RESEARCH ARTICLE

Setting Out Unwillingly: A Qualitative Analysis of the 'Career Drift' Experience Through Social Media Narratives

Emre Emrullah Boğazlıyan¹

¹ Dr., *Kahramanmaras Istiklal University, Kahramanmaras/Türkiye*
ORCID: 0000-0002-1741-2285
E-Mail:
emre.bogazliyan11@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the increasingly visible phenomenon of "career drift" in the context of 21st-century work life, characterized by uncertainty, fragility, and flexibility, through the lens of social media narratives. Employing a qualitative research design, the study analyzed 120 publicly available posts collected from Twitter (now X) and Ekşi Sözlük using purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: externally driven career orientation, occupational meaninglessness and identity ambiguity, permanence of temporary solutions, digital lamentation and narrative coping, and reorientation and deferred future construction. The findings reveal that users often make career choices based on coincidences, economic constraints, or environmental pressures, and experience significant ruptures in terms of meaning, identity, and belonging in these decisions. It was also observed that individuals express these experiences on social media through humor, irony, and a critical tone, using these platforms as a form of emotional coping. The study emphasizes the need to conceptualize career drift within a distinct theoretical framework and offers structural recommendations for career counseling practices and vocational guidance services.

Keywords: *Career drift, life narrative, digital narratives, career counseling*

Öz

Bu çalışma, 21. yüzyılın belirsizlik, kırılganlık ve esneklikle tanımlanan iş yaşamı bağlamında giderek görünür hâle gelen "kariyer sürüklenmesi" olgusunu sosyal medya anlatıları üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Nitel araştırma desenine göre yapılandırılan araştırmada, Twitter (X) ve Ekşi Sözlük platformlarından kamuya açık 120 paylaşım amaçlı örnekleme yoluyla toplanmış; elde edilen veriler tematik analiz yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Analizler sonucunda beş ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: kontrol dışı mesleki yönelim, mesleki anlamsızlık ve kimlik belirsizliği, geçici çözümün kalıcılaşması, dijital serzeniş ve anlatısal başa çıkma, yeniden yönelme ve geç gelecek kurgusu. Bulgular, bireylerin kariyer tercihlerini çoğu zaman rastlantısal, ekonomik ya da çevresel zorunluluklara bağlı olarak gerçekleştirdiğini ve bu tercihlerde anlam, kimlik ve aidiyet eksenli ciddi kırılmalar yaşadıklarını göstermektedir. Ayrıca bireylerin sosyal medya üzerinden bu deneyimlerini mizah, ironi ve eleştirel dille dışavurdukları ve bu mecraları bir tür duygusal başa çıkma alanı olarak kullandıkları gözlemlenmiştir. Çalışma, kariyer sürüklenmesi kavramının özgün bir kuramsal çerçeveye kavuşturulması gerektiğini vurgulamakta ve kariyer psikolojik danışmanlığı uygulamaları ile mesleki yönlendirme hizmetlerine ilişkin yapısal öneriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kariyer sürüklenmesi, yaşam anlatısı, dijital anlatılar, kariyer danışmanlığı*

Introduction

Traditional career theories explain individuals' career development processes through the alignment between personal characteristics and environmental opportunities (Super, 1990; Holland, 1997). These approaches typically adopt a linear and predictable view of career progression. However, the social and economic transformations of the 21st century have highlighted the limitations of such theories (Pryor & Bright, 2015; Bozgeyikli, 2022). With globalization, technological advances, and shifts in employment structures, individuals face increasing uncertainty in their career paths, complicating decision-making processes and adding layers of complexity (Savickas, 2013; Guichard, 2018). Consequently, people are being steered toward lifestyles that are partially planned, largely incidental, and constantly subject to change (Bozgeyikli, 2022). This new reality has given rise to novel approaches and concepts within the field of career psychology—one of which is "career drift."

Career drift is defined as a tendency shaped not by intrinsic awareness or motivation, but rather by external obligations and passive responses to chance events (Kato & Suzuki, 2006). The concept of career drift was initially developed to explain the professional uncertainties experienced by young adults in Japan. According to Kato and Suzuki (2006), it is not primarily about conflicts between professional identities and values. It is therefore important to note that career drift does not occur solely at the individual level; it can also be observed within institutional systems. It describes a process in which individuals are unable to plan their career choices consciously and meaningfully, lose direction, and are often unintentionally guided into working life (Davidson et al., 2015).

Some related definitions in the literature—such as Krumboltz's (2009) Happenstance Learning Theory—shed light on how unplanned events can influence career choices. However, such frameworks do not fully capture the passive and unconscious aspects that define career drift. In this context, career drift is difficult to comprehend within the boundaries of traditional career theories and is best understood as an emerging concept that has yet to be fully grounded in theoretical frameworks (Costa & Oliveirai, 2016, p.39).

