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Psychological Contracts in the Gig Economy: A Case Study of Food Delivery Workers in Turkey

Abstract

This research explores the perception and impact of psychological contract violations among gig economy workers at a food delivery company in Turkey. Focusing on the unique working conditions and the multi-party business structure of the gig economy, the study aims to understand how these factors contribute to psychological contract breaches and their effects on workers' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Utilizing a thematic analysis of interviews with gig workers, the study identifies four key themes related to psychological contract breaches: Flexibility and Freedom, Job Security and Stability, Social Support and Sense of Belonging, and Professional Development and Career Opportunities. The findings highlight how the gig economy model significantly influences traditional notions of psychological contract breaches and violations. This study offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by gig workers and proposes recommendations for human resources managers and service providers to foster fairer and more sustainable working conditions in the gig economy.

Keywords: Gig economy, psychological contract, gig worker, thematic analysis

Introduction

The gig economy, which has become increasingly widespread in the last few years and has become a large part of the economy, can be defined as a market where temporary positions are common and employers make short-term contracts with self-employed workers (Erdoğan and Çiğdem, 2018). The gig economy, one of the areas where short-term and temporary work is available, is a sector that has come to life with innovations realized with artificial intelligence (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2021). This sector provides employees with temporal flexibility by giving them control over how they spend every minute of the day and also provides diversity in terms of workspaces, both physical and digital. Gig economy workers often conduct their business through digital business platforms. Employees can work online (e.g. programming or content creation) via cloud technology or carry out their work in a localized manner as location-based work (e.g. delivery services).

It is stated in the literature that being a gig economy worker means having some advantages and disadvantages. Gig-based workers have several advantages in that they have greater flexibility in choosing or rejecting jobs, determining their working hours and participation levels, and controlling aspects of their work (Donovan, Bradley and Shimabukuru, 2016; Durward et al., 2016; Todolí-Signes, 2017). The basic assumption is that employees will be able to decide when to work, where to work, and what job to accept.

Considering the disadvantages, gig-based workers are mostly classified as independent contractors or freelancers, thus they are excluded from the protective institutions and rules of labor law in terms of employment protections and the right to organize and collective bargaining. In the gig economy, the triangular business relationship between the platform, the customer, and the worker deviates from the traditional employee-employer relationship. It seems that it is constantly criticized because it weakens the relationship (Aloisi, 2016; De Stafano, 2016). One of the possible problems caused by the disruption of this mutual relationship is the violations and breaches of the psychological contract between the employer and the employee.

The psychological contract (PC), as defined by Rousseau, Hansen, and Tomprou (2018) is a cognitive framework of mutual inducements between an employee and an employer. Investigating the dynamics of psychological contract breaches and violations is crucial, particularly in the context of gig work where traditional employee-organization relationships are redefined through app-based interactions. A PC breach can lead to decreased trust in the organization, reduced employee contributions, and negative work attitudes (Rousseau et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2007). Morrison and Robinson (1997) further point out that such breaches can evoke strong emotional responses and potentially cause irreparable harm to the employment relationship. Given these implications, exploring how gig workers experience and respond to PC breaches offers valuable insights into the employment dynamics within non-traditional work settings.

Understanding these contract breaches and violations is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, the gig economy is often seen as the future of work, with many young people opting to participate in it. Violations and breaches contribute to potential labor loss in this innovative sector. Secondly, the conventional methods of maintaining a PC, essential for an employee's continued engagement with an organization, may become inapplicable or completely disrupted within gig economy work practices. Kraak and Linde (2019) suggest the importance of considering contextual factors in understanding how PCs develop and evolve, particularly

in gig work environments. Finally, in the gig economy, the complexity of psychological contract breaches is heightened due to the presence of more than the traditional two parties (employer and employee), often extending to three or even four parties involved. This multiplicity complicates the alignment of expectations and obligations, leading to an increased potential for PC breaches and violations. The influence of such factors remains underexplored (Kraak, Altman and Laguecir, 2018; Kraak, Lakshman and Griep, 2020), indicating a need for qualitative research to uncover how external and organizational contexts impact PC dynamics.

Despite the growing body of literature on the gig economy and its implications for workers, several key questions remain unanswered. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following research questions: How do food delivery couriers in Turkey perceive psychological contract violations and breaches within the gig economy framework? What are the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions of these workers to perceived breaches of the psychological contract? How do the unique working conditions of the gig economy, involving multiple parties such as the platform, customers, and sometimes third-party logistics companies, influence these perceptions and reactions?

Additionally, this research aims to explore the broader implications of psychological contract violations and breaches in the gig economy. Specifically, it will investigate the impact of these violations and breaches on workers' job satisfaction, engagement, and overall well-being. By examining these questions, this study will provide valuable insights into the dynamics of psychological contracts in non-traditional work settings and offer recommendations for creating more fair and sustainable working conditions in the gig economy. In this context, the process of breaches and violations will be analyzed through the experiences of gig economy workers. The goal is to understand the impact of the gig economy's unique working conditions on the psychological contract and to determine the consequences of this impact on employees' work-related attitudes and behaviors.

Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 24 food delivery couriers working for a gig economy platform revealed four main themes related to psychological contract breaches: Flexibility and Freedom, Job Security and Stability, Social Support and Sense of Belonging, and Professional Development and Career Opportunities. These findings suggest that the gig economy's work model significantly impacts traditional psychological contract breaches and violations. The results of this study provide an in-depth understanding of the psychological contract violations faced by workers in the gig economy. Based on these findings, a set of practices will be presented for human resources managers and gig economy service providers on how to offer more fair and sustainable working conditions in the gig economy.

Literature Review

Gig economy

The gig economy, also known as the platform or app economy, sharing economy, or on-demand workforce has become increasingly widespread in recent years, becoming a significant part of the economy. Historically, people occasionally took on short-term jobs or additional jobs to earn extra income. However, in the 2000s, driven by the economic crisis and the rapid pace of digital transformation, this trend significantly increased, challenging traditional employment systems (Caro, O'Higgins and Berg, 2021).

The gig economy is a work organization model where individuals find and complete short-term jobs through a platform or intermediary provided by a company, typically involving three parties (Aloisi, 2016; Chen, 2020; De Stefano, 2016b; De Stefano, 2018; Donovan et al., 2016; Erdut, 2021; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2019; Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016; Todolí-Signes, 2017). Individuals access these jobs via an application or website using smartphones, tablets, or computers (Dunn, 2018; Webster, 2016, Woodcock and Graham, 2020) earning a fee for each job completed. The process concludes with the platform taking a portion of the earnings as a "commission fee" (Donovan et al., 2016).

Gig economy platforms have low entry barriers, which facilitate rapid growth and increase the labor supply both locally and globally (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). Webster identifies at least three prerequisites for participating in gig economy platforms: the ownership of a digital device (such as a computer, tablet, or smartphone) or a vehicle (like a car, motorcycle, or bicycle); access to the internet (whether at home, in cafes, or at universities); and the possession of skills required by the nature of the jobs offered on the platform, which may include various computer skills, a driving license for cars or motorcycles, or the ability to cycle (Webster, 2016). Therefore, access to the internet and owning a smartphone is crucial for participation in gig economy platforms.

The review of literature on the gig economy, one area of disagreement is the nature of the working relationship established between the parties involved. It is known that there are various definitions for the typically three-sided work relationship that emerges in the gig economy. For instance, Harris and Krueger (2015) describe it as "independent workers, clients, and intermediaries," Lehdonvirta et al. (2019) refer to it as a "triadic provider-platform-client" relationship, the European Commission (2016) classifies it as "service providers, users, and intermediaries," and the European Parliament (2017) differently from the European Commission, evaluates it as "platform worker, online platform, and client."

The gig economy represents a modern reshaping of an old process that impacts working life, based on a three-party business model enhanced by technology (Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016; Schmidt, 2017; Stewart and Stanford, 2017). Within the gig economy, a tripartite work relationship is established between the platform, the worker, and an individual or business, governed by a pre-agreed service contract facilitating the transactions between these parties (De Stefano, 2016a; Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016; Todolí-Signes, 2017). This three-party work relationship in the gig economy denotes an employment model facilitated by smartphone apps or online platforms. This model connects platforms, workers performing tasks, and the end recipients of these services, who can be individuals or businesses (De Stefano, 2016a; De Stefano, 2016b; Donovan et al., 2016; Muntaner, 2018; Stewart and Stanford, 2017). Although the gig economy typically revolves around a three-party relationship, some sectors exhibit a four-party relationship, particularly in food delivery services. This four-party relationship usually involves the platform (e.g., Deliveroo, Foodora), the restaurant, the customer, and the courier, forming a business relationship among them (Heiland, 2021).

The emergence of a new form of the tripartite work relationship in the gig economy does not produce equal or similar outcomes for all parties involved. This relationship grants platforms surveillance and control power (Gandini, 2019), capital accumulation (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2019), and the ability to evade labor law regulations (Lobel, 2017; Todolí-Signes, 2017). For workers, it exacerbates situations of lacking social and economic protections, uncertainty, and insecurity, making these conditions more entrenched and permanent (Aloisi, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Lobel, 2017). End users (individuals or businesses), on the other hand,

benefit from the accumulation achieved through labor in national or international labor markets where platforms operate, gaining access to low transaction costs and high bargaining power, representing the third party that benefits from these opportunities (Aloisi, 2016; Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016; Todoli-Signes, 2017; Graham and Amir Anwar, 2018).

Platforms operating within the gig economy describe themselves not as employers but as an "intermediary structure" that connects supply with demand (De Stefano, 2016a; Erdut, 2021; Lobel, 2017). The working relationship between gig economy firms and workers, structured as an "intermediary structure-independent contractor," leads to the emergence of numerous issues. One of these issues is the disruption of the psychological contract, which is an important element of the known employee-employer relationship.

Psychological Contract

Psychological contract was first conceptualized by Argyris (1960) as mutual expectations between employee and employer, Rousseau (1989) refers to an individual's belief about the terms and conditions of reciprocal exchange agreements. Accordingly, the concept exemplifies the relationship between employee and employer, and it encompasses the beliefs both parties hold about it (Hui, Lee and Rousseau, 2004).

Employees perceive the psychological contract as a representation of workplace expectations between employers and employees. A psychological contract, according to Freese (2007), is defined as "employees' beliefs regarding mutual expectations and obligations within the context of their relationship with an organization, which determine their behavior." In addition to being difficult to express, these expectations between employer and employee are also those that cannot be stated in contracts or job publications, yet still affect employee and employer behavior (Anderson and Schalk, 1998).

Psychological contracts, rooted in the belief of mutual obligations and commitments between employers and employees (Rousseau, 1995), are shaped by individual perceptions and choices, affecting engagement levels. These contracts, often based on taken-for-granted elements and explicit promises (MacNeil, 1985), are fundamental to the employment relationship, with both parties relying on exchanged promises and considerations (Rousseau, 1989). Makin and Cooper (1999) highlight that these contracts encompass expectations of fair compensation, advancement, and job security from employers, and hard work, loyalty, and commitment from employees. Furthermore, psychological contracts are crucial for understanding work attitudes and employee performance (Robinson, Kraatz and Rousseau, 1994; Shore and Tetrick, 1994).

The phenomena of PC breach—where obligations are perceived as unmet—and PC violation—emotional responses to such breaches—are integral to understanding the impact on employee cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Kraak et al., 2020; Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). While existing research has delved into the formation and breaches of PCs (Bankins, 2015; Conway and Briner, 2005; Tomprou, Rousseau and Hansen 2015), there's a noted gap in how the social context influences the evolution of PC breaches or violations and subsequent employee reactions. Recognizing this, there's a growing interest in exploring the role of contextual factors on PCs (Kraak and Linde, 2019; Kraak et al., 2020), indicating a need for further investigation into how external and organizational environments shape the dynamics of psychological contracts.

