

The Challenges of White-Collar Professionals in Post Covid-19 in Türkiye: Possibilities, Tactics, and Crisis

Covid-19 Sonrası Dönemde Türkiye’de Beyaz Yakalı Profesyonellerin Dinamikleri: İmkânlar, Taktikler ve Kriz

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Abstract: This study examines how the working models, lifestyle, working, and everyday life of white-collar professionals in Türkiye have evolved in the post-pandemic era. It explores the shift from office-based work to remote and hybrid models, and how these changes have influenced both working dynamics and lifestyle. We elaborate on two main research questions: (1) How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted white-collar working practices? (2) How has the white-collar lifestyle transformed after the pandemic? Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 white-collar professionals working remotely or in hybrid arrangements. We analyzed the data thematically using ATLAS.ti and the findings demonstrated that remoteness and hybridity have become the new norm. These shifts are not limited to work environments but extend to various aspects of their lives, including consumption patterns, embodied experiences, and spatial practices.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Lifestyle, Habitus, Remoteness, White-collar Professionals.

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Öz: Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de beyaz yakalı profesyonellerin yaşam tarzlarının, çalışma modellerinin ve gündelik pratiklerinin pandemi sonrası dönemde nasıl dönüştüğünü incelemektedir. Araştırma, ofis temelli çalışmadan uzaktan/hibrit modellere geçişi ve bu değişimin hem çalışma dinamiklerini hem de genel yaşam tarzlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini ele almaktadır. Çalışma iki temel araştırma sorusuna odaklanmaktadır: (1) Covid-19 pandemisi beyaz yakalı çalışma pratiklerini nasıl etkilemiştir? (2) Pandemi sonrasında beyaz yakalı yaşam tarzı nasıl dönüşmüştür? Bu amaçla, uzaktan/hibrit modellerde çalışan 26 beyaz yakalı profesyonelle yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş; katılımcıların yaşam tarzlarına ve deneyimledikleri değişimlere ilişkin veriler toplanmıştır. Veriler ATLAS.ti kullanılarak tematik analize tabi tutulmuştur. Bulgularımız, uzaktan ve hibrit çalışmanın beyaz yakalı profesyoneller için yeni norm haline geldiğini göstermektedir. Bu dönüşümler yalnızca çalışma ortamlarıyla sınırlı kalmamakta, tüketim kalıpları, bedensel deneyimler ve mekânsal pratikler gibi gündelik yaşamın çeşitli boyutlarına da yayılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Covid-19 Pandemisi, Yaşam Tarzı, Habitus, Uzaktanlık, Beyaz Yakalı Profesyoneller.

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1. Introduction

Social scientists in Türkiye have long been interested in white-collarness, typically in the context of class debates (Bora and Erdoğan, 2011; Erdayı, 2012; Nuro, 2014) and precarization (Özalp and Yaman, 2020; Vatansever 2013). These studies focus on analyzing whether white-collar professionals should be considered middle class, as well as the precariousness of their working conditions, which are characterized by increasing unemployment, insecurity, and uncertainty (Bora and Erdoğan, 2011; Peng et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2010). Although such research emphasizes that white-collar workers are not a homogenous social group, it finds that these professionals often share a degree of cultural capital, such as holding a university degree, engaging in work that requires advanced skills, and having “distinctive” lifestyle tastes (Giddens, 1983; Hyman 1983; Urry 1983). Previous studies have also associated white-collar roles, in general, with possessing advanced skills, engaging in innovative tasks, taking responsibility for enhancing organizational productivity through team management, holding prestigious jobs, earning higher incomes, and having higher educational qualifications (Peng et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016).

Recently, there has been a renewed focus on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on white-collar professional life. These discussions explore how the pandemic has transformed working experiences, including the shift to remote, flexible, or hybrid working models, and the increased digitalization of work (Baydar, 2012; Değirmenci, 2022; Omay, 2020). The transformation to remote and hybrid models is closely associated with white-collar occupations (Arntz et al., 2020, 383; Galasso and Foucault, 2020). Although these models existed before the pandemic in many countries, including Türkiye, the pandemic’s effects have significantly accelerated and expanded their adoption. As suggested by Arntz et al. (2020), there was a dramatic increase in remote and hybrid work during the pandemic in Germany and the Netherlands. Furthermore, Değerli (2023) indicated that individuals who work remotely or in a hybrid model for more than six months tend to prefer this arrangement over traditional office work, and that the nature of a particular field (e.g., finance, technology, banking, software, IT, education) influences the preference between hybrid and completely remote setups.

