



Journal of Economy Culture and Society

Research Article

Open Access

Legally Self-Employed but De Facto Worker: Motor Couriers' Working Conditions and Work-Life Balance in Zonguldak, Türkiye



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Abstract

This article investigates the working conditions and work-life balance of couriers in Zonguldak, Türkiye. The study aims to determine whether there is any differentiation in working conditions and work-life balance between self-employed platform couriers and employed platform or non-platform couriers. The "Survey on Socio-demographic Data and Opinions on the Working Conditions of Motor Couriers" which consists of close-ended questions prepared by researchers and the "Work-Life Balance Scale" developed by Fisher, Bulger, and Smith, was used as a data collection tool. The purposive sampling method was employed in the selection of a sampling group, and the snowball sampling method was used for data collection. In the field study, 195 couriers were surveyed out of a total of 250-275 couriers. According to the data, self-employed platform couriers work longer than salaried platform and non-platform couriers, and their work-life imbalance is higher than others. Although they make more money than all other couriers, their life satisfaction is not much higher than that of salaried and weekly-waged couriers. In the SPSS analysis, it was found that self-employed platform couriers are not in a more advantageous position than other fixed-wage employed couriers in terms of income, work hours, seniority, flexibility, and work-life balance.

Keywords

Food delivery workers • couriers gig economy • gig workers • platform workers • flexibility • work-life balance



Citation: Demir, İ. & Özkan, A. O. (2025). Legally Self-Employed but de facto worker: Motor couriers' working conditions and Work-Life balance in Zonguldak, Türkiye. *Journal of Economy Culture and Society*, (71), 121-139. <https://doi.org/10.26650/JECS2024-1597125>

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Digital labor platforms do not produce any concrete goods. They bring together product and service providers with consumers, customers, or requesters in a digital application. This interaction has engendered a new form of work and organization. The advent of a gig economy inflames the debate on platform-based employees' legal status (De Stefano et al., 2022, p. 24; Duggan et al., 2022, p. 3). Most platform workers, especially food delivery workers (hereafter couriers), are classified as self-employed by platforms to avoid operating expenses, even though they are dependent on platforms for income, tasks, customers, working time and work organization. This leads them to be legally classified as self-employed even though they are de facto employees. Research on platform workers reveals that these workers are exposed to precarious and dangerous working conditions (Kassem, 2023; Rani and Gobel, 2023; Schor, 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). Couriers, one of the most common workers in a gig economy, regularly work under these conditions (Fairwork, 2023a; Ivanova et al., 2018).

In recent years, the economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, high costs and courier deaths have led to numerous couriers' protests in Türkiye (Hamsici, 2022; GazeteDuvar, 2023; Kıldak, 2023). However, the job has been glorified with the rhetoric of entrepreneurship, flexibility, high earnings and self-employment (Uysal, 2022). A monopoly in food and grocery delivery in Türkiye, *Getir* has soon expanded to the world's largest metropolises. Another big Turkish company, *Yemeksepeti* was bought by the German Deliveroo Hero. There are many delivery platforms in Türkiye, like *Vigo*, *Fiyuu*, *Banabikurye*, *TrendyolGo*, *Pakettaksi*, *Tıklagelsin* and *İstegelsin*, other than *Getir* and *Yemeksepeti*. They do not pay a regular and fixed salary and prefer a pay-per-package system. Most couriers can earn the minimum wage or less by working 12 hours a day after all operating costs and do not benefit from social and economic protections (ILO, 2022; Ceylan, 2022).

The gig economy is transforming not only the way we work but also our work-life balance. As Kelliher et al. (2018) stated, "work-life balance refers to the relationship between work and non-work aspects of individuals' lives." Just as gender roles and class affect the work-life balance, new production technologies and the ways of working also have effects on it negatively or positively (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). The balance, however, varies according to person, gender, class, marital status, educational level, job, profession and other social categories. Therefore, it may be necessary to develop a more encompassing and dynamic understanding of work and life. When we consider the flexible working arrangements, it is evident that the work-life balance is blurring. Work is spilling over into life, and the boundaries are becoming unclear (Guest, 2002). With the spread of flexible work organizations, the distinction between work hours and non-work hours is fast disappearing. Compared to traditional ways of working, the gig economy has altered the work-life balance.

In this frame, the article aims to show the working conditions and work-life balance of food delivery workers in Türkiye. However, it focuses on platform-based self-employed couriers because they make up the majority of employees. The article also examines, as a secondary objective, whether there is a difference in terms of working conditions and work-life balance between platform-based self-employed couriers and salaried platform or non-platform couriers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the article explores whether flexible labor regimes are considered an advantage by self-employed platform couriers in terms

of income, working hours, work-life balance, and autonomy compared to salaried platform or non-platform couriers.