The Psychological Contract in the Gig Economy

The interaction between the gig economy and the psychological contract (PC) introduces a complex dynamic that reshapes traditional employment relationships. While the gig economy offers flexibility and autonomy to workers, it also challenges the conventional understanding of employment contracts by introducing a multi-party relationship and algorithmic management.

The psychological contract in the gig economy deviates from traditional models due to the nature of platform-mediated work. Unlike traditional employment, where the contract is typically between an employer and an employee, gig workers often interact with multiple entities including the platform, customers, and sometimes third-party businesses. This complexity alters the traditional psychological contract, making it more challenging to maintain and fulfill mutual expectations (Bankins and Formosa, 2020; Bajwa et al., 2018).

In the context of the gig economy, algorithms play a crucial role in the operation of gig economy organizations, utilizing technology to facilitate a workforce that can work either full-time or part-time digitally (Duggan et al., 2020). These algorithms can dictate work assignments, evaluate performance, and determine earnings, which significantly impacts the psychological contract (Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020). The interaction between gig workers and AI-enabled interfaces, and the impact of these interactions on the psychological contract (PC) between workers and organizations, presents an area ripe for further investigation (Broadbent, 2017). The reliance on algorithmic management can lead to perceptions of unfairness and lack of transparency, which are critical factors in psychological contract breaches and violations (Cheng and Foley, 2019).

The gig economy introduces a unique dimension to employee-organization communication, now predominantly mediated by technology and algorithmic practices, which impacts the traditional support system roles and places a quasi-worker status on gig workers (Bankins and Formosa, 2020). This shift complicates the transparency in decision-making processes within app-based organizations, posing challenges for gig workers who navigate this highly competitive environment (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). In our study, the complexity of the situation is further compounded by the involvement of not only artificial intelligence but also third and even fourth parties in food transportation.

For these reasons understanding psychological contract breaches and violations within the gig economy is essential for addressing the challenges faced by gig workers. Breaches occur when workers perceive that the platform or intermediaries have failed to fulfill promised obligations, leading to feelings of betrayal and disengagement (Zhao et al., 2007). In the gig economy, breaches can be more frequent due to the impersonal and automated nature of platform management (Möhlmann and Zalmanson, 2017).

The Turkish gig economy also presents unique challenges and opportunities that shape the psychological contract differently compared to other regions. Turkey's socio-economic context, characterized by high unemployment rates and a large informal economy, drives many individuals to participate in gig work (Tolba, 2021; Çelik and Lüküslü, 2018). This participation is often out of necessity rather than choice, which influences the formation and fulfillment of the psychological contract.

Moreover, the regulatory environment in Turkey lacks comprehensive labor protections for gig workers, exacerbating issues related to job security and workers' rights (Uysal and Boyraz, 2024; Carboni, 2015). The absence of clear legal frameworks to protect gig workers' interests leads to increased vulnerability to psychological contract breaches, as these workers often face unpredictable work conditions and income instability.

Methodology and Analysis

This study was designed as a case study to understand the perception and effects of psychological contract violations and breaches of gig economy workers. By focusing on gig economy workers at a food distribution company in Turkey, the research aims to fill the gap in the existing literature in this field. In this study, a qualitative case study approach was adopted to explore the end states of psychological contracts among gig workers at a prominent app-based food delivery company in Turkey. Twenty-four male couriers, aged 19 to 62, with durations of employment ranging from 1 to 3.5 years, including 13 migrants seeking better opportunities, were selected. Female employees for the interview were not found; hence, all participants were men. The interviews were conducted from September to December 2023. These motor couriers represent the forefront of the app-based food delivery workforce in the country.

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Through snowball sampling, the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of their affiliations were ensured. Before conducting semi-structured interviews, consent for audio recordings was obtained, with participants initially briefed on the study's focus and the notions of PC, its breaches, and violations. The sample size of 24 participants was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences and perceptions within this specific workforce. This aligns with Creswell's (2014) recommendation for in-depth qualitative studies to reach data saturation. Furthermore, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) argue that data saturation often occurs within the first twelve interviews, although they recommend more interviews to capture a full range of themes in a diverse sample. Similarly, Mason (2010) emphasizes that qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to achieve saturation but small enough to manage in-depth, nuanced analysis. In this study, 24 participants provided a robust dataset that ensured a detailed exploration of psychological contract violations and breaches among gig workers.

The interviews targeted their experiences with app-based work, including promised versus experienced autonomy, the impact of technology, their views on the organization's pricing and rating systems, and overall perceptions of gig work fairness. Employing the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), couriers were encouraged to share specific impactful incidents, with emotional responses indicative of PC violations being observed. This technique was selected for its effectiveness in eliciting detailed and significant accounts of specific events that influence psychological contracts. Semistructured questions were asked aimed at eliciting responses on what they expect from their company as a gig worker and what kind of psychological contract breaches and violations have occurred through the years. For instance:

1. What motivated your decision to join this company for work?
2. Before your arrival, what were your expectations of being a gig economy worker?
3. In what aspects and how did the company fall short of meeting your expectations?
4. How did these breaches shape your emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions?

5. How do these unmet expectations influence your willingness to remain at this company and in the gig economy in general?

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for each participant. Transcribed interviews (translated from Turkish to English) were analyzed through thematic analysis, as outlined by Creswell (2014). This method involves a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility and capacity to provide a rich, detailed, and complex account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It allows researchers to identify and interpret key themes that emerge from the data, making it particularly suitable for exploring the nuanced experiences and perceptions of gig economy workers regarding psychological contract violations and breaches. The process of thematic analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. By following these steps, we ensured a rigorous and systematic analysis that enhances the reliability and validity of our findings. This method not only allowed us to capture the diversity of experiences among participants but also facilitated the identification of common patterns and unique insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of psychological contracts in the gig economy. By using Creswell's approach, we ensured a rigorous and systematic analysis, which enhances the validity and reliability of the findings. Ultimately, this process resulted in the identification of four main themes that encapsulate the experiences and perceptions of the gig economy workers.

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Findings

The key findings from the analysis will be presented as (a) flexibility and freedom, (b) job security and stability, (c) social support and sense of belonging, and (d) professional development and career opportunities.

Flexibility and Freedom

While couriers expected the flexible working hours offered by the gig economy to adapt to their personal lives and facilitate a work-private life balance, they stated that this was not the case in practice. They thought they had the freedom to choose their work area and expected to work in regions of their choosing or where they could earn more, but they found that the application did not direct them according to their preferences. Although they started working as couriers thinking that they would be able to decide when and how much to work, thus having the opportunity to earn a higher income, they realized that this was not feasible. Couriers initially anticipated that the gig economy's promise of flexibility would allow them to balance work and personal life effectively. However, many found this flexibility to be illusory.

Working Hours and Location Selection

Due to intense competition and regional restrictions determined by the platform, couriers' freedom in choosing a location and working hours seems to be limited in practice. None of the research participants found the flexibility they expected from the company, as Participant 2 recollects,

"It is said that I can work whenever I want, but in reality, I have to work at peak hours and in areas to earn money, which harms my private life. Although it seems like I have the freedom to choose where I work, there are very few jobs in some areas. So, I really can't work where I want."

Additionally, the expectation of autonomy in choosing work locations was also unmet. Participant 19 noted:

"The app suggests that I can work wherever I want, but in reality, I am directed to high-demand areas. If I try to work in my preferred location, I get fewer orders, and my income drops significantly. It feels like I'm trapped in their system."

Workload Control

The need to work constantly to earn a high income has overshadowed the advantages of flexibility and left couriers under constant work pressure. Participant 17 observed that despite maintaining a satisfactory performance rating, there was a noticeable decrease in both his earnings and the number of trips assigned to him. He expressed his expectation that the company, being a prominent organization, would address and resolve this discrepancy promptly.

"It is said that I can control my workload, but in reality, I have to constantly work to earn more. This is not freedom, it is constant pressure. I have no control over how work is allocated; sometimes I don't get enough work for days."

Autonomy

The freedom to make decisions is less than expected under the platform's strict rules and algorithmic management, and couriers feel obliged to comply with the conditions set by the platform. Participant 5 stated:

"I was told that I could make my own decisions, but I have to act according to the rules of the platform and customer demands. The freedom we are given is only on paper. In reality, everything about how and when we work is determined by the platform's algorithm."

Participant 8 remarked:

"Flexibility is a myth. I have to be available during peak hours, which are the same hours I need to spend with my family. It feels like I am always on call, and this constant availability ruins the work-life balance I was hoping to achieve."

Job Security and Stability

In this stage, the gig worker realized that their decision to join the online food delivery industry didn't yield the expected benefits. They found that in terms of earnings, support, and technology, the experience didn't significantly surpass their prior employment experiences in Turkey.

Although gig economy workers think that flexible working hours will provide a steady source of income in the long term and that this flexibility will allow them to better balance their work with other life goals or responsibilities, this is not the reality. As technology increasingly integrates into our lives, gig economy workers expected that the job opportunities offered by digital platforms would increase and thus job security would be ensured; Since the gig economy is a demand-oriented business model, employees thought that they could respond quickly to the market needs and thus their jobs would be secure, but they realized that this was not the case in actual business practices. Although the flexible structure of the gig economy suggests that individuals can find various jobs and thus maintain their job security even during economic or sectoral crises, the opposite occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Long-Term Business Guarantees

Couriers thought that they could find permanent employment through the platform and thus have long-term job security, but the frequency of finding a job was less than expected due to fluctuations in the market or algorithm changes of the platform, causing the couriers' long-term job security expectations to not be met. Participant 22 stated that:

"It's hard to make plans without a long-term job guarantee. There's constant uncertainty in this job. I don't know if I'll still have a job tomorrow."

The lack of long-term job guarantees created a sense of insecurity among couriers. Participant 3 shared:

"Every day, I worry about whether I'll still have a job tomorrow. The platform can change its policies or algorithms at any time, and there's nothing I can do about it. This constant uncertainty is stressful and demotivating."

Income Stability

Despite flexible working hours, lower-than-expected and fluctuating incomes did not meet couriers' financial security expectations. Couriers hoped to earn a regular and predictable income, thus providing financial stability, but the variability of the number of orders according to days and hours and the fluctuation of payments led to their lack of stability of income. Participant 9 shares in the narrative below how transitioning to a food delivery company did not result in substantial gains.

"One week I make good money, the next week I make almost nothing. The fact that my income fluctuates so much makes it difficult to manage my budget. I can't make long-term financial plans because of the instability of my income. I'm always wondering 'What will happen?' I'm worried."

Gig workers entered the field with the belief that the increasing reliance on digital platforms would ensure job security. However, fluctuations in demand and platform algorithms led to inconsistent work availability. Participant 10 highlighted this issue:

"One week, I'm flooded with orders, and the next, it's like I don't exist. The instability makes it hard to rely on this job as a steady source of income. I can't plan for the future with this kind of uncertainty."

Assurance of Contracted Works

Couriers expected that the contracts would provide certain job and income security and fair working conditions, but the uncertainty of the contracts, inadequate protection, and unfair conditions caused the couriers' expectations in this area to not be met. The service provider, as the employer, does not accept to be a clear party, which leads to the disruption of the existing psychological contract parties. The service provider refuses to provide a permanent contract for the couriers for all the flexibility promised. Participant 16 was also tired of the constant feeling of fearing losing his job and observed that it has consequences for workers as dissatisfaction.