Career drift not only highlights the ambiguity in individual decision-making processes but also underscores the guiding influence of social and institutional structures on individuals. According to Davidson et al. (2015), rapidly changing conditions in the modern workforce have led individuals to exert limited control over their careers, pushing them toward less predictable trajectories. From this perspective, career drift serves as an analytical tool that goes beyond adaptation to chance events and helps explain how broader systems shape individuals. Hall's (2002) concept of the "protean evolution of careers" is relevant in this context, as both approaches highlight a structural transformation in which individuals lose agency over their careers while external factors gain prominence.

In Turkey, this transformation is intensified by structural problems such as the inability of university graduates to find employment in their fields (Gündoğar & Yelboğa, 2014), growing pressure to enter the public sector (Öktem & Yıldız, 2022), and the prevalence of insecure, low-paid jobs. As such, the phenomenon of career drift becomes more pronounced. In this context, it can be argued that career drift leads individuals to shape their careers not through active planning, but in response to available opportunities, thereby increasing career vulnerability at a societal level.

This study aims to examine the phenomenon of career drift through professional experiences shared on digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Ekşi Sözlük. These platforms serve as notable digital spaces where public discourse—often anonymous, emotional, critical, and occasionally humorous—tends to concentrate (Papacharissi, 2015). Phrases encountered on these platforms, such as "I just found myself in this job," "I realized I've been doing this for years," or "It has nothing to do with my field, but I'm working anyway" (representative examples drawn from the social media posts analyzed in this study), illustrate a departure from planned career development and a shift toward reactive and incidental career orientations.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the descriptive and interpretive dimensions of the

career drift phenomenon through a qualitative analysis of social media content. Grounded in the Life Design Paradigm (Savickas, 2005a; Nota & Rossier, 2015), the study seeks to examine how individuals construct identity, assign meaning, and navigate career orientations through narratives shared on social media. By analyzing these digital narratives in terms of coping strategies, levels of awareness, and career orientation styles, this study aims to contribute to the theoretical literature and support the development of innovative approaches in career counseling.

1.1 Theoretical Foundations of Career Drift

Career drift refers to a condition in which individuals shape their career paths not through conscious, intrinsically motivated decisions, but rather through external pressures, incidental opportunities, and passive acceptance (Kato & Suzuki, 2006). The concept was introduced primarily to understand the states of uncertainty, lack of direction, and indecisiveness experienced by young adults (Davidson et al., 2015). Career drift is not merely an individual-level condition of indecision; it also offers critical insights into how societal, structural, and institutional factors influence an individual's professional life. In this regard, the concept signals a shift in which the individual becomes less an active agent in career planning and more a respondent to environmental influences.

For example, while Savickas's (2005a) Life Design Paradigm emphasizes the individual's capacity to create meaning and actively construct their career through intentional choices, individuals experiencing drift tend to move away from this active process and instead engage in passive adaptation. Similarly, career development theories generally warn that the loss of career control can lead to various psychosocial consequences (Super, 1990; Lent & Brown, 2013). Thus, it is necessary to investigate career drift not only conceptually but also empirically.

Studies examining how uncertainty, indecision, and lack of direction impact life satisfaction, professional fulfillment, and psychological well-being have supported the validity of this concept (Hirschi, 2012; Urbanaviciute et al., 2019). In the Turkish context, analyzing individuals' narratives on social media regarding career choice and orientation can offer insights into the local manifestation of this phenomenon. Therefore, preliminary research is needed to aid in the empirical understanding of career drift. The findings presented in this study serve as an initial analysis toward fulfilling that need.

1.2. Social Media Narratives and Career Experience

The widespread use of social media platforms today has transformed them into digital spaces where individuals can express not only personal matters but also their career experiences (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Davis et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). In this context, digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Ekşi Sözlük serve as public arenas where individuals narrate, evaluate, and share emotions related to their professional lives (Papacharissi, 2015). Through social media, individuals share not only personal stories but also career-related narratives and experiences (Corvite & Hui, 2024). Accordingly, the content individuals generate through these social media narratives constitutes a rich source of data for analyzing career experiences.

Microblog-style platforms, in particular, allow individuals to articulate their career journeys in non-linear, multidimensional, and emotionally charged ways. These narratives offer a means for individuals to reconstruct their career experiences while making their professional histories visible and exposing critiques of systemic workplace issues. (Page, 2012). Digital storytelling is a form through which individuals convey their lived experiences from a first-person perspective in the digital realm. These narratives not only render personal life stories visible but also contribute to collective memory, provide cultural representations, and sometimes serve as tools for social critique (Couldry, 2008).

The study of digital narratives presents new opportunities for qualitative research. Methods such as thematic analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis allow for in-depth exploration of social media content, providing comprehensive insights into individuals' career experiences. How-

ever, from a methodological standpoint, it is important to recognize that social media posts may not directly reflect actual experiences; they are often shaped selectively, performatively, and with regard to perceived social expectations (Van Dijck, 2013).