Research on the working conditions of couriers generally focuses on working hours, working days (Ceylan, 2022; Heiland, 2022b), flexibility experiences (Piasna & Drahekoupil, 2021; Sun et al., 2023), income levels and precarity (Huang, 2022; 2023; Taylor et al., 2017). They also address how algorithmic management creates these conditions (Heiland, 2022a, 2022b). In this study, the working conditions were analyzed by using these parameters in the literature.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it fills the gap in the quantitative data on food delivery workers in Türkiye. Second, it provides knowledge on platform labor in Türkiye, a country in the Global South. Third, it shows that flexible working practices do not create autonomy for couriers and, in this sense, undermine work-life balance rather than providing it.

The article begins with an explanation of platform capitalism's political economy, the platform economy's flexible working conditions and the concept of work-life balance. It continues with the research method. Third, the results reveal the couriers' working conditions and work-life balance. In the last section, discussion and conclusion, it is compared the research's results with the literature of platform work and present how to create fairer working conditions.

Theoretical Framework

The Political Economy of Platforms and the Transformation of Work

Digital platforms, which have emerged with technological developments in the last 2 decades, bring together the supply and demand for goods and services. However, they also function as means of surplus-value extraction (Woodcock & Graham, 2018; Poutanen et al., 2019; Duggan et al., 2022). For this reason, digital capitalism (Schiller, 1999) needs freedom of action and an unregulated labor force market, as well as a digital infrastructure. It provides this freedom through neoliberal economic policies and flexible work. Although the platformization of capitalism has many dimensions, the most prominent features are the outsourcing and flexibilization of labor and algorithmic surveillance technologies. Therefore, the platform economy cannot be considered independent of class conflicts, labor exploitation, capital intensification, inequalities and profit maximization.

Working in the platform economy refers to wage labor. Platforms as a means of production are owned by companies and workers work for platforms by renting their labor, although they are not classified as employees. The value produced is put into relations of distribution, and a large part of this value is appropriated by the platform owners. Therefore, digital technologies and capital are not a thing, but a definite social production relation that confronts production actors.

Marx put forth all these components in Capital I. According to Marx (1990), capitalists appropriate surplus value by increasing work hours, decreasing wages, intensifying labor, using new technology, new management strategies, and a piece-wage system. The basic aim of technological transformation and labor management for capitalists is to capture surplus value and undoubtedly increase economic and political domination. The platform economy does this with digital production technologies, flexibilization, and algorithmic management. Also, according to Marx (1993), the basic elements of the labor process are the purposeful activity of labor, the object of labor, and the means of labor. In the era of the platform economy, although there are formal changes, the basic logic has not changed. Digital technologies as the means of

labor and data as the object of labor are new elements of digital capitalism. However, the relations of exploitative production remain the same way. While digital technological transformation has not done more fair and equitable to the world, it has punished workers and the poor by increasing income inequalities (O'Neil, 2017). Moreover, digital labor platforms have contributed greatly to the expansion of the precarity that Standing (2014) spoke about long ago. The irregular, fixed-term, part-time, project-based, and periodic work without job and income security defines this class. Digital work platforms and their labor regime have increased precarization, especially through the classification of self-employed or independent contractors. Precarization not only impacts job and income security but also, as Sennett (2003) shows in "The Corrosion of Character," hinders the formation of meaningful and stable relationships and disrupts work-life balance.

Work-life Balance

Work-life balance is defined as the ability to be satisfied with one's work and non-work life (Sturges & Guest, 2004). Behind the increased academic interest in work-life balance after 2000 is the transformation of the work form due to digital technologies, the spread of flexible working, the blurring of distinction between work and private life, precarization, the marketization of public life as a result of privatization, a decline in life satisfaction, an increase in women's employment, and a more intense experience of work-life imbalance among women in employment (Booth & Frank, 2005; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Drobnič, 2011; Houston, 2005, p. 1–3; Kelliher et al., 2018).

Work-life balance is generally understood as the way work affects our non-work life, especially family life, but the concept could also mean the effect non-work life, especially family life or problems related to private life, could have on our work life (Benito-Osorio et al., 2014; Lazăr et al., 2010). The work-life balance should be seen as a two-pole concept. Many approaches have been developed on work-life balance. These approaches include views on the possibility of work-life balance disruption and its causes and consequences. This research, on the other hand, mainly adopts a conflict approach.

There are various impacts of platform work on platform workers' work-life balance. For instance, couriers in particular are often unable to spend time with family and friends as they have to work during peak hours (evenings and weekends) (Heiland, 2021, p. 9). Moreover, the per-package wage system forces couriers to work more and therefore they do not spend time on extra-work activities (Ceylan, 2022). In addition, couriers do not make productive use of their non-work time as they work six hours a week and take care of engine maintenance on their days off. The reflection of psychological problems caused by working in precarious and uncertain conditions on relationships outside of work is another dimension of this phenomenon.