"There are huge differences between what is written in our contract and what we are told. Transparency is lacking. I don't think our contract terms are fair. I feel like they're more in the interests of the platform."

Protection Against Crisis Situations

Couriers expected the platform to support and protect them in unexpected situations such as economic crises or health crises. However, they found that the platforms did not provide sufficient support and protection, or decreased job opportunities in times of crisis, leaving couriers vulnerable. Participant 14 explained the challenges during the COVID-19 period, stating,

"I had difficulty finding a job during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the platform did not support us at all. I felt unprotected during the crisis. When there is an economic crisis, we, as gig workers, are the first to be affected and we are the least protected. The increase in food order rates during the COVID-19 period made our working conditions deteriorate greatly. We were threatened with dismissal if we objected to this situation because the company was aware of the high demand for jobs."

Social Support and Sense of Belonging

Although it might seem at odds with the gig economy's nature, food delivery couriers and other gig workers expect not only to meet their personal needs but also to find favorable working conditions within this sector. Since those working in the gig economy have similar challenges and experiences, these common experiences have created a basis for developing a sense of belonging with their colleagues and solidarity against the challenges faced. Due to the uncertain nature of the gig economy, employees have sought economic and emotional security, and social support has been seen as an important resource in coping with this uncertainty. Gig economy workers considered the relationships they formed with their colleagues to have the potential to create professional development opportunities and business networks. These expectations indicate that food delivery couriers do not only seek financial gain, but also care about the needs for social support, professional development, and community belonging. Although the gig economy was not designed to directly meet such social needs, employees felt the need to meet these needs, but their expectations were not met.

Relations with Colleagues

Couriers hoped to establish a strong solidarity and support network with other gig economy workers and thought that they could overcome difficulties together by sharing common experiences with other individuals in the sector. However, in the gig economy where competition is intense, contrary to the expected solidarity among employees, there is a feeling of isolation and loneliness, and interaction with colleagues remains limited or competitive. Participant 11 told us that he was motivated by human interaction and he described his dissatisfaction with the fact that the people he takes to order sometimes do not even open the door and that even simple daily conversations do not take place.

"I meet a lot of people throughout the day, but there's no one I form a meaningful connection with. We're all working on our own. We compete with other couriers, so I don't feel a lot of support or solidarity."

Despite working in a high-interaction environment, couriers often felt isolated due to the competitive nature of the gig economy. Participant 6 expressed:

"I thought I would meet new people and form bonds with fellow couriers, but instead, I feel isolated. Everyone is competing for the same jobs, and there's little sense of camaraderie. It's a lonely job despite being around people all day."

Organizational Belonging

As part of the platform, couriers hoped to experience a certain organizational identity and sense of belonging and expected this sense of belonging to make them more committed to their jobs and increase their motivation. However, due to the nature of the gig economy,

couriers have found themselves treated as mere temporary staff performing tasks, rather than as facets of the platform, and have had difficulty developing a sense of organizational commitment. People like Participant 5, who has been working as a courier for this company for the last two years, state that they do not feel any organizational commitment, even though they have been working for this company for a long time.

"I don't feel connected to the company because I'm just working through an app. It's like I'm just a number! I'm just seen as an intermediary service."

Participant 12 mentioned:

"I don't feel like I'm part of any organization. I'm just a cog in the machine, performing tasks dictated by an app. There's no sense of belonging or community. It's like I'm invisible."

Professional Development and Career Opportunities

Couriers have found that there is little or no opportunity for career advancement in gig jobs such as food delivery. Their positions often remain static, with high performance rarely leading to advancement. The absence of support mechanisms such as performance appraisals and career counseling has made it challenging for couriers to understand how to enhance their skills and advance their careers.

Career Path Opportunities

Couriers hoped the gig economy would offer them various skills that contribute to their professional development, leading to better job opportunities over time. Despite expectations of gaining diverse experiences from working with different customers and restaurants, couriers found the training or development programs provided to be insufficient, lacking the necessary support and resources for professional skill development. The gig economy's nature, devoid of a clear career path or advancement opportunities, has led to couriers' frustration in achieving long-term professional goals. A participant expressed feeling marginalized, with no consideration for his career growth:

"I don't see a long-term career path in this job. All I can do is deliver more orders (laughing sarcastically). There is no clear path to progress in the gig economy. No matter how hard I work, my position remains unchanged."

Couriers hoped that gig work would offer opportunities for skill development and career advancement. However, many found that their roles remained static, with limited prospects for growth. Participant 7 commented:

"I thought working with different customers and restaurants would help me develop new skills and open up career opportunities. But there's no training or development programs. I'm doing the same thing day in and day out with no way to progress."

Feedback and Evaluation

In the gig economy, especially for food couriers, performance evaluations are mostly through customer ratings and comments. The subjective nature of these evaluations means couriers' performances are not measured fairly, with factors beyond their control affecting their scores.

This multifaceted evaluation process, involving the platform, restaurants, and customers, complicates feedback and adds pressure on couriers. After encountering several frustrating comments in the app's rating section, couriers begin to doubt the reliability of the rating process. Participant 21 shared his experience:

"Feedback usually comes only in the form of negative comments, reducing my motivation. There's no support like career counseling available."

The feedback system, primarily based on customer ratings, was also a source of frustration. Participant 15 noted:

"The feedback I get is mostly negative, and it's often about things beyond my control, like food quality or delivery delays due to traffic. There's no constructive feedback or career counseling to help me improve. It feels unfair and demotivating."

Discussion

Our study's findings reveal nuanced insights into PC breaches and violations among gig economy workers. The theme of Flexibility and Freedom highlights a core attribute of gig work that attracts individuals seeking autonomy in their work schedules and conditions. This autonomy, however, comes at the cost of job security and consistent income, revealing the double-edged nature of such flexibility. Our findings resonate with the concept of "precarious freedom" described by Kalleberg (2009), where workers are granted the freedom to work anytime and anywhere but must also navigate the instability and unpredictability that come with such freedom. This precariousness challenges the traditional understanding of employment stability and necessitates a reevaluation of what workers value in their psychological contract with employers. The autonomy to select working hours and locations is a hallmark of gig employment, positioned as offering unparalleled flexibility compared to traditional jobs (De Stefano, 2016b). However, our findings suggest that this flexibility can lead to psychological contract violations when it undermines work-life balance, echoing the concerns raised by Wood et al. (2019), who found that the unpredictability associated with such flexibility could result in increased stress and job insecurity. This contradiction challenges the initial appeal of gig work, suggesting that the psychological contract needs to better align expectations with the reality of gig work's flexibility.

Participants desire for workload control reflects a need for autonomy in managing their job intensity, a feature that gig work purportedly offers (Prassl, 2018). However, the reality of fluctuating demands and platform-driven workload allocation often leads to violations of this aspect of the psychological contract. This finding supports the argument by Kalleberg (2011) that while gig work offers autonomy in theory, the practical execution often leaves workers feeling powerless over their work conditions, leading to dissatisfaction and perceptions of unfair treatment.

The expectation of autonomy in gig work is closely tied to the notion of being an independent contractor. Yet, this study's findings reveal a gap between the expectation of autonomy and the experience of control by platform algorithms and customer feedback systems, which resonates with the observations made by Rosenblat (2018) on the paradox of autonomy in gig work. This discrepancy highlights a significant psychological contract violation, where the promised independence is undercut by the reality of platform-mediated control.

Job Security and Stability emerged as a significant concern among participants, underscoring the inherent tension between the gig economy's flexible nature and the desire for stable employment. This tension reflects a broader debate on the gig economy's impact on traditional employment structures, where the shift towards more flexible work arrangements often results in reduced job security (De Stefano, 2016a). Our research suggests that the psychological contract in gig work may need to incorporate more explicit negotiations around stability and security to address these concerns.

The longing for long-term business guarantees reflects a deep-seated need for job security among gig workers, challenging the precarious nature of gig employment as highlighted by Kalleberg (2009). The absence of such guarantees constitutes a psychological contract violation, exacerbating feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among workers. This aligns with findings from De Stefano (2016a), who argues that the gig economy's structural characteristics inherently limit the potential for job security and stability, thus necessitating a reevaluation of employment policies to address these discrepancies.

Income stability is a critical aspect of job security for gig workers, with fluctuations in earnings leading to psychological contract breaches (Gandini, 2019). Our findings underscore the precariousness of relying on gig work as a primary source of income, where earnings unpredictability can lead to financial stress and uncertainty. This instability directly contravenes the expectations outlined in the psychological contract, highlighting the need for mechanisms that ensure a more stable income for gig workers, such as minimum earnings guarantees or compensation for waiting times.

The desire for protection against crises, such as sudden job loss or market downturns, is a manifestation of gig workers' vulnerability to external shocks. This expectation is often unmet in the gig economy, leading to psychological contract violations (Wood et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated the precariousness of gig work, with many workers facing abrupt income losses without adequate safety nets (Chen et al., 2020). This scenario underscores the necessity for policies that offer protection and support to gig workers in times of crisis, ensuring they are not disproportionately affected by unforeseen events.

The theme of Social Support and Sense of Belonging underscores the importance of community and support systems for gig workers, who often operate in isolation. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of food delivery couriers, who, despite the individualistic nature of their work, express a desire for a sense of belonging and support from their peers and the platform. This reflects a shift in the psychological contract, where emotional and social support becomes as critical as financial compensation (Rousseau, 1995). Platforms and policymakers must consider ways to foster community among gig workers to enhance their job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Particularly about colleagues, highlights the isolation often experienced in gig work (Ashford et al., 2018). Despite the individualistic nature of their tasks, participants expressed a need for connection and support from their peers, indicating that the psychological contract encompasses not only economic but also social expectations. This finding suggests that gig platforms and policymakers should consider ways to foster community and support networks among gig workers, potentially mitigating some of the negative effects of gig work's isolating tendencies.

Our findings on Professional Development and Career Opportunities reveal a gap in the gig economy's ability to provide meaningful career progression, which is traditionally a key component of the psychological contract between employers and employees. This gap highlights a critical area for improvement for gig economy platforms, which could benefit from offering training and development opportunities to their workers. Such initiatives could help mitigate feelings of stagnation and enhance workers' perceptions of value and investment in their roles, aligning with the desires for growth and development identified in our study.

The expectation for professional development and career opportunities reflects gig workers' aspirations beyond immediate financial gains, seeking pathways for growth and advancement. The lack of such opportunities in gig work represents a psychological contract violation (Gandini, 2019). This highlights a gap in gig economy platforms' offerings, suggesting a need for initiatives that support workers' professional growth, such as training programs or pathways to higher-paying tasks or roles.

Besides all these, the gig economy offers a business structure that relies on the interaction of multiple parties: employees, platforms (intermediaries), customers, and sometimes government or regulatory bodies as a fourth party. This multilateral structure has unique challenges and complexities that contribute to psychological contract violations. As noted by Ravenelle (2019), this multi-layered structure in the gig economy blurs traditional definitions of the employer-employee relationship, thus complicating the content of the psychological contract and expectations.

This multi-party structure means that each party has different expectations and goals. For example, platforms seek maximum flexibility and cost-effectiveness, while employees expect greater job security and income stability. Customers' demands also shape platforms' policies, which can have an indirect impact on employees' workload and working conditions. Finally, government and regulatory bodies may put pressure on labor standards and workers' rights, which could affect the platforms' business model and thus psychological contracts. This multilateral interaction is also discussed by Veen, Barratt, and Goods (2020), where it is stated that the structure of the gig economy presents several governance and control challenges not seen in traditional business models.

The gig economy's complex network underscores the importance of addressing psychological contract violations through enhanced communication and clear expectations between workers and platforms. This necessitates a collaborative effort from platforms, policymakers, and stakeholders to foster a more comprehensive framework beyond traditional employment relationships, aiming to mitigate worker challenges and establish fair, sustainable working conditions.

Theoretical Implications

The gig economy, heralded as one of the most appealing business models today, offers the allure of flexible working hours and autonomy in job selection. Yet, this research reveals that for certain roles within the gig economy, such as food delivery couriers, these anticipated benefits fail to materialize. In developing countries like Turkey, the supposed flexibility and freedom of the gig economy are eclipsed by labor exploitation, driven by low wages, precarious work conditions, and a lack of social protection. This discrepancy between the expectations set by the gig economy and the reality faced by workers leads to violations of the psychological contract.

The findings of this study necessitate a broader conceptualization of the psychological contract that incorporates the flexibility, autonomy, and transient nature of gig work arrangements. Traditional models of the psychological contract, which emphasize mutual expectations of loyalty and job security (Rousseau, 1989), may not fully capture the realities of gig work. Instead, an expanded model that considers these unique dimensions offers a more accurate framework for understanding employment relationships in the gig economy. This aligns with the perspectives of scholars like Kalleberg and Dunn (2016), who argue that the gig economy represents a significant departure from traditional employment models, requiring new theoretical approaches to adequately address its complexities.

Moreover, the research highlights the need to understand the multi-party nature of gig work. Unlike traditional employment relationships, gig workers interact with multiple parties, including platforms, customers, and sometimes third-party service providers. This complexity challenges existing theories of employment relationships and underscores the importance of developing new theoretical frameworks that can account for these interactions (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for extending the extant literature on the gig economy and labor relations.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are significant for gig economy platforms, policymakers, and human resource professionals. In our study, no participant had worked in the profession for more than 3.5 years, indicating the transient nature of gig economy jobs and the rarity of long-term career paths within this sector. Furthermore, all participants were male, underscoring the profession's exclusivity to men and suggesting a need for further analysis of gender distribution and job selection within the gig economy. Additionally, the fact that half of the participants are immigrants underscores the necessity for further research on discrimination and immigration within the gig economy, as well as on minorities who are vulnerable to labor exploitation.

Traditional employer-employee relations are expanded to include multiple parties, complicating standard labor protections and rights for gig-based workers (Stanford, 2017). Gig workers often miss out on standard employment rights such as minimum wage and benefits associated with traditional employment (Fabo, Karanovic and Dukova, 2017). Additionally, these workers lack collective bargaining rights, workplace health and safety guarantees, and access to taxation and insurance benefits (Stanford, 2017). The nature of jobs conducted through platforms often does not align with the definition of decent work (Erdoğan and Çiğdem, 2018). The desire for flexibility risks leaving a generation without short-, medium-, or long-term employment security, facing dilemmas over their status as freelancers or independent contractors (Fabo et al., 2017).

Human resource professionals play a crucial role in ensuring job satisfaction and motivation among workers, particularly freelancers, in the gig economy. The role of HR in enhancing performance quality, providing social support, and motivating freelancers in the gig economy raises questions about its long-term effectiveness (Jabagi et al., 2019). Also, in their study on gig workers, Sivarajan, Varma, and Reshmi (2021) stated that it would be prudent for organizations employing gig workers to address their perceptions of breaches and violations at an early stage through an inclusive communication platform. Therefore, the HR department and its employees have important duties in taking steps towards the proposed corrections.

Policymakers should consider regulations that protect gig workers' rights while preserving the benefits of gig work. This may include portable benefits, minimum wage guarantees, or mechanisms for collective representation (Stewart and Stanford, 2017). Proposals to improve the irregular structure of gig-based work include recognizing gig workers under existing labor laws, clarifying employment uncertainties, creating a new category of workers, establishing universal rights, and reconceptualizing the notion of employer (Aloisi, 2016).

Limitations

This study's findings are subject to several limitations. Firstly, the interviews were conducted exclusively with male couriers, which may result in gender bias and limit the generalizability of the findings to female gig workers. Gender-specific experiences and perceptions of psychological contract violations may differ significantly, and future research should aim to include a more diverse sample to provide a comprehensive understanding. Also the study's focus on couriers working for a single company in Turkey limits the generalizability of our findings. Future research should explore PC breaches and violations across a broader range of gig economy platforms and in different cultural contexts to deepen our understanding of these phenomena. Additionally, the translation of interview transcripts from Turkish to English introduces the potential for misinterpretation or loss of nuanced meaning, as certain expressions and cultural contexts may not fully translate. This limitation is supported by Temple and Young (2004), who highlight the challenges of cross-language qualitative research and the importance of maintaining cultural nuances during translation. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, considering these translation-related constraints.

Conclusion

This study delved into the experiences of psychological contract breaches and violations among gig economy workers, specifically focusing on couriers working for a leading food delivery service in Turkey. Through thematic analysis of interviews with 24 couriers, the research unveiled how the unique operational dynamics of the gig economy, characterized by its flexibility, autonomy, and the involvement of multiple parties in the employment relationship, shape workers' perceptions of PC breaches. The investigation identified four central themes that are pivotal in understanding the nature of these violations: Flexibility and Freedom, Job Security and Stability, Social Support and Sense of Belonging, and Professional Development and Career Opportunities. These findings not only shed light on the specific challenges faced by gig workers but also highlighted the broader implications of gig work on traditional employment structures and psychological contracts.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of literature on the gig economy and its impact on labor relations and worker well-being. By articulating the nuanced ways in which gig economy workers experience and perceive PC breaches, the research offers critical insights into the complexities of modern work arrangements. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for gig economy platforms, policymakers, and human resources professionals to reconsider and adapt their strategies to ensure fairer and more sustainable working conditions. As the gig economy continues to expand globally, understanding and addressing the challenges highlighted by this research will be crucial in fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for all workers.

Our study's findings reveal nuanced insights into PC breaches and violations among gig economy workers in Turkey. However, these findings also resonate with global patterns

observed in the gig economy. For example, research in the United States and Europe has similarly highlighted the precarious nature of gig work, where promised flexibility often leads to unstable income and job insecurity (Kaine and Josserand, 2019; Heeks, 2022). This suggests that the issues identified in the Turkish context may be indicative of broader structural challenges inherent in gig work. Future research should explore these dynamics in different cultural and economic settings to better understand the universal and contextual factors influencing psychological contract breaches in the gig economy.

Additionally, the comparison of gig economy workers' experiences across various sectors can provide further insights. While this study focused on food delivery workers, gig workers in other sectors, such as ride-sharing or freelance digital work, may face different challenges and expectations. For instance, digital freelancers might experience greater autonomy but face issues with client non-payment and project continuity (Huws, Spencer and Syrdal, 2018). Investigating these sector-specific differences can help tailor policies and platform practices to better meet the diverse needs of gig workers. Future research should also consider longitudinal studies to track changes in workers' perceptions and experiences over time, offering a more dynamic understanding of psychological contract evolution in the gig economy.

Table 1: Research Participant Demographics.

No.	Age	Years driven for Organization	Own motorcycle	Gender
1	19	1	No	Male
2	27	2	No	Male
3	38	3	No	Male
4	22	1	No	Male
5	45	2	No	Male
6	24	2	No	Male
7	23	1	Yes	Male
8	22	2.5	No	Male
9	31	3.3	No	Male
10	20	1.2	No	Male
11	22	1.4	No	Male
12	19	1	No	Male
13	20	1	Yes	Male
14	25	3.5	No	Male
15	30	1	No	Male
16	24	1.2	No	Male
17	22	1	No	Male
18	20	1	Yes	Male
19	21	3	No	Male
20	21	1.7	No	Male
21	42	2	No	Male
22	33	2	No	Male
23	62	1	No	Male
24	55	1.5	No	Male

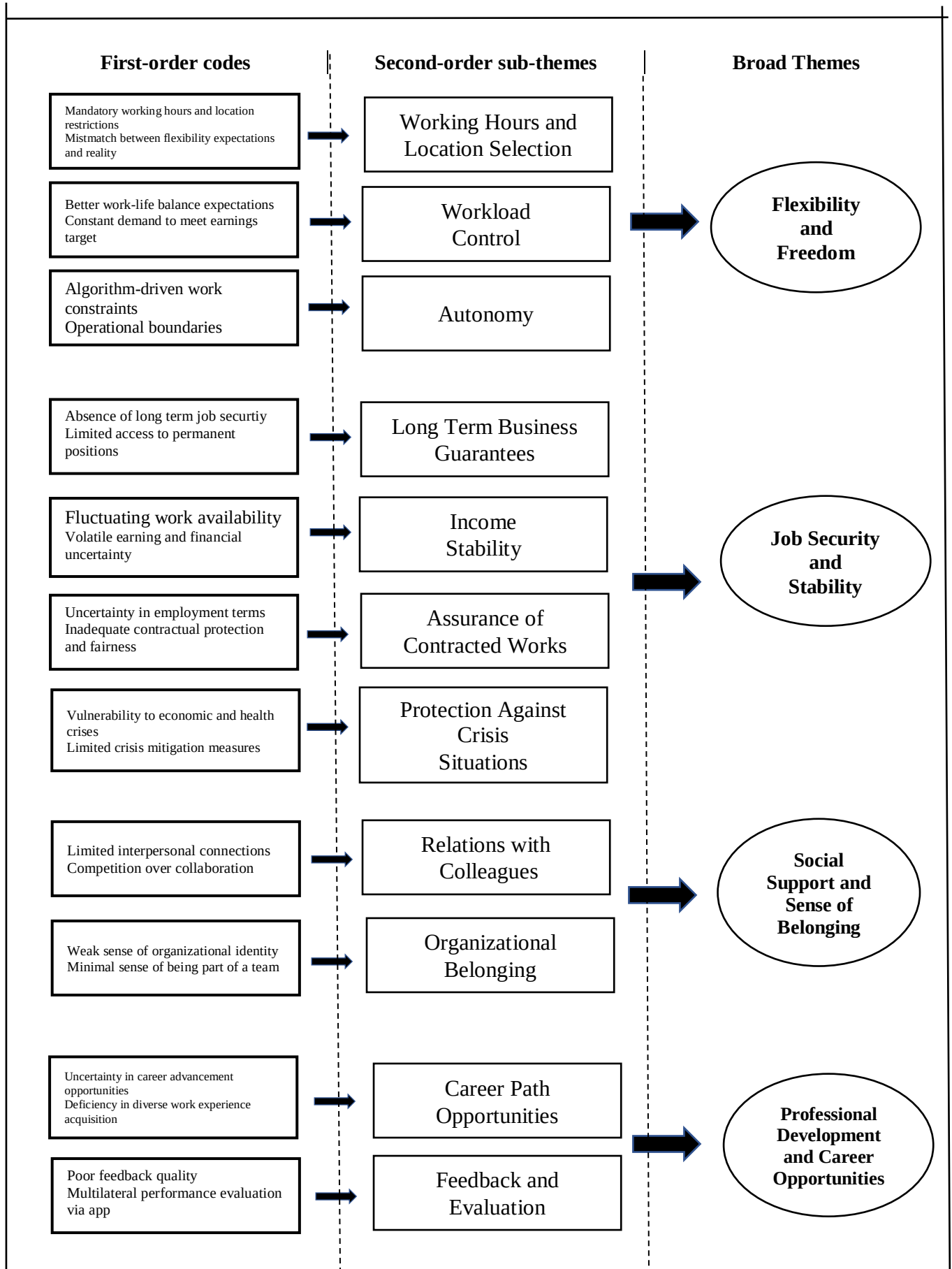


Figure 1: Overview of the Data Structure and Themes

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