Phenomena such as career drift, professional meaning crises, and burnout—though not yet fully theorized—are increasingly visible in observations of social media content. These digital narratives are emerging as valuable data sources for disciplines such as career counseling, occupational psychology, and sociology (Zhang et al., 2024). Systematic analysis of social media content allows for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic and complex structure of career development.

Analyzing social media content has the potential to overcome some of the limitations of traditional career research. While structured interviews or standardized measurements may fall short in capturing spontaneous and unfiltered expressions, social media narratives offer unmediated, natural accounts arising from daily life. This enables career experiences to be explored in more contextually grounded and authentic ways. On the other hand, the limitations of social media analysis must also be acknowledged. The selective and performative nature of posts, along with their potential divergence from actual lived experiences, may lead to misleading interpretations. Moreover, analyzing content without considering its cultural, economic, and social context can result in erroneous conclusions. Therefore, it is essential to approach social media data with a careful and critical perspective, taking into account the limitations of the data and the broader contextual factors in which they are embedded.

1.3. Socioeconomic Dynamics and Career Drift in Turkey

In recent years, as in much of the world, socioeconomic changes in Turkey—such as increasing job insecurity and rising youth unemployment—have led to growing uncertainty in individuals' career trajectories. It is becoming increasingly difficult for university graduates in Turkey to shape their ca-

reers in a planned and deliberate manner, particularly for those who graduate from lesser-known institutions, with many waiting an average of 13 months to find employment (Esas Sosyal & SIA Insight, 2023). A significant portion of the youth population in Turkey works in jobs unrelated to their fields of study. This misalignment is noted to have a negative impact on the development of professional identity (Sunar, 2023, p. 45). Rather than reflecting strategic, long-term career planning, this situation underscores the necessity of adapting to current economic and structural conditions.

For example, individuals aspiring to careers in the public sector often spend extended periods preparing for the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS), during which they are compelled to work in temporary and insecure jobs—thus effectively *drifting* through their careers. Structural issues such as education-employment mismatch, the gap between qualifications and opportunities, and inadequate vocational guidance are among the primary challenges Turkish youth face in the labor market (Akçacı & Altınok, 2023). Pressured to quickly integrate into the job market after graduation, many young people are observed to steer away from long-term planning and instead opt for temporary, insecure forms of employment. This trend is particularly associated with economic uncertainties, trade disruptions, and high levels of informal employment in the Asia-Pacific region (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2025). While these dynamics increase dissatisfaction and a sense of detachment from one's profession at the individual level, they also negatively impact productivity and the sustainable development of the labor force at the societal level.

The widespread use of social media among young adults in Turkey provides a unique opportunity to analyze career-related experiences through personal narratives. Posts on platforms like X and Ekşi Sözlük that express themes of "exhaustion," "regret," and "meaninglessness" reveal the psychosocial dimensions of career drift. These digital narratives serve as critical sources for uncovering individual experiences and societal dynamics that official labor statistics often fail to capture. This study, conducted within the context of

Turkey, contributes to understanding the experience of career drift as intertwined with cultural, economic, and structural factors. It also offers recommendations for reconfiguring career counseling practices in accordance with principles of individual awareness and life design.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on social media content in which individuals narrate their career experiences, drawing data specifically from the X and Ekşi Sözlük platforms. These platforms were selected because they allow users to publicly share spontaneous, introspective, and often emotionally expressive accounts of their everyday lives and career experiences.

The research was conducted between January and March 2025. During data collection, both keyword and hashtag-based searches were used. On X, posts were retrieved using advanced search filters with the following keywords and hashtags: "my profession doesn't represent me," "a job I took up unwillingly," "wrong career choice," "I found myself in this job," "I started work without planning," "I'm drifting" #career, #drift, #profession, #uncertainty, #careerchange, #iwishidnevertakenit.

A total of 205 posts written in Turkish and thematically related to career drift were manually reviewed. Posts lacking thematic relevance were excluded, resulting in 80 posts being included in the analysis. Similarly, data from Ekşi Sözlük were collected via topic-based searches using the following entry titles: "A profession done unwillingly," "Wrong career choice," "My profession doesn't represent me," "I'm drifting," "I started work without planning." Of the 58 entries reviewed, 40 with strong thematic coherence and depth were selected.