Freelancers working online suffer from the social isolation of working from home. The opportunities for social interaction provided by the workplace are absent in work-from-home, and freelancers lack the opportunity to spend time with colleagues after work. Due to the disadvantages of reputation ratings, many freelancers underbid for assignments, are forced to undertake long-term tasks, and lose their privacy at home due to algorithmic surveillance (sending screenshots or turning on cameras). Irregular and untimely payments are other factors that disrupt freelancers' work-life balance. However, online freelancers, especially women ones, have the opportunity to earn income without interrupting their caregiving responsibilities and can spare time for their domestic needs. Especially for workers who prefer platform work for additional income, these jobs increase household income and contribute to private life. (İlyas, 2022; Moore et al., 2018)

Method

In the study, a quantitative research method was employed. The study population consisted of couriers working via digital platforms (such as *Getir*, *Vigo*, *PaketTaksi*, *Fiyuu*, *Tıklagelsin*, *Trendyol Go* and *Yemeksepeti*), salaried couriers, and daily/weekly wage couriers for restaurants in the Zonguldak city center and its districts, named *Ereğli*, *Çaycuma* and *Kilimli*. The "Survey on Socio-demographic Data and Opinions on the Working Conditions of Motor Couriers" which consists of close-ended questions prepared by researchers and the "Work-Life Balance Scale" developed by Fisher, Bulger, and Smith (2009) were used as data collection tools. The study was approved by the Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University Ethics Committee (Approval No: 23.3.2023/288960).

The scale included a total of 17 items and has four sub-dimensions: "Negative Impact of Life on Work", "Negative Impact of Work on Life", "Positive Impact of Life on Work" and "Positive Impact of Work on Life". The scale was a 5-point Likert scale with five different responses ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". There were no reverse scored items in the scale. The scale score was obtained by summing the value equivalents of the responses given to the scale items, and an increase in the score obtained from the scale sub-dimensions draws attention to an increase in the impact of the relevant dimension.

According to the results of a confirmatory factor analysis on the validity and reliability of the scale, the model goodness of fit criteria of the scale are found as Chi-square/sd =1.572, RMSEA=.053, NNFI= .97, CFI= .98 for the four sub-dimensional model and it was found to be a reasonable model goodness. The reliability for all four sub-dimensions; Negative Impact of Life on Work (Cronbach's alpha = 0.847), Negative Impact of Work on Life (Cronbach's alpha = 0.869), Positive Impact of Life on Work (Cronbach's alpha = 0.837) and Positive Impact of Work on Life (Cronbach's alpha = 0.812), were found to be good.

In this study, the SPSS AMOS and SPSS 25 programs were used for data analysis. For the four sub-dimensional models that were tested within the scope of the study, it was found that the model fit criteria of the scale had a reasonable model goodness of fit (Chi-square/sd =1.611, RMSEA=.056, NNFI= .94, CFI= .97). The reliability analyses showed that a reliable measurement was provided in the sub-dimensions of the Negative Impact of Life on Work (Cronbach alpha = 0.905), Negative Impact of Work on Life (Cronbach alpha = 0.942), Positive Impact of Life on Work (Cronbach alpha = 0.929) and Positive Impact of Work on Life (Cronbach alpha = 0.865).

In the data analysis step of the study, descriptive analyses were employed by the researchers and cross tabulations were preferred. In the sample selection, purposive sampling, one of the non-probability sampling types, was preferred. Since we clearly identified the characteristics of the group subject to our research and reached almost all members of this group, it was clear that this sampling technique provided reliable results. In addition, a snowball sampling technique, which is a sub-dimension of purposive sampling, was used in the study. To collect data, we first met the head of the Zonguldak Motor Couriers Association. The head shared the questionnaire form on the WhatsApp group of the association and then directed the researchers to the waiting area and workplace of the couriers.

Purposive sampling is quite functional for sample groups with homogeneous characteristics. Therefore, there was no quota setting or stratification. No random selection was made in the survey application. This type of sampling is preferred in field research and explanatory studies (Neuman, 2012, p. 274). Individuals who reflected the population in general terms were included in the sample. The knowledge and experience of the researchers guided the sample selection (Balci, 2004, p. 90). This sampling method, which is extremely

valuable for special cases, is based on the selection of sample cases for a specific phenomenon (Neuman, 2012, p. 274). The sampling technique and the researchers' command of the field provided an opportunity to reach almost all of the population, and this increased the reliability of the results obtained. Purposive sampling was the most appropriate in terms of time and cost because it ensured the accuracy of the results (Neuman, 2012, p. 274).

The population of couriers in Zonguldak was not clearly known. To estimate the size of the population, interviews were held with the Zonguldak Tax Offices and the number of self-employed couriers who had established a sole proprietorship was found. With the NACE Code 50.20.09, the tax office found that there were 28 delivery workers registered to the *Karaelmas* Tax Office, 68 registered to the *Uzun Mehmet* Tax Office and 72 registered to *Ereğli* Tax Office. Of course, the couriers surveyed are not only those registered with these tax offices. As in other provinces of Türkiye and countries around the world, couriers are working informally in Zonguldak as well.

Based on the information obtained from official institutions, interviews with couriers and field observations of the researchers, it was estimated that there were around 250-275 couriers in Zonguldak. After considering the total population size, an ideal sample size was reached (Sekaran & Bougie, 2003).

The data collection process occurred between April and August 2023. A combination of face-to-face and online survey techniques was preferred as part of the data collection process. Before the fieldwork, the researchers visited the couriers' workplace and waiting areas, provided information about the research and joined the messaging application (WhatsApp) groups. For couriers who could not be interviewed face-to-face, the survey form was transferred to Google Forms. The researchers followed this approach as recommended in the literature to achieve a satisfactory sample size (Hewson, 2008).

Results

Table 1

Sociodemographic Data (n=195)

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	1	0.5%
Male	194	99.5%
Age		
Age 18-25	131	67.2%
Age 26-33	44	22.6%
Age 34-41	14	7.2%
Age 42-49	5	2.6%
Age 50+	1	0.5%
Marital status		
Married	34	17.4%
Single	161	82.6%
Having children or not		
Yes	30	15.4%
No	165	84.6%
Education		

Gender	Number	Percentage
Literate	1	0.5%
Primary and Secondary School	27	13.8%
High School	129	66.2%
Bachelor's Degree	37	0,19
Master's Degree or Higher	1	0.5%
Duration of work (in years)		
1-5 Years	173	88.7%
6-10 Years	17	8.7%
11-15 Years	3	1.5%
16-20 Years	1	0.5%
21 Years and up	1	0.5%
Working time in the same company (years)		
1-5 Years	194	99.5%
6-10 Years	1	0.5%
Reason to work		
Main job	189	96.9%
Additional work	3	1.5%
Student (works for pocket money)	3	1.5%
Occupational status		
Self-employed couriers	102	52.3%
Salaried couriers	72	36.9%
Daily/weekly wage couriers	21	10.8%

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

Almost all the respondents were male (99.5%), and the majority were between the ages of 18-25 (67.2%). Nearly 83 percent (82.6%) of the respondents were single and 84.6% had no dependent children. When we looked at how many years they had been working as food delivery workers, we saw that the majority (88.7%) had been working between 1 and 5 years. Only 10.7% of the respondents have been working as a courier for more than 5 years. There were almost no couriers who worked in the same business for more than 1-5 years and the majority (52.3%) were self-employed.

Table 2

Earnings and working hours

Monthly earning	Avr.	Min-Max ± Ss
Self-employed couriers	15.759(562\$)	10.000(357\$)-29.000(1035\$)± 4.418,21
Salaried couriers	12.015(429\$)	9.000(321\$)-18.000(642\$)± 1.424,49
Daily/weekly wage couriers	11.471(409\$)	10.000(357\$)-14.000(500\$)± 911,12
Daily working hours		
Self-employed couriers	10.43	5-14 ± 1.53
Salaried couriers	9.90	7-14 ± 1.50
Daily/weekly wage couriers	10.09	5-13 ± 1.78

Monthly earning	Avr.	Min-Max $\pm$ Ss
Working day number (weekly)		
Self-employed couriers	6.12	5-7 $\pm$ 0.41
Salaried couriers	6.04	5-9 $\pm$ 0.48
Daily/weekly wage couriers	6.23	6-7 $\pm$ 0.43

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

While the minimum wage was 8.506 TL (about 425 dollars) in the first six months of 2023, during the data collection phase of the study, it became 11.402 TL (about 407 dollars) in the last six months of the given year. Although the government increased the minimum wage due to inflation, the minimum wage eroded rapidly because of the increase in the dollar exchange rate. The data provided in this article reflects the second 6 months of 2023.

In [Table 2.](#), in average monthly earnings, the lowest earners were the daily/weekly wage couriers, while the highest earners were self-employed couriers. In the average daily working hours, self-employed couriers got the most work, while traditional salaried couriers got the least. In the average number of days worked per week, casual couriers had the highest number of workdays, while salaried couriers had the lowest. This shows that both self-employed platform couriers and casual restaurant couriers work more than fixed-wage workers.

Table 3

Findings on Flexible Working Experiences of Self-Employed Couriers (n=102)

Ability to determine working days	Number	Percentage
Yes	34	33.3%
No	68	66.7%
Ability to determine working hours		
Yes	29	28.4%
No	73	71.6%
Ability to determine monthly earnings		
Yes	46	45.1%
No	56	54.9%

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

The findings in [Table 3.](#) showed that 66.7% of self-employed couriers could not determine their work days, 71.6% could not determine their work hours and 54.9% could not determine their monthly income. First, companies require couriers to work according to certain shifts. In addition, couriers generally must work during peak hours to increase the number of orders they deliver. This also forces them to work mostly in the evenings and on weekends. Especially in the summer, couriers work until 2:00–3:00 a.m. Finally, regardless of their hard work, their earnings are always stuck at a threshold due to various expenses. For all these reasons, couriers cannot think that they can determine their working days, hours, regions, income, and conditions.

