On the Returns to Originality: Micro Evidence From an Online Crowdsourcing Platform*

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Abstract

We collect micro-data on all design contests, submissions and participants from the inception of `crowdSPRING`, a large online crowdsourced ideation platform. Using these data we document that designers ("solvers") who enter later into contests tend to imitate better rated designs that are submitted prior to their entry, thereby generating significant risk to early entrants that their ideas will be appropriated by later entrants without recompense. Such imitation, when unpunished, calls into question the long-run viability of such platforms as marketplaces where original ideas are recognized and rewarded. As a countervailing force, we document however that agents running the contests ("seekers") tend to reward original early designs, and avoid picking as winners those that seem to be plagiarizing and free-riding. Further, in repeated play, solvers seem to be adjusting their behavior in response to this reward/punishment policy. These patterns suggest that market behavior on such platforms may have a self-policing component that disincentivizes excessive imitation and rewards originality.

Keywords: crowdsourcing, imitation, innovation contests, platforms, learning.