This study is limited to text-based content. Visuals, videos, and user profile data were excluded, and only content written in Turkish was analyzed. In accordance with ethical standards, usernames, dates, and location data were anonymized; analysis focused solely on the content itself (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). While these limitations may restrict generalizability, the findings offer valuable insights into how individuals articulate their career experiences through digital narratives. Since the data primarily reflect urban, young adult users who are active on digital platforms, interpretations should be considered within this social context.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study was designed within the framework of qualitative research methods and structured using a case study model. A case study enables in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon or social context within its natural setting (Büyüköztürk, 2010; Yin, 2018). The focus of this study is individuals' career-related experiences shared via social media platforms. The main objective is to understand the phenomenon of "career drift" through social media content alone and to explain it through a structured analysis. The Life Design Paradigm, a postmodern career theory, was adopted as the theoretical framework to interpret the findings. This paradigm views career as a subjective narrative shaped by identity development and the search for meaning (Savickas, 2013; Hartung, 2011).

2.2. Study Group and Sampling Method

The study group consists of publicly available career-related narratives shared by individuals on social media platforms (X and Ekşi Sözlük). Purposeful sampling was employed, with a specific focus on "criterion sampling." This method allows for the selection of content that meets predefined characteristics aligned with the study's objectives (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Inclusion criteria were: content had to be written in Turkish, directly reference career-related themes (e.g., career choice, regret, or lack of direction), and be publicly accessible. Based on these criteria, a total of 120 digital texts were selected—80 from X and 40 from Ekşi Sözlük.

2.3. Data Collection Process

Data were collected between January and March 2025 using digital search techniques. On X, posts

were manually retrieved using keyword- and phrase-based search filters. Keywords included: "wrong career choice," "my profession doesn't represent me," "I found myself in this job," "a profession I took up unwillingly," and "I'm drifting." For Ekşi Sözlük, entries were searched under topic headings such as "A profession done unwillingly" and "Unplanned career beginnings." These entries were evaluated in terms of narrative structure, emotional content, and thematic depth. Only textual content was considered; usernames, dates, locations, and visual media were excluded for ethical reasons. All data were anonymized, systematically categorized and coded in Excel (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely recognized qualitative method for identifying patterns, meanings, and interpretations within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Şad et al., 2019). This approach was chosen due to its suitability for exploring the nuanced experiences and narratives of participants. The analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which provided a systematic structure for interpreting the data.

Initially, the researcher engaged in familiarization with the data by reading all posts / transcripts multiple times to develop a holistic understanding of the content. During this phase, attention was paid to emotional tones, recurring expressions, and narrative styles, which helped identify key themes and patterns. Following this, the texts were subjected to line-by-line coding, where statements reflecting career experiences, decision points, internal conflicts, and shifts in direction were converted into open codes. These codes were then grouped based on conceptual similarity and organized into higher-level thematic structures, representing overarching patterns in the data.

To ensure comprehensiveness and consistency, the identified themes were reviewed against the entire dataset. Each theme was redefined according to its psychosocial dimensions and given analytical titles that accurately captured its essence. Finally, the findings were reported by linking the identified themes to the Life Design Paradigm, providing a theoretical context for the results.

Throughout the analysis, each theme was conceptualized in relation to individuals' internal reflections, social expectations, and identity-related disruptions within their career experiences. Coding was conducted manually, and both codes and themes were systematically documented in a digital database (Excel) to enhance transparency and reproducibility. To assess inter-coder reliability, a second researcher independently coded a random sample of 25 texts. The calculated inter-coder agreement was 87%, which is considered a high level of reliability in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014).

Thematic analysis proved to be an effective method for this study, as it enabled the reconstruction of participants' career experiences through their own narratives. It facilitated the discovery of layered meanings within the textual data and enabled the identification of the social-psychological dimensions underlying career drift (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). By following a rigorous and systematic approach, the analysis ensured robustness and validity in capturing the complexities of participants' lived experiences.

2.5. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for qualitative research were adopted: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

For credibility, the use of naturally occurring, user-generated data—without researcher intervention—allowed the narratives to be studied in their original context. The data analysis process was conducted transparently—through open coding, theme development, and theoretical interpretation—ensuring consistency with the chosen theoretical framework.

In terms of transferability, the contextual boundaries of the study were clearly defined, and it was noted that the data largely represent young, urban, digitally engaged individuals. Representative excerpts were included in the presentation of themes to support readers in developing contextual judgments.

To ensure dependability, the analysis process was meticulously documented, including the construction of a thematic code matrix. An independent researcher coded a random sample of 25 texts, and the resulting inter-coder agreement rate was 87%, indicating a high level of reliability (Miles et al., 2014).

Finally, for confirmability, the researcher maintained a reflexive approach throughout the study. Interpretations were supported by direct data excerpts and theoretical references to minimize subjectivity. This comprehensive approach reinforces both the methodological rigor and ethical responsibility of the research.

3. Findings

The analysis of user-generated content from X and Ekşi Sözlük revealed five main themes related to career drift: *Externally Driven Career Orientation*, *Vocational Meaninglessness and Identity Ambiguity*, *The Permanence of Temporary Solutions*, *Digital Lament and Narrative Coping*, and *Redirection and Deferred Future Narratives*. These themes reflect how individuals experience, interpret, and respond to misalignment between their careers and personal identities. The data come from public posts, not from interviews or surveys, so the users did not participate in a research context. However, the anonymity of platforms like Ekşi Sözlük appears to allow for candid, reflective accounts—many entries are not impulsive but carefully written over time, often expressing long-standing concerns about work and self.

One of the clearest patterns in the data is Externally Driven Career Orientation. Many users described entering their careers not by choice, but due to pressure from family, financial need, or academic results. For example, one user wrote, *"My family chose my university major—I just signed the form."* Another said, *"I did whatever the economic conditions demanded."* These statements suggest that career paths are often shaped by necessity rather than personal interest. Some users entered fields based on exam scores or peer decisions: *"My exam score was low, so I just went where it could get me,"* or *"My friends were applying, so I applied too."* In these cases, the career path begins as a default option, not a goal. This aligns with research on structural constraints in career development, where personal agency is limited by social and economic conditions.

Related to this is Vocational Meaninglessness and Identity Ambiguity, where users express a disconnect between their jobs and their sense of self. Even when successful, some feel emotionally detached or empty. One user said, *"I'm successful at work, but I feel like a failure."* Another noted, *"There's no connection between who I am and what I do."* This gap often leads to a sense of performance—acting a role rather than living it. As one user put it, *"I post my career progress on LinkedIn, but nothing inside me feels like it's progressing."* The metaphor of clothing or uniforms came up often: *"The uniform I wear doesn't feel like it belongs to me."* These expressions suggest that while the job may be stable or respected, it does not contribute to a coherent personal identity. This experience is consistent with theories of alienation in modern work, where individuals fulfill roles without feeling ownership over them.

Another recurring theme is The Permanence of Temporary Solutions. Many users described taking jobs they thought would be short-term, only to find themselves stuck years later. One wrote, *"I said it would be temporary—months turned into years."* Another said, *"My dream was in a different field, but time just passed."* The initial compromise becomes a path that is hard to leave, partly due to financial stability and the comfort of routine. As one user explained, *"Once I got my first paycheck, I settled in. It was easy, but now I feel chained."* Another added, *"It was all supposed to be temporary, but somehow I developed a sense of belonging."* This shows how temporary decisions can become permanent through inertia—a phenomenon sometimes called "drift" in career literature. The lack of active decision-making does not mean lack of regret; many users express a quiet resignation to paths they did not choose.

In response to these experiences, users often turn to Digital Lament and Narrative Coping. They use humor and irony to talk about their struggles, which may function as coping mechanisms for managing frustration. Statements like *"The best I can do about my career is make jokes about it"* or *"I start Monday hopeful with coffee, end Friday in burnout"* suggest a mix of resignation and resistance. These

posts are not just personal complaints—they often invite recognition from others. For example, *"Corporate life: looks organized on the outside, depression on the inside,"* or *"My job description is vague, but they expect clarity from me,"* reflect shared frustrations. By posting these, users may be seeking connection or validation, turning private struggles into public commentary. This kind of expression can be seen as a form of narrative coping, where telling the story helps make sense of the experience.

Another said, *"I stayed silent for years. Now I'm finally speaking for my own life."* This does not always mean immediate action, but it signals a re-evaluation of what matters. For some, it's the beginning of a new career path; for others, it's a mental shift toward authenticity.

Table 1 presents a thematic summary of these findings, including sub-themes and illustrative quotes.

Table 1. Career Drift Analysis – Code Matrix

Theme	Sub-theme / Conceptual Focus	Representative Codes	Sample Narratives (Quotes)
1. Career Orientation Beyond Personal Control	Family, exam, or economic obligation-driven orientation	family pressure, test score placement, had to get a job, peer influence	"My family made the university choice; I just signed the papers." "I did what the economic conditions required."
	Unplanned entry into career	randomness, automatic progression, external direction	"I got a low score and went where it would take me." "My friends applied, so I did too."
2. Vocational Meaninglessness and Identity Confusion	Misalignment between identity and profession	self-conflict, lack of representation, alienation	"I'm good at my job, but I feel like a failure." "There's no connection between who I am and what I do."
	Role-playing and inner void	pretending, symbolic identity, internal collapse	"I write about my career growth on LinkedIn, but nothing's growing inside me." "Wearing this uniform feels like it doesn't belong to me."
3. Permanence of Temporary Solutions	Loss of awareness in the process	temporary status, time distortion, institutional obligation	"It was supposed to be temporary; months turned into years." "My dream was in another field, but time passed."
	Routine regret	habit, drift, situational acceptance	"Once I got my first paycheck, I got used to it. It was easy—but I became chained." "Everything was temporary—then it became my identity."
4. Digital Lament and Narrative Coping	Coping through humor and irony	sarcasm, social media humor, cultural reframing	"The best I can do for my career is make jokes." "I start the week hopeful with coffee, end it drained on Friday."
	Sharing collective loneliness	shared sentiment, visibility need, normalization	"Corporate life: order on the outside, depression on the inside." "My job description is vague, but they expect clarity from me."
5. Search for Redirection and Delayed Future Vision	Desire for change and self-awareness	new beginning, late transformation, search for meaning	"I started university again at 40." "I'm scared, but this is my life."
	Value-centered career vision	spiritual fulfillment, self-agency, inner empowerment	"Now I prioritize values, not the job itself." "I've been silent for years. Now I speak for my own life."

Representative Codes refer to recurring conceptual markers identified through open coding. Sub-themes reflect key conceptual clusters under each main theme, deepening the analysis. Sample Narratives are anonymized, illustrative quotes sourced from social media content.

Finally, some users describe Redirection and Deferred Future Narratives—a growing awareness that change is possible, even later in life. One user said, *"I started university again after turning 40."* Another wrote, *"I'm scared, but this life is mine."* These statements point to a shift from passivity to agency. The focus moves from external rewards (salary, status) to internal values. As one user put it, *"I no longer prioritize the job—I prioritize values."*

The table shows how career drift is not a single experience but rather a complex process shaped by structural, emotional, and identity-related factors. While the data are drawn from online platforms, they reflect broader patterns in how people navigate careers in uncertain and often constrained conditions.

The frequency with which these themes appear in social media content is presented in Table 2.

According to Table 2, the most frequently occurring theme is "Externally Driven Career Orientation," with a rate of 73.3%. This finding indicates that individuals tend to follow career paths shaped by external obligations rather than acting as deliberate and conscious agents in their career development. It is followed by "Vocational Meaninglessness and Identity Ambiguity" at 63.3%, and "Digital Lament and Narrative Coping" at 57.5%. These figures suggest that individuals attempt to make sense of their internal career-related conflicts both within the context of identity construction and through digital narratives.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Themes (n = 120 posts)

Theme	Number of Posts	Percentage (%)
1. Career Orientation Beyond Personal Control	88	73.3%
2. Vocational Meaninglessness and Identity Confusion	76	63.3%
3. Permanence of Temporary Solutions	52	43.3%
4. Digital Lament and Narrative Coping	69	57.5%
5. Search for Redirection and Delayed Future Vision	29	24.1%

The theme "The Permanence of Temporary Solutions", observed at 43.3%, reflects how individuals gradually become fixed in career paths they initially entered unintentionally. Lastly, the theme Redirection and Deferred Future Narratives—the least frequent, at 24.1%—suggests that while the desire for change is less commonly expressed, it nonetheless signals a significant shift.

This quantitative distribution demonstrates that career drift is a common and multilayered experience among individuals; however, the potential for transformative action arising from awareness of this condition remains limited. Table 2 not only indicates the presence of these themes in the content but also reflects the degree to which each theme is experienced, thereby supporting the study's qualitative findings with a quantitative perspective.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that career decisions are not solely the result of individual agency but are significantly shaped by external factors such as economic necessity, family expectations, and societal norms. The digital narratives examined reveal that individuals' career journeys often resemble a flow in which they are carried along, rather than a consciously planned path. This aligns closely with the concept of *career drift*. For example, Bradley and Waller (2017) also found that a significant portion of university graduates experience uncertain, directionless, and indecisive career trajectories as "drifters" after graduation.

One notable aspect of the study is the identity disruption participants experienced in their professional lives. Narratives describing a misalignment between one's job and personal values, or an inability to feel fulfilled despite success, suggest not merely job dissatisfaction but a deeper sense of alienation at the level of career identity. This supports the view that emotional well-being can be seriously compromised when career goals do not align with individual values (Haratsis et al., 2015).

Another notable pattern is how temporary solutions become permanent over time, often without the individual's full awareness. What starts as a stopgap measure gradually turns into a habit, and in some cases, individuals begin to define themselves through those roles. Savickas's (2005b) career construction theory emphasizes the individual's ability to actively shape their own life narrative as a means of reversing such situations. However, the findings of this study suggest that such re-narrativization rarely occurs in practice. Instead, individuals often settle for adapting to their existing circumstances (Savickas, 2013).

The use of humor and irony on social media has become a significant outlet for individuals to express their emotional burdens related to career. Here, humor serves not only as a form of expression but also as a coping strategy and a space for collective catharsis. Andersen (2024) similarly observed that humor in online communities helps individuals manage stress and vulnerability while fostering a sense of shared solidarity. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that social media narratives may be selectively constructed or exaggerated. Finally, some individuals expressed a desire to leave their current career paths and seek a "fresh start." While this aligns to some extent with Savickas's idea of "rewriting the story," most nar-

ratives in this study seem to reflect a longing to escape a constraining present rather than constructing a future through reflective meaning-making.

Taken together, these findings suggest that career drift is not simply a result of individual inadequacy but is instead linked to systemic barriers and identity-related tensions. A growing body of literature supports this view, emphasizing that in the absence of structural guidance mechanisms, individuals are increasingly at risk of academic or professional drift (Mahdjoub & Miliani, 2017). The data from this study suggest that this tendency is especially pronounced among younger individuals influenced by digital culture.

Conclusion

This study offered a thematic analysis of the phenomenon of career drift through social media narratives, providing a limited but meaningful framework for understanding how individuals' career experiences take shape. The findings show that participants' career decisions were largely influenced by external conditions and often resulted in professional identities that did not align with their personal values. The prominence of themes such as *Externally Driven Career Orientation* and *Vocational Meaninglessness* indicates that career development may be shaped more by environmental factors than by self-directed choice.

Narratives revealed that career decisions often emerged in an unplanned manner, that temporary solutions became permanent over time, and that this process typically unfolds not through active awareness, but through passive acceptance. Some posts featured humor and irony as digital coping strategies, suggesting that individuals use social media as a tool to express emotional burdens. On the other hand, the relative scarcity of narratives reflecting attempts at redirection highlights how limited the opportunity for meaningful change can be in the face of structural pressures. While the findings are based on a qualitative sample and cannot be generalized to the broader population, they do offer insight into certain trends in young adults' career experiences. Thus, career drift should not be understood solely as a result of poor individual choices, but rather as a multifaceted process

shaped by structural, cultural, and emotional layers.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study sought to understand the phenomenon of career drift through social media narratives. Like all qualitative research, it has certain limitations. First, the data were drawn exclusively from social media platforms, where individuals often present themselves selectively, and where expressions may be exaggerated, ironic or stylized. Therefore, assuming that the narratives directly and objectively reflect lived experiences could be misleading. The context of these narratives may be shaped by factors such as anonymity or the unique humor norms of social media culture. For this reason, findings should be interpreted with a focus on how the narratives are constructed, rather than taken at face value.

Additionally, the study focuses on individuals who actively produce digital content and participate in such platforms. This inherently narrows the participant profile, excluding individuals who either do not use digital media or do not express their career-related challenges in this manner. Thus, the findings are not intended to reflect society as a whole, but rather aim to construct meaning based on the narratives of a particular group. Moreover, the interpretive role of the researcher was necessarily embedded in the data analysis process. As is typical in qualitative research, this requires acknowledgment that some degree of subjectivity may have influenced theme development. However, care was taken throughout the analysis to remain faithful to the data, and themes were supported by representative excerpts to ensure transparency.

In light of these limitations, several recommendations can be made for future research. First, mixed-method studies that incorporate both social media narratives and offline interviews or life experiences could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Additionally, studies that include more diverse samples in terms of age groups, professional fields, and social classes could reveal how career drift manifests across different

societal contexts. The findings also offer implications for the field of career counseling. Particularly in services aimed at young adults, holistic approaches that center not only on occupational choices but also on life stories and identity are increasingly important. However, progress in this area will require more than individual-level interventions; it also demands policy measures that address structural inequalities. Studies like this one have the potential to inform the design of such policies by offering grounded insights from the field.

References

Akçacı, T., & Altinok, B. (2022). Üniversite mezunları açısından eğitim istihdam ilişkisi. *TURAN: Stratejik Arastirmalar Merkezi, 14*, 565-581.

Andersen, J. C. (2024). The incel subculture: Drifting in and out. *YOUNG.* https://doi.org/10.1177-/11033088241296626.

Bozgeyikli, H. (2022). Kaos kuramına dayalı kariyer psikolojik danışmanlık. In F. Bacanlı & A. Büyükgöze Kavas (Eds.), *Kariyer psikolojik danışmasında çağdaş kuramlar, yaklaşımlar ve modeller* (pp. 218–258). Pegem Akademi.

Bradley, H., & Waller, R. (2017). Gendered and classed graduate transitions to work: How the unequal playing field is constructed, maintained, and experienced. In R. Waller, N. Ingram, & M. Ward (Eds.), *Higher education and social inequalities: University admissions, experiences, and outcomes* (pp. 210–230). Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Büyüköztürk, Ş. (2010). *Sosyal bilimler için veri analizi el kitabı: İstatistik, araştırma deseni, SPSS uygulamaları ve yorum.* Ankara: Pegem Akademi.

Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 10*(6), 807–815. https://doi.org/10.-1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019

Corvite, S., & Hui, J. (2024). Social media as a lens into careers during a changing world of work. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 8*(CSCW2), Article 514, 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1145/3687053

Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the emergent space of digital storytelling. *New Media & Society, 10*(3), 373–391.

da Costa, J. F., & Oliveira, T. C. (2016). Managing Careers: Anchored, Plateaued or Drifting?. In *Organizational Management: Policies and Practices in a Global Market* (pp. 31-62). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Davidson, M., Østerlund, K., & Flaherty, K. (2015). Career drift in a changing world of work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior , 89*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2015.04.001

Davis, J., Wolff, H.-G., Forret, M. L., & Sullivan, S. E. (2020). Networking via LinkedIn: An examination of usage and career benefits. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 118*, 103396. https://doi.-org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103396

Esas Sosyal & SIA Insight. (2023). *Yükseköğretimli gençlerin istihdama geçiş süreci ve kariyer planlama zorlukları: Türkiye örneği* [Araştırma raporu]. Esas Sosyal. https://www.-ilkfirsat.org/files/raporlar/es_sia_arastirma-_ozeti_en.pdf

Guichard, J. (2018). Life design interventions and the issue of identity. In *International handbook of career guidance* (pp. 115–130). Springer.

Gündoğar, D., & Yelboğa, A. (2014). Üniversite öğrencilerinin kariyer kararsızlık düzeyleri ile bazı psikososyal değişkenler arasındaki ilişkilerin incelenmesi. *Eğitim ve Bilim, 39*(176), 69–83. https://doi.org/10.15390-/EB.2014.2906

Hall, D. T. (2002). *Careers in and out of organizations*. SAGE Publications.

Haratsis, J. M., Hood, M., & Creed, P. A. (2015). *Career goals in young adults*. Journal of Career Development, 42(5), 431–445. https://doi.org/10.-1177/0894845315572019

Hartung, P. J. (2011). *Barrier or benefit? Emotion in life-design career counseling*. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 79(2), 296–299. https://doi.org/10.-1016/j.jvb.2011.03.009

Hirschi, A. (2012). The career resources model: An integrative framework for career counsellors. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 40*(4), 369-383. https://doi.org/10.1080-/03069885.2012.700506

Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Psychological Asses. Res.

Kato, H., & Suzuki, Y. (2006). The career development of young workers in Japan: A qualitative

study of the concept of career drift. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* , *6*(2), 103–117. https://doi.org/10-.1007/s10775-006-9098-8

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

Mahdjoub, R., & Miliani, M. (2017). *Education and career guidance in Algeria*. In: Career and Career Guidance in the Knowledge Society (pp. 123–137). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-992-8_7

Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2012). *Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee* (Version 2.0). Association of Internet Researchers. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf

McFarland, L. A., & Ployhart, R. E. (2015). Social media: A contextual framework to guide research and practice. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 100*(6), 1653–1677. https://doi.org/10.-1037/a0039244

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Nota, L., & Rossier, J. (2015). *Handbook of life design: From practice to theory and from theory to practice*. Hogrefe Publishing.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Öktem, M. K., & Yıldız, A. (2021). Türkiye'de üniversite mezunu işsizliği: Nedensellik, sonuçlar ve politika önerileri. *İktisat ve Toplum*, *121*, 15–23.

Page, R. (2012). *Stories and social media: Identities and interaction*. Routledge.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford Uni. Press.

Pryor, R. G. L., ve Bright, J. E. H. (2011). *The chaos theory of careers: A new perspective on working in the twenty-first century*. Taylor & Francis Group

Savickas, M. L. (2005a). The life-design approach to career construction: Action-oriented counseling. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 42*(4), 179–185. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2005.tb00072.x

Savickas, M. L. (2005b). The theory and practice of career construction. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 42–70). John Wiley & Sons.

Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career construction theory and practice. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (2nd ed., pp. 147–183). John Wiley & Sons.

Sunar, L. (2023). Türkiye'de çalışma hayatı ve meslekler (Toplumsal Yapı Araştırmaları - 1; Araştırma Raporları - 1). Toplumsal Yapı Araştırmaları Programı. https://tyap.net/mediaf/Calisma_Hayati.pdf

Super, D. E. (1990). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (2nd ed., pp. 197–261). Jossey-Bass.

Şad, S. N., Özer, N., & Atli, A. (2019). Psikolojide tematik analizin kullanımı. *Eğitimde Nitel Araştırmalar Dergisi, 7*(2), 873-898.

Uluslararası Çalışma Örgütü [International Labour Organization]. (2025). World Employment and Social Outlook 2025: Asia and the Pacific May update. https://doi.org/10.54394/-KQSG9490

Urbanaviciute, I., Udayar, S., & Rossier, J. (2019). Career adaptability and employee well-being over a two-year period: Investigating cross-lagged effects and their boundary conditions. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *111*, 74-90.

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, *15*(3), 398–405. https://doi.org/10.1111-/nhs.12048

Van Dijck, J. (2013). 'You have one identity': Performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, culture & society*, *35*(2), 199-215.

Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2018). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri* (11. Baskı). Seçkin Yayıncılık.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE

Zhang, M., Zhou, S., Wu, Y., & Liu, S. (2024). Pressure from social media: Influence of social media usage on career exploration. *Career Development International*, *29*(1), 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-01-2023-0016