Table 4*Findings on being a courier is seen dangerous*

Self-employed couriers (n=102)	Number	Percentage
Almost Never	1	0,01
Very Low	7	6.9%
Medium	16	15.7%
High	16	25.5%
Very High	52	0,51
Salaried couriers (n=72)		
Very Low	7	9.7%
Medium	9	12.5%
High	14	19.4%
Very High	42	58.3%

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

Both self-employed and salaried couriers stated that they perceived the profession as dangerous regardless of their status. According to them, drivers do not respect couriers and often ignore them. Working in bad weather conditions also increases accidents. Even though they have safety equipment, they see the possibility of being involved in an accident with injury and death as high. In spontaneous conversations during the surveys, it was found that many couriers had fractures, dislocations, and crushes in various parts of their bodies. As a matter of fact, various messages about work accidents are frequently encountered in the WhatsApp groups and Instagram accounts followed by the researchers. Couriers have established a solidarity network for such situations. The Zonguldak Motorcyclists Association also has a lawyer who provides counseling services in cases of accidents and disputes.

Table 5*Findings on feeling the order pressure*

Self-employed couriers (n=102)	Number	Percentage
Self-employed couriers (n=102)	Number	Percentage
Almost Never	14	13.7%
Very Low	23	22.5%
Medium	30	29.4%
High	26	25.5%
Very High	9	8.8%
Salaried couriers (n=72)		
Almost Never	12	16.7%
Very Low	21	29.2%
Medium	21	29.2%
High	13	18.1%
Very High	3	6.9%

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

When the self-employed and salaried couriers' feelings of delivery pressure were analyzed, the total rate of feeling pressured about delivery at moderate, high, and very high levels was 63.7% for self-employed

couriers, while this rate was 54.2% for salaried couriers. There are several reasons why self-employed couriers feel more pressure than salaried couriers. First, self-employed couriers must deliver more packages because they work on a per-package wage policy, and they therefore feel the need to move faster. Second, as they are mostly platform couriers, they are often exposed to algorithmic surveillance technologies, and every second is recorded. In particular, the fast delivery promises of platforms increase customer expectations and put couriers under pressure.

Table 6

Findings on Job, Earnings, and life satisfaction

	Job Satisfaction		Earning satisfaction		Life Satisfaction	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Self-employed couriers (n=102)						
Never	13	12.7%	16	15.7%	40	39.2%
Less	25	24.5%	23	22.5%	23	22.5%
Normal	53	0,52	54	52.9%	36	35.3%
Very	11	10.8%	9	8.8%	3	2.9%
Salaried couriers (n=72)						
Never	11	15.3%	29	40.3%	25	34.7%
Less	20	27.8%	15	20.8%	15	20.8%
Normal	36	0,5	27	37.5%	30	41.7%
Very	5	6.9%	1	1.4%	2	2.8%
Daily/weekly waged couriers (n=21)						
Never	2	9.5%	4	0,19	9	42.9%
Less	6	28.6%	6	28.6%	4	0,19
Normal	13	61.9%	11	52.4%	8	38.1%

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

When the job satisfaction rates of couriers were analyzed, it was seen that the rates were close to each other. Regarding income satisfaction, self-employed couriers had a higher satisfaction rate, whereas salaried couriers reported a high level of dissatisfaction. In terms of life satisfaction, the rates were similar.

Table 7

Findings on the Work-Life Balance Scale (n=195)

Scale Sub-Dimensions	Avr. - Ss	Min. - Max.
Negative Impact of Life on Work	11.23 ± 5	6-27
Negative Impact of Work on Life	18.33 ± 6.19	5-25
Positive Impact of Life on Work	7.11 ± 3.21	3-15
Positive Impact of Work on Life	7.92 ± 3.08	3-12

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

Table 8

Findings on the scores of respondents' Work-Life Balance Scale

	Mean scores from the scale		
	Self-employed couriers (n=102)	Salaried couriers (n=72)	Hourly/weekly courier(n=21)
Scale Sub-Dimensions			
Negative Impact of Life on Work	11.74	10.12	12.52
Negative Impact of Work on Life	18.75	17.91	17.71
Positive Impact of Life on Work	7.58	6.36	7.38
Positive Impact of Work on Life	7.75	8.02	8.42

Source: Authors' compilation based on the survey

When **Table 8.**, which demonstrated the average scores of the couriers from the Work-Life Balance Scale, was examined, it was observed that the average score of the daily wage couriers was high in the "Negative Impact of Life on Work" sub-dimension. This score revealed that life had a more negative effect on the work of daily/weekly wage couriers compared to self-employed and salaried couriers. When the "Negative Impact of Work on Life" sub-dimension was analyzed, it was seen that the average scores of self-employed couriers were higher. This is noteworthy because it revealed that for self-employed couriers, work affected their lives negatively more than other couriers. When the mean scores of the "Positive Impact of Life on Work" sub-dimension were analyzed, it became clear that salaried couriers felt a less positive impact when compared to other couriers. In the "Positive Impact of Work on Life" sub-dimension, the mean scores of self-employed couriers were lower than those of other couriers.

Discussion and Conclusion

In Zonguldak, as in other countries, delivery platforms and restaurants established different forms of labor relations and systems with couriers for work time and wages. The working relationships are categorized as follows:

1. Employed couriers working with *restaurant motorcycles* for fixed-wage (*Dominos, McDonalds* et al.).
2. Self-employed couriers working (mostly informal) with *restaurant motorcycles* for a daily/weekly wage.
3. Self-employed couriers (mostly young and informal) working for restaurants and on *their own motorcycles* for a daily/weekly wage.
4. Platform couriers (self-employed) (*Vigo and Paket Taksi*) working with *their own motorcycles*, on an hourly rate+per package basis.
5. Platform couriers (self-employed) working with *platform motorcycles* on an hourly rate+per package basis (*Getir*).
6. Platform couriers (employed) working with *personal or platform motorcycles* for fixed-wage (*Tıklagelsin and Fiyuu*)

Wages, Working Hours and Days

In the research, an interesting picture emerged concerning working hours and income. The minimum wage is calculated for 45 hours of work (9 hours per day, 5 days a week) per week as 11.400 TL (407\$). When we looked at the working hours of couriers participating in this study, it showed an average of 10-12 hours per day, 6 days a week, which is 60 hours of work a week.

If a courier who earns minimum wage worked 45 hours a week, his hourly wage would be 63 TL (2.26 dollars), but since the same courier really works an average of 60 hours a week, his hourly wage is 47.50 TL (1.69 dollars). Based on 60 hours of work per week, the monthly wage for a courier on the payroll would be approximately 15.120 TL (540 dollars). A self-employed courier has to cover the costs of fuel, food, engine maintenance, insurance and other expenses, which is on average at least 28.000 TL-30.000 TL (1000-1100 dollars), but the majority of platform-based self-employed couriers do not reach this income. Even if they do, the loss of income due to illness, vacation, or accident and the lack of paid annual leave make this income meaningless. Moreover, many couriers (whether salaried or self-employed) work close to 80 hours per week. As a result, according to the data of this study, both platform couriers and other couriers actually worked for an income below the minimum wage when working hours and expenses were considered.

Ceylan's study (2022, p. 124-126) on couriers in İstanbul and Kaya et al. (2022) in İzmir clearly show how the income of self-employed couriers has become meaningless due to fuel, food, insurance, taxes, and engine maintenance costs, so new strategies should be developed. Ceylan reveals that to save money, couriers work long hours, work on multiple platforms at the same time, do not have insurance and rent their motorcycles to other couriers. Couriers need for delivering 35-40 packages to make a profit sometimes working 12-13 hours per day to reach this figure (Ceylan, 2022, p. 127-129). The same was true for the couriers in Zonguldak. Platforms that negotiate with couriers on an hourly+per package basis increase their profits by increasing the number of tasks assigned to the courier.

The courier who wants to earn more than the minimum wage must work more than 10 hours. Moreover, since the algorithm distributes the packages evenly among couriers, it is not possible for one courier to carry too many packages, or there is competition among couriers to carry these packages. Therefore, couriers cannot rise above a certain income level.

The findings of this study agreed with the findings of the research conducted by ILO (2022) and Kaya et al. (2022). According to ILO's research, couriers in Türkiye will earn an average of 5.117 TL in 2022. This figure is around the minimum wage of the period (5.500 TL). In 2022, self-employed couriers earned an average of 6.273 TL, while salaried couriers earned 4.106 TL, which was lower than the minimum wage. Kaya et al.'s research (2022) also showed that delivery workers earn an average of 5000-6000 TL when all expenses are considered. In addition, when the unpaid labor of couriers (Cini, 2023) (such as waiting for orders, carrying packages, communication with customers, engine maintenance) is considered, the labor exploitation that they are exposed to becomes even more visible.

As mentioned above, some platforms work with self-employed couriers on the principle of hourly wage + per package in Zonguldak. As the number of packages delivered and the work time increased, the couriers earned more. However, when operating costs are considered, the total monthly earnings remain around the minimum wage. Looking at the data, self-employed couriers earned an average of 15.800 TL (585 USD) per month when all expenses were deducted; however, there were some who earned more. Some platforms (*Fiyuu*) opted for a fixed wage model and paid couriers minimum wage (for working 60 hours or more), but when working hours were added (more than 60 hours per week), the couriers actually earned less than the minimum wage.

According to *Türk-İş* (2023), Türkiye's largest labor union confederation, the cost of living for a family of four is 39.733 TL (1419 dollars). The cost of living for a single worker is 15.813 TL (564 dollars). Furthermore, according to the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Türkiye (*Disk*, 2023) on the brink of famine is

12.612 TL (450 dollars), while the poverty line is 43.623 TL (1.557 dollars). These earnings kept single couriers at or below the poverty line and married couriers at or below the brink of famine.

According to the data, the average working time of couriers in Zonguldak was over 10 hours. The experiences of platform couriers in other parts of the world are similar to those described in this study. Reports by Fairwork (2023d, 2023b, 2023e) show that in many countries, from the USA to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Uganda to Brazil, couriers work below the minimum wage hourly. In these countries, platform couriers work close to 80 hours per week (Fairwork, 2023c). A study (Urzi Brancati et al., 2020, p. 37) covering 16 European Union countries showed that the longer the work hours, the lower the hourly earnings among platform workers. Ivanova et al.'s (2018, p. 20-22) research on Foodora and Deliveroo couriers in Berlin prove that platform couriers cannot earn minimum wage because of working hours and operating costs.

Flexibility and Autonomy

One of the most remarkable findings of the study concerned whether self-employed platform couriers felt autonomous in terms of work days, hours, location, and income. As the data showed, 66.7% of self-employed platform couriers did not feel autonomous in terms of working days, 71.6% in terms of working hours, and 54.9% in terms of income. The most important reason for this is the algorithmic management strategies developed for directing and monitoring the production process. Platforms often present themselves as infrastructures that enable flexible working. Delivery platforms (Fiyuu, 2023; PaketTaksi, 2023) describe their couriers as self-employed micro-entrepreneurs in Türkiye.

Despite propagating a narrative of flexibility, platforms control the entire production and distribution process. Through algorithmic management, platforms limit the space in which couriers work, determine delivery routes and times, confiscate tips, set package rates, and suspend a courier's account in case of a customer complaint. From the findings of the study, it was clear that the discourses of flexibility and self-employment, which were used to make platform-based work attractive, did not have a concrete counterpart in the world of work.

About 70 percent of self-employed couriers believed that they could determine neither their work days nor their working hours. Therefore, the promise of working where they want, when they want, for as long as they want, with whom they want, and being their own boss was confronted with the harsh reality of company directives, shifts application, algorithmic surveillance strategies, and the obligation to work during peak hours (Bertolini et al., 2023; Ivanova et al., 2018, p. 21-22). As Heiland also shows (2019), algorithmic management leads 63% of German couriers to feel at the mercy of platforms.

Although platforms work on an hourly+per-package wage model, they do offer couriers certain schedules or shifts and ask them to choose one. Henly et al. (2006) conceptualized this as manager-controlled flexible scheduling. Therefore, the flexibility is a kind of guided flexibility.

Data on the couriers' working hours showed that flexibility extended the hours. For couriers, working per package or hourly required working more than 10 hours to reach the minimum wage, while for businesses it meant access to a workforce that could work for long periods of time without employment.

The illusion of flexibility and the illusory freedom it created (Umer, 2021) were not unique to the delivery workers in Zonguldak. Delivery workers in other countries lack work autonomy, even if they appear to be self-employed (Griesbach et al., 2019, p. 2; Sun et al., 2023). Lehdonvirta's (2018) study clearly shows how structural constraints prevent flexibility that would work in favor of the workers. Furthermore, Piasna and Drakohoupil's (2021) research on Deliveroo couriers in Belgium shows that workers who are economically

dependent on the platform and more vulnerable in the labor market prefer to be classified as employees rather than as self-employed and prefer regular hours instead of flexible work. Mbare (2023), in his research on food delivery workers in Finland, states that Finnish couriers also experience the tensions of flexibility and autonomy due to algorithmic management practices, harsh conditions, a lack of social interaction with coworkers, and their mental well-being negatively affected.

Work-life Balance

Just as working more than 8 hours a day disrupts couriers' work-life balance, uncertainty about income and working hours also makes work-life balance uncertain. Warren (2021) questions the applicability of the mainstream work-life balance agenda for the platform economy as it reflects the traditional employment model and argues that the impact of precarious and uncertain working conditions on work-life balance should be reconsidered. According to Warren (2021, p. 526-527), the mainstream agenda focuses on time constraints and individualizes problems/solutions, reducing "work" to paid employment, "life" to family life, and "balance" to a conflict-addition dichotomy. However, this problem, which has become public, cannot be solved by individualistic explanations and time squeezing cannot be the fundamental problem of work-life balance.

Digital platform labor creates a work relationship that calls into question the already problematic mainstream work-life balance approach. Insecurity, precarization, unpaid labor, digital surveillance, financial difficulties, and uncertainty allow for a class-based approach to work-life balance that focuses on time squeezing (Warren, 2021, p. 528). Lakshmi and Arunachalam's study (2022) on couriers in the city of Madurai (India) shows that work-life imbalance is caused not only by time constraints but also by the factors mentioned above. Kim et al.'s (2023) study on gig workers' work-life balance and life satisfaction reveals that the work environment and income level are determinants. Finally, Glavin et al.'s study (2024) on location-based platform workers in Canada reveals that platform workers suffer more from work-life conflict compared to employees and the traditional self-employed. According to this study, the protection of workers' rights, defining the boundaries of work, clarifying work and leisure time, ensuring employment status, and achieving an income that covers the cost of living are the main indicators of work-life balance. In this sense, Fairwork's (2023f) criteria of fair wages, fair working conditions, fair and transparent contracts, fair and participatory management, and fair representation are functional in ensuring the work-life balance of couriers.

When we look at the research findings, work-life had a negative impact on non-work life. Findings on life satisfaction proved the problem in work-life balance. Approximately 65% of both salaried and self-employed couriers stated that they were dissatisfied with their lives. Although the couriers were satisfied to having a job and income, they had a negative attitude toward life satisfaction. Because the unemployment rate among 15-24 year olds is 18% (Turkstat, 2023) and the NEET rate among 15-29 year olds is 29% for men in Türkiye (OECD, 2023), it is easy to understand why the job and income satisfaction are at this level. However, there was a contradiction between the couriers' satisfaction with their jobs and incomes, even though their wages did not cover the cost of living and their life satisfaction was low. In the dialogs during the survey, the couriers stated that they felt lucky to have a job and income in the current economic conditions, but that they were uncomfortable with the rising costs of living and long working hours.

According to the data, there was a significant difference between self-employed couriers (61.7% in total) and employed couriers (38.9% in total) in terms of income satisfaction. However, platform couriers did not have an advantageous position in terms of work-life satisfaction. This is because flexibility is embodied not

as a factor that reduces work-life conflict and increases incomes, but as uncertainty, precariousness, and financial risk. Even though couriers earn more, they can not enjoy this gain as an extra advantage due to work time, operating costs, cost of living, lack of time for private life, and difficulties of the profession. The "Negative Impact of Work on Life" sub-scale score of all couriers (salaried, self-employed, and casual) was very high. According to this data, platform couriers did not get rid of the boredom of working 9-5 nor did they benefit from the advantage of "living their private lives the way they want" which should be provided by the flexible working model.

There is not much discussion or research done on how long delivery workers can do this job under the current work conditions. Previous studies usually focus on the couriers' wages, work hours and whether they have security or not. However, many delivery workers have suffered from fractures and bruises, especially in their wrists, ankles, shoulders, and other parts of their bodies due to accidents. Couriers suffer from neck, back and lumbar problems because they sit on the motorcycle even when they are resting. Normally, when you travel on a motorcycle, your eyes tear up. During the surveys, some couriers reported dry eyes. Many couriers continue to work unaware of the cardiological and respiratory diseases they will face after 10 years of this type of work. Considering all these factors, there are many issues affecting life satisfaction and work-life balance. Therefore, it would not be wise to limit the work-life balance issue to work time factors only.

As mentioned above, the gig economy has increased securitization, precarization, uncertainty, informalization, and risks. Couriers have lots of problems regarding wages, work hours, work conditions, work accidents, health, and weather conditions in Türkiye (Hamsici, 2022; KuryeHaber, 2022, 2023; Motorcycle Couriers Association, 2022). In recent years, many protests have been organized by delivery workers due to their working conditions and low wages (Hamsici, 2022; Kıdak, 2023). In addition, there have been court rulings and discussions as to whether couriers were employees with fixed wages or self-employed business owners. (Cefaliello & Countouris, 2020; Diken, 2021, 2022; Jimenez et al., 2021)

As a result, this study initially contributes to the research area regarding platform-based couriers with quantitative data and aims to close a big gap concerning the indicated research field in Türkiye. There are almost no studies based on quantitative data on the working conditions, work-life balance, and income of delivery workers in Türkiye. A small number of qualitative studies (Kaya et al., 2022; Ceylan, 2022; ILO, 2022; Kavurmacı, 2023; Kanyılmaz Polat & Cezer Aydin, 2023) and research by courier associations (KuryeHaber, 2023; Motorcycle Couriers Association, 2022) provide parallel findings to this research. Also, the study detects that platform work does not occur autonomously as argued, and flexible work creates precarious conditions for gig workers by combining with algorithmic management. In this sense, the study contributes to the international literature by providing information about the situation of the platform economy and delivery workers in Türkiye. Platform-based couriers must work in precarious, low-paid, informal and insecurity conditions in Türkiye, as well. Moreover, it shows that platforms promise autonomy for workers notwithstanding they do not facilitate delivery workers' non-work life, in other words, their work-life negatively affects their private life. Although the study was conducted in a small city and with a small number of couriers, the results it achieved can serve as some insights for researchers.

Achieving decent working conditions and work-life balance for couriers depends on the regulation of work hours, work days and wage policy. Furthermore, regulations must eliminate insecurity, precarity, informalization, and uncertainty to ensure fair work and work-life balance.

In the absence of a new legal framework that mitigates the risks of gig work and guarantees the rights and interests of employees, platforms use workers in any way they want and appropriate huge surplus-

value. Therefore, neither flexible nor traditional forms of working solve workers' problems. There is no other solution than a fair framework for the relations between production and distribution.



Ethics Committee Approval	The study was approved by the Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University Ethics Committee (Approval No: 23.3.2023/288960).
Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Author Contributions	Conception/Design of Study- İ.D., A.O.Ö.; Data Acquisition- İ.D., A.O.Ö.; Data Analysis/Interpretation- İ.D., A.O.Ö.; Drafting Manuscript- İ.D., A.O.Ö.; Critical Revision of Manuscript- İ.D., A.O.Ö.; Final Approval and Accountability- İ.D., A.O.Ö.
Conflict of Interest	The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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