In addition to transforming working practices, and creating new social challenges—such as the blurring of work and personal spaces, increasing gender inequality at home, and adverse health effects (Neely, 2020; Arntz, 2020; Xiong et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2020) – the Covid-19 pandemic also resulted in negative economic impacts on a global scale (Goodell, 2020). National incomes declined worldwide due to the pandemic, particularly affecting economies heavily reliant on their service, tourism, and textile sectors (Fernandes, 2020; Kavindra, 2021). The global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has been 1.4 times greater than that of 2008, as it disrupted production supply chain, the health and service sectors and consumer demand (Yagi and Managi, 2021). White-collar workers have become vulnerable to the economic impacts of this crisis, and as a result, have had to reassess their future objectives (Han and Hart, 2021). Overall, the pandemic has led to negative economic consequences, including a decrease in welfare levels and production, financial instability (Demir and Esen, 2021; Eşsiz and Durucan, 2021; Beşirli, 2022). For Türkiye, the negative impact has been exacerbated by the fact that the country was already experiencing an economic recession (Sertkaya and Baş, 2021). The combined effects of the existing recession and pandemic-era pressures have diminished individuals’ purchasing power and confronted them with significant economic challenges.

The present study contributes to the relevant literature by offering insights into the experiences of white-collar workers from Türkiye, facilitating intercultural interpretation at the intersection of the Covid-19 pandemic and white-collar employment. Based on the premise that the pandemic has induced persistent changes for white-collar professionals in terms of work model preferences, embodiment experiences, relationship to space, and the organization of their lifestyles in general, we address two main research questions: (1) How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted white-collar working practices? and (2) How has the white-collar lifestyle transformed after the pandemic? This article examines how the economic, social, and cultural impacts of the pandemic have changed the socioeconomic position, status, and lifestyle of white-collar professionals. In this context, this article focuses on how white-collar professionals (re)relate to work and the working environment based on the transformations of working models, including hybrid

and remote working, due to the pandemic. Secondly, this study shows how white-collar professionals are coping with the effects of the pandemic and how they have reorganized their lives. To answer these research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with 26 white-collar professionals in Türkiye across various industries. Our semi-structured interviews focused on the impact of the pandemic on their lifestyles, working experiences, and the meanings they attach to white-collariness. By contextualizing these insights within established theoretical frameworks, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the symbolic dimensions of white-collariness and the transformation of the post-pandemic white-collar world. While drawing on these theoretical frameworks, we also seek to make a theoretical contribution by reconsidering and revising them on the basis of our empirical data (Layder, 1998).

In the following, we will begin with our theoretical and conceptual framework on lay practical consciousness, ontological security and habitus. Then, we will describe the data and qualitative method used to understand the experiences of white-collar professionals. Finally, we will detail our findings with a conclusion and additional remarks.

2. Theoretical Background: Habitus and Practical Consciousness

The economic and social repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic have affected many aspects of white-collar professionals’ everyday lives causing significant disruptions in their daily routines. Before addressing these challenges and the strategies employed to cope with the effects of the pandemic, it is important to understand the white-collar lifestyle and everyday life. We draw on the concepts of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), practical consciousness and ontological security (Giddens, 1986) that are associated with lifestyle practices and lifestyle to explain the underpinnings of white-collar life. Also, comprehending the experiences of change and transformation in the everyday life of white collars seems to be significant for understanding the social impacts of Covid-19.

Firstly, the concept of habitus refers to the “generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and system of classification of these practices” (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). In the Bourdieusian framework, habitus can be explained as a regulatory structure of embodied practical actions and a classifier structure. Bourdieu (2002: 27) describes habitus as “schemata or structures of perception, conception, and action.” Habitus as an embodied structure also reflects the subjective unconscious emerging as a set of tastes, behaviors, and thoughts. According to him (1997: 72), the habitus in which practices are produced includes agents’ strategies for coping with unforeseen situations. However, these strategies do not stem from the agent’s creativity but from the conditioning influence of the habitus, which drives the agent to act as she/he has to without consciousness and deliberate calculation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127 – 128). Practices emerging as expressions of the habitus shaped by and within social structures are embodied through the social actions of agents. One specific function of habitus is to shape everyday practices, including rituals, choices, taste, and the products of daily life, according to its own logic. The relations, positions, and struggles of the agents are determined by/within their habitus according to the type of capital they achieve. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119-120) shows that capital, which takes a variety of species in differentiated societies, namely economic (as wealth, income, and resources), symbolic (qualities recognized as worthy of honor or credit), cultural (comprised of cultural products, cultural resources, taste, knowledge, or skills), and social capital (as individual’s communication and networks) is fundamental.

Bourdieu offers a theoretical framework centered on the concept of habitus to explain why people act in certain ways. However, he provides less insight into how individuals interpret their practices in relation to the specific contexts in which those practices take place. Giddens’ (1986) conceptualization of practical consciousness makes more room for the interpretation of human agency so that one can comprehend habitus more dialectically between structure and agent. Giddens (1986: 289), while recognizing the importance of the structural properties, emphasizes the importance of an analysis that prioritizes actors’ activities within a specific context without avoiding a “description of agents’ knowledgeability; a sophisticated account of motivation...” In this context, Giddens’ conceptualization of social practice serves

as a useful theoretical framework for elucidating the dynamic and adaptive dimensions of Bourdieu's notion of habitus.

Secondly, according to Giddens (1986: 50), the routines embedded in everyday life provide predictability and foreseeability, fostering a sense of security for individuals, conceptualized as ontological security. Giddens (1986: 44) refers to the knowledge that underpins practices and is responsible for the reproduction of everyday life as practical consciousness, which is critical for constituting ontological security. Reflexive navigation of social practices by means of observing ongoing in the environment by the individual is possible through practical consciousness. Thus, practical consciousness serves as the underlying logic of the reproduction of everyday life, by providing individuals with grounds for adapting to situations in daily life and giving everyday life its repetitive nature. Practical consciousness routinizes daily life and constitutes the reproduction of both society and the personalities of acting individuals (Giddens, 1986: 60). Giddens (1986: 61) argues that the significance of daily routines in terms of ontological security can best be grasped by analyzing the critical instances in which these routines are disrupted, damaged, or collapsed, and he defines these critical instances as situations that are unpredictable, radical conditions of rupture which affect a significant number of individuals and remove or threaten the certainty of institutionalized routines. These critical instances undermine ontological security, by disrupting the ordinary character of daily routines, as it is constituted through these routines (Giddens, 1986: 63). What should not be overlooked is that these threatening elements also tend to acquire an absolutely routinized character (Giddens, 1986: 61). In other words, individuals attempt to reconstruct damaged ontological security by making new circumstances part of their predictable daily routines under conditions that undermine the framework of the practical awareness of social life. This attempt itself needs to be scrutinized.

Drawing on this theoretical framework and considering the pandemic as a factor that threatens ontological security and white-collar habitus, this article will shed light on how white-collar workers re-organized their disrupted lifestyle in the post-pandemic era, how they constituted their ontological security by making it part of their practical consciousness, and what kinds of strategies, linked to types of capital and practical consciousness, they applied in order to maintain their social positions.

3. Methodology

This study centers on the experiences of white-collar professionals before, during, and after the pandemic on the axes of lifestyle and the transformation of working models. In-depth interviews enable researchers to discover the daily experiences and thoughts of participants by referring to Charmaz (2006) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000). In this context, we applied the in-depth interview technique. At the beginning of our research, we were concerned about conducting remote interviews, as the face-to-face interview technique is a "gold standard" and accepted as superior to remote interviews in which observing the facial expressions of participants are limited (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006: 390). However, remote methods that are applied intensively, especially during the pandemic, have practical advantages (Flick, 2009; Zadkowska et al., 2022). Our primary advantage was the pre-existing familiarity of our participants with digital platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Teams as part of their professional workflows. Indeed, the primary rationale for selecting digital platforms as our interview tool was their utility and convenience for our respondents.

By applying the digital interview technique, a total of 26 participants in Türkiye were selected for this study, including 14 women and 12 men aged 27 to 45 with at least five years of work experience, whose professions are listed in the table below, (see Table 1). We conducted in-depth interviews by using snowball sampling. We determined three criteria for participation based on the relevant literature (Hopp et al., 2009; Peng et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma, 2016) on the definition of white-collar tasks: Each participant needed to (1) have work experience before, during, and after the pandemic; (2) be a white-collar employee in the private sector and take on creative/innovative tasks; and (3) have at least a university degree. We developed a semi-structured interview guide that aimed to cover the impact of the pandemic on (1) white-collar professionals' lifestyles, (2) working experiences, and (3) the meanings of white-collariness in general. We conducted interviews online via the Zoom application and collected the data in

2024. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Assessment Committee at Düzce University. Our interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. We began each interview by asking the participant to describe their current job and then asked them about their everyday life, hobbies, and routines. First, we asked about their thoughts on the meaning of being white-collar both in terms of everyday life and the work environment, in order to discover their habitus, which is linked to lifestyle. Second, we asked how their lives have changed during and after the pandemic. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

P	Age	Education	Profession	Experience	Working models
1	42	Bachelor’s	Planning Chief	10 years	Hybrid
2	27	Master’s	Expert Chemist	5 years	Hybrid
3	39	Master’s	Human Resources Specialist	14 years	Hybrid
4	32	PhD	Academic	5 years	Hybrid
5	34	Bachelor’s	Lead Generation Specialist	11 years	Hybrid
6	42	Master’s	Industrial Designer	18 years	Hybrid
7	34	Bachelor’s	Sales Representative	11 years	Hybrid
8	36	Master’s	Senior Specialist	7 years	Hybrid
9	32	Bachelor’s	Human Resources Specialist	10 years	Hybrid
10	40	Bachelor’s	Executive Editor	10 years	Hybrid
11	33	Bachelor’s	Social Services Specialist	7 years	Hybrid
12	34	PhD	Academic	8 years	Hybrid
13	35	Bachelor’s	Customer Relations Professional	7 years	Remote
14	34	Master’s	Computer Programmer	8 years	Remote
15	32	PhD	Research Assistant	6 years	Hybrid
16	34	Bachelor’s	Textile Engineer	15 years	Hybrid
17	44	Master’s	Banker	27 years	Hybrid
18	45	Master’s	Textile Engineer	24 years	Hybrid
19	34	Master’s	Textile Engineer	13 years	Hybrid
20	33	Master’s	Textile Engineer	10 years	Hybrid
21	38	Bachelor’s	Accounting Manager	10 years	Hybrid
22	29	PhD	Engineer	8 years	Hybrid
23	28	Bachelor’s	Field operations specialist	9 years	Hybrid
24	33	Bachelor’s	Product manager	4 years	Hybrid
25	32	Bachelor’s	Software Developer	5 years	Remote
26	40	Bachelor’s	Photographer	6 years	Hybrid

We analyzed our data using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software by applying the thematic analysis technique based on two steps. We first coded our data to generate initial themes and categories. Then, we concentrated the themes and categories around our research question by focusing on the work experiences and lifestyles of white-collar workers. With thematic analysis, we generated a conceptual framework by systematically establishing connections between the identified themes and their corresponding sub-codes. We employed the frequency analysis technique to create word clouds (Figures 1 and 2), by using MAXQDA. To build the word clouds, we asked participants to describe employers who support the hybrid/remote working model and those who do not. We subsequently identified and extracted the most frequently used words from their responses.

4. Findings

We will present and discuss the findings of the study in two phases. The first phase encompasses the organization of lifestyle, the spatiality of white-collarness, and the embodiment of white-collar identity. The second phase involves the post-pandemic transformation of working style, lifestyle, and the spatiality of white-collar professionals. Subsequently, we contextualized these insights within established theoretical frameworks, specifically Bourdieu's (1977; 1984) concepts of habitus and capital, as well as Giddens' (1986) concepts of practical consciousness and ontological security, which are crucial to understanding the social actions of individuals.

4.1. The Organization of the Lifestyle of White-Collar Professionals

Although it is difficult to distinguish between blue- and white-collar workers, discriminatory attitudes and divergences in both groups may still be at stake (Weaver, 1975). Studies have demonstrated that lifestyle and cultural preferences serve as indicators of class differences, with white-collar status being associated with greater affluence, higher levels of educational attainment, and residence in urban areas (Katz-Gerro, 1999). We identified four interconnected layers that characterize the lifestyle of white-collar professionals based on the narratives of the participants. These layers include an intense and fast-paced life, engagement in particular leisure activities, the importance of spatial dynamics, and the relationship with the body. Each of these elements carries symbolic meanings that contribute to how white-collar professionals construct and express their identities.

First, our participants pointed to the intensity of their lives, in terms of workload and the flow of their daily lives, by placing themselves in a cluster. The emphasis of the participants on intensity seems to overlap with the nature of urban life, which is characterized by a high rhythm of social life. Participant 7, highlighted the direct connection between being a white-collar and the intensity of their everyday life, saying "intensity is 'whitening'"³, and went on: "In a similar loop, I go to work in the morning, spending a lot of time in traffic. I go to the cinema or the pub and come home just in time for bed." The participants refer to the intensive lifestyle as a symbolic distinction of white-collarness, utilizing some given patterns, such as prepared foods, preferred leisure time activities, and a calculated schedule loop that white-collar workers try to keep up with. Although there is a risk of viewing white-collar professional as a homogeneous group, white-collarness means having a particular lifestyle, which can be considered through the concept of habitus that refers to a given symbolic, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Our participants highlight the dispositions of a white-collar worker through cultural and symbolic capital, such as "doing yoga or pilates, exercising at a gym, knowing at least two foreign languages", "taking painting or music courses", "traveling frequently, either abroad or domestically", "having leisure time without work", "owning a cat or a dog". Our participants also refer to a fast-paced and intense lifestyle, which is an indicator of their symbolic capital. Their lifestyle holds significance within the microcosm of white-collar culture, where deviations from its unwritten norms can threaten the white-collar identity. The shared symbolic capital among white-collar professionals underscores the existence of a distinct white-collar habitus.

³ This is the exact term used by the participant to refer to the lifestyle components of white-collar workers that would make them more white-collar to the extent that they have these components.

Second, concerning lifestyle organization, the spatiality of white-collar professionals is also a constitutive element of the habitus and a part of their practical consciousness, which signifies the symbolic capital that is actualized in everyday life and becomes the indicator of their distinctive lifestyle (Järvinen and Gundelach, 2007; Kerr and Robinson, 2016). For instance, Participant 6 said office infrastructure and design have a symbolic meaning as constitutive elements of the white-collar habitus: *We have a very good coffee machine. We even have a mobile Starbucks in the office. A place to lie down and a sofa when it's necessary. There is always a regular happy hour.* While Participant 13 highlighted a distinction between “production office” and “management office”, suggesting that the management office, which is dominated by white-collar workers, is endowed with facilities and comforts such as resting areas, comfortable tables in the garden for smokers, unlimited coffee, tea, and fruit, in contrast to the “production office,” where mostly blue-collar employees work. One of the participants said they believe the place white-collar employees work needs to be a comfort zone, while also relying on other cultural tastes as symbolic capital, assumed to be the definitive character of the white-collar habitus, in defining the working environment of employees.

Being a white-collar is particularly meaningful in metropolitan areas, since these spaces provide them with various sources of symbolic capital through which they can associate themselves with the white-collar lifestyle. For instance, Participant 2 works in a small city and stated that “small cities are not the places where people want to live. White collars would like to have an active life in bigger cities.” Participant 4, who used to work in a small city called Ardahan, and currently works in the Turkish capital city Ankara, compared her white-collariness in both cities, highlighting the distinctive symbolic capital that the current big city environment provides her by referring to cultural opportunities such as gyms and sophisticated restaurants. Likewise, Participant 6 also explicitly expressed that certain parts of İstanbul offer more symbolic capital to white-collar workers, such as “good cafes”, adding that *“you cannot equate me with a white-collar professional in Bağcılar (a suburban neighborhood in İstanbul).”* She went on to link her alma mater to the part of the city she lives in, saying *“I attach myself to the region of the city based on educational status”*, which she also related to her social capital, as she implied, she engages with people like herself in her neighborhood. All these narratives concerning the intricate relationship between space and white-collariness reveal that spatial features function as symbolic capital, which becomes an indicator of the other types of capital, such as social and economic.

Third and final dimension of the white-collar lifestyle pertains to the embodiment of white-collar habitus, conceptualized here as the “sterile embodiment” of the white-collar professionals. This embodiment extends beyond mere appearance to encompass attitudes and behaviors. Participant 3 put it this way: *“A white-collar worker should always pay attention to how she dresses, word choice, and good diction.”* The bodily disposition of white-collar workers is also determined by their fast, mobile, and intense lifestyle, and we can see a shift from an official look to an unofficial look, in a sense. For example, Participant 7 said of footwear: *“There is a sneaker habit now. It is about the urban lifestyle. You wear a jacket or suit etc., but you combine it with sneakers... because you're in a rush. Sneakers seem white-collar to me... Thanks a lot, white-collariness, for giving us that comfort.”* The embodiment of white-collariness, was also defined by participants, as expectations of sports and beauty facilities in workplaces, with good looks in general.

The presentation of the self by paying special attention to style, beauty, and neatness is one of the most significant reference points of being a white-collar worker (Burger et al., 2015) that has been undermined by the remote/hybrid working model due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While Participant 2 drew attention to luxury exhibited conspicuously, Participant 6’s narrative demonstