by doing that, surf the low wages of local jobs and the financial turbulence in the country where I live, it’s a situation I hoped would have changed for the better after all these years. My situation made me wonder if this was related to imposed sanctions on Venezuela and, if that was not the case, how many workers were facing the same issue and where they were located.

Since gift card balances cannot be used to cover basic needs, some workers look for ways to transform their earnings into useful money at the expense of losing a significant percentage, wasting time and effort studying the market, and almost creating a secondary or even tertiary job.

It is important to raise awareness about this issue, as the principal motive for workers looking for this type of work is to generate

an income, whether it is their primary or supplemental source. Even though Amazon does not see them as employees but as independent contractors, it's our right to be paid fairly and in a useful manner.

METHODOLOGY

I am an organizer with Turkopticon (a worker-led non-profit organization advocating for data workers worldwide). We organize open forums where workers come and discuss their issues and questions. I reached out to workers who previously talked with us about the issue of being paid with gift cards and also looked to recruit potential interviewees from workers' Slack channels and Reddit forums, where workers discuss issues related to work on the MTurk platform.

By cross-matching data from [Amazon's latest post about countries that were allowed to transfer their earnings to bank accounts in 2019](#) and Panos Iperoitis' data from [Demographics and Dynamics of Mechanical Turk Workers](#) and [Github](#), I was able to find countries not mentioned in the former, and with a strong participants' pool in the latter.

[Demographics and Dynamics of Mechanical Turk Workers](#) - Figure 1 (D. Difallah et al., 2018) shows that some of the top 20 countries with more MTurk workers, like the Philippines, Venezuela, Mexico, and Russia, were not mentioned in [Amazon's blog post](#).

I conducted seven interviews between April and May of 2024 with workers in Pakistan, Colombia, the Philippines, Venezuela, Brazil, India, and Kenya who were or are still getting paid through deposits to their amazon.com gift card balance for their work on the platform.

Interviewees were asked to participate in an online meeting and were compensated at a rate of 20 USD / 30 minutes, depending

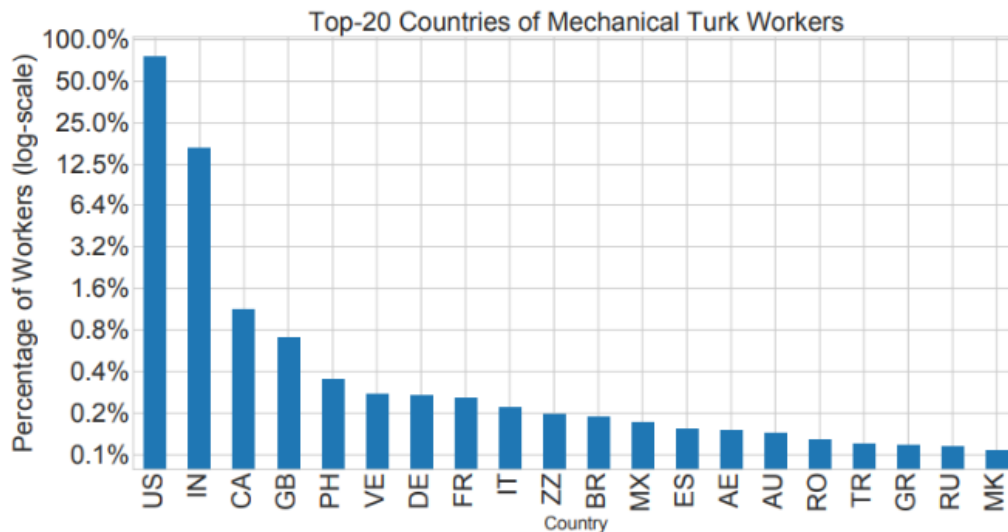


Figure 1: The top-20 countries of origin for Mechanical Turk workers. Most of the workers are from the USA (75%), with India (16%) being second, followed by Canada (1.1%), Great Britain (0.7%), Philippines (0.35%), and Germany (0.27%).

on the interview length, paid via bank transfers or Paypal for their time and expertise. My main goal was to listen to their working experiences on the MTurk platform, primarily focusing on their payments. Such findings will be presented along with quotes from these interviews throughout the report, while workers' identities will be changed through the use of pseudonyms to protect workers' privacy rights.

Running a survey using screeners or location qualifications on MTurk would have made finding these workers easier. However, even after this short study, I am unaware of all the countries where workers have no choice but to accept this payment method, as there is no such thing as an updated official statement about MTurk workers' demographics and their available payment methods. That process would have also implied a filtered participant pool of only active workers and not the inactive workers who may have been suspended, idle, or just stopped working on the platform.

Last but not least, the study was done outside of the platform to help the interviewees by offering an alternative payment method other

than adding more funds to their gift card balances, which some of us have been accumulating throughout all of these years of work.

MOTIVES

As [Panos Iperotis already said in 2010](#), the country of origin tends to change the motivating reasons for workers to participate in the platform. Still, at least in this case, the majority of these workers joined the platform not only to earn payments but also to receive these in a currency sturdier than their local ones. This type of work may be scarce for workers outside of the US, as not all crowdwork platforms accept or have enough constant work available according to their demographics.

Secondly, the payments, considered low by most people worldwide, can represent economic relief, especially since most people interviewed were in developing countries from the global south, where we may face challenges like low wages, income inequality, hyperinflation, and poverty. Ajay, a worker from India, with eight years of experience on MTurk as his main source of income, and was suspended for a brief time for unknown reasons, was allowed to withdraw his earnings in 2020, said:

“As an Indian, you can earn the same amount of money as a worker on MTurk as you can in a decent corporate mid-level job in the private sector.”

Thirdly, the flexibility of working from home attracts people for a whole range of reasons, which can vary between not having a boss or a strict schedule, time flexibility, being able to save time and resources in commuting and work-related expenses, to take care of relatives, and allowing people with disabilities and in older age to remain part of the labor force. Alejandro, a Venezuelan worker who

struggles with depression, and has been working on the platform as his only source of income, commented:

“These rewards, even small, gave me more than a regular job. Even after all the associated risks and expenses, I preferred to dedicate myself to the platform instead of working on a regular job and earning less than what I would spend on transportation fares.”

FINDINGS

It is worth mentioning that, depending on their locations, workers rearrange their sleep schedules to find more work on the platform, as most of it is posted during work hours in the US time zones. Sometimes, that might mean a difference of 9 hours, like India and Pakistan, or even 12 hours in the Philippines. Ajay, added:

“The platform work starts becoming available around 6 p.m., Indian time, meaning that if you are doing a 9-to-5 job, you can return from it and start working on the platform until 2 or 3 a.m. If you are not doing a regular job, you could sleep at 3 a.m. and get up around noon; that was my sleep schedule for quite a long time.”

Ali, a father and former computer technician located in Pakistan, who worked on the platform as his main source of income for more than a decade until being suspended, presumably for logging in and working abroad while taking care of his family, weighed in:

“I worked on MTurk as much as I could. I was awake until 7.30 a.m., fell asleep around 8 a.m., and woke up at 3 p.m. Because of the time difference between the US and Pakistan, I started working in the evening, around 7 or 8 p.m. Even when I was sleeping, my computer notified me with emails and alarms, wherever there was work from my favorite requesters. So, I would wake up, do my work, and

go back to sleep. It took a lot of effort and time, but I was getting rewarded.”

Platform options might be limited depending on where we are located, and even when able to find such work, we might still face other types of issues, such as account suspensions and lack of work. Sabrina, a mother of three in her mid-30s, from Kenya, joined the platform in 2016 as her main source of income explained:

“I tried joining Remotasks, but as soon as I joined, they banned all of the workers in Kenya. It wasn’t only me; it was the whole country. I didn’t get to do a single job on the platform. I logged in and realized they suspended my account without giving me a reason.”

Others like being experienced on the platform, as starting somewhere else would mean losing past work history—like losing your resume—along with qualifications and relationships with requesters (those who post the tasks for workers to do). Ali, the worker from Pakistan introduced above, shared:

“I never really searched or tried other platforms because of the experience I already had working on MTurk. Other platforms, like Upwork, ask you to pay for tests and qualifications to apply for a job. I would still prefer to stick with MTurk, even after getting suspended for an unfair reason, which shows my loyalty to Amazon. And based on my location, even if I reapply for work, I don’t think MTurk would approve my new application.”

As these workers couldn’t withdraw their earnings to their bank accounts for useful money, they started looking for alternatives. Some just bought products for themselves, friends, and family. Nelson, a worker from Colombia in his mid-20s, started working on MTurk in 2017 but stopped in 2021. He has been working as a content moderator since then, and had this to say about working on MTurk:

“My first resource was to go and find someone I knew who had intentions of buying things from Amazon, to buy these for them and get the money. That was my first option, but it was challenging. There weren’t that many people. I even asked family members in the US, where you would assume most of the Amazon customers are, but they didn’t want to buy anything from the website. I thought it would be impossible to have relatives there without any intentions to buy things from the website, but it certainly was difficult, and when I found them, it was something I couldn’t rely on every month.”

Some bought products, paid transportation and import fees, and sold them in their local markets, while others bought physical or digital goods and sold them at a discount in exchange for cryptocurrencies that they could later exchange for the currency of choice. Leonardo, who lives in Brazil, working on the platform since 2020, and was allowed to withdraw his earnings at the end of 2021, reflected:

“Some people buy Amazon gift cards with their Amazon gift card balance and sell them to other people, usually on Reddit. There are subreddit forums for these, verifying your reputation, but I never really trusted these. I didn’t want to get involved in that. So I used a website called Avacus, like Abacus with a v, which connected me to people who paid a fraction of the product’s cost in Bitcoin. I paid for stuff using my gift card balance and sent it to their addresses. The website kept the payment in custody until the other user confirmed they received the order.”

Sale taxes can be refunded on Amazon if workers include any supporting tax exemption documentation for the territory to which the shipment was delivered. However, value-added taxes, shipping, and import fees vary depending on the destination. For example, in Brazil, imports are subject to several taxes and fees, most of which

are calculated on a cumulative basis. This causes significant losses to these workers, as they may not compete with local sale prices to cover these fees. Leonardo gave an example of this:

“Import tax was 60%, which was already high enough, but now the Brazilian government changed it so that every website must include a 92% import tax on any article over \$50.”

Gift card balances restrict access to essential needs, like food, rent, and bills, which traditional currency wouldn't. Ali, from Pakistan, noted:

“Gift cards are problematic. They involve time and effort in doing some research and looking for ways to pay fewer duties and taxes. Most of the time, I had to lose an average of 15-20% in taxes to get such products here in Pakistan. I never really looked into buying and selling gift cards online because that's against [Amazon.com Gift Card Terms and Conditions](#), and it's something I never wanted to do.

Just imagine how hard it might be if it's your first time doing this, and you don't have any money to eat or something. It'd be a struggle, but once you know it works and have a better idea of how to handle this whole thing, you just keep the wheel moving because you know you will keep earning payments month after month, and it's just a matter of time, as long as you make sure everything's on schedule, with a delay of, let's say, one month depending on shipping time, tax payments to your local government, and finding a buyer.”

Even in cases like Venezuela, where imported goods might be cheaper than those locally produced, spending time on market research isn't necessarily a guarantee of getting earnings exchanged. Alejandro stated:

“In Venezuela, it isn't as easy to sell the products I buy from Ama-

zon as before. Years ago, you could be selling products without any issues, but now the market is so competitive that I ask individuals what they need so that I can bring it for them on credit. I hope it goes well, but it's pretty risky because after doing all that, people could end up saying I can't pay you, and what can I do? I already accepted the risk when I offered to do that."

Exchanging earnings for crypto doesn't escape from having losses either. Marco, a Filipino worker in his late 30s who has been working on the platform for nearly a decade and uses it as his main source of income, expressed:

"I buy items for my needs, buy gadgets to sell, and use exchange websites. Purse.io is one that I used before it closed. I waited for sale prices on amazon.com and sold them for better prices. Gadgets are more expensive here in the Philippines than in the US, even without taxes, import, and shipping fees, but I had to sell them with a 5-10% discount in exchange for Bitcoin."

There is also a mixed view about the benefits and drawbacks of using crypto, varying from those who rely more on timely payments to those who can wait and use volatility to their advantage. Ajay, the Indian worker, mentioned:

"Why would you want to buy products through a middleman like Purse.io? Because as a buyer, you would get a discount, that's it. If you were starting to buy stuff on that website, you would get at least a 7-8% discount. Once the buyer is more experienced on the platform and after completing some orders, the discounts get higher and higher, to 20-25 and 30-35%. As a seller, I would hunt for orders with the lowest discount rate to avoid losing much."

I had no idea about Bitcoin's power then, but I'm glad I was introduced to it because of this."

Alejandro, from Venezuela, also added:

“Crypto means other types of issues. Sometimes, I had to accept selling products on Purse.io, where I got my money pretty quickly, but to make it attractive, I had to do it at a discount.

The website always had many options, so I chose the ones that were better for me. While the order was being shipped, crypto was affected by its volatility. Sometimes, I received less money than I originally thought I would because of a decrease in crypto prices. There was the sale discount, possible losses due to crypto volatility, the website’s fee, and fees for exchanging crypto for useful money.”

Since the end of 2023, amazon.com no longer allows workers to use their gift card balance to purchase other gift cards. Sabrina, from Kenya, said:

“Methods have changed over the years. I started buying and selling digital games on G2A.com, a digital game trading platform. I used to buy PUBG and other games on Amazon and sell the keys there. The wait time was over two weeks, so I started using IPayYou.io to buy gift cards in exchange for Bitcoin, which I usually got within 24 hours, but I can’t do that anymore.”

Some lose perception of our work’s value, gamifying the earnings, eventually making us feel undervalued and lose interest in the work. Nelson shared his experience regarding this:

“It’s not right to push someone to spend money on a website for your own sake. So, in the end, I ended up buying stuff that I didn’t want or need, just out of the pure pleasure of seeing my gift card balance go to 0.

That's what frustrated me the most because it forced me to consume my earnings inside the platform or in its defect to look for someone else and get a bank transfer. That was the most challenging part because it's not a job that leaves you a substantial salary; it's more of a side income, and if you look for these kinds of alternatives, it's precisely because of your need for money, not to purchase things on the platform. I think that was one of the things that made me abandon it; I was buying stuff I didn't need nor want, just to make up for the time."

CONCLUSION

Even when so many people criticize platform work, it still offers opportunities and can improve our lives. Still, in the case of MTurk and its deposits to amazon.com gift card balances, the imposed barriers with payment methods make it harder for us to get our earnings, decreasing our autonomy.

In this case, platform work does not stop after the earnings are deposited in our gift card balances; it goes on, spending time and effort looking for ways to overcome these challenges and transform our earnings into useful money in the most efficient way while avoiding being suspended for doing so.

Those of us who decide not to exchange our gift card balance earnings are restricted to buying on Amazon, possibly overspending and losing perception of our work's value, perhaps reducing our motivation to keep working on the platform.

All these things can create a sense of uncertainty that can impact our overall well-being.

Instead of being embedded in a platform, we would prefer the free-

dom to choose how we want to be paid, whether through gift cards or deposits to our bank accounts. The current method doesn't fully satisfy our needs, but a hybrid system with payment options would empower us and likely improve overall platform productivity.

To this day, I still hope this situation will change soon, and we will be free to decide how and where to spend our earnings.



www.data-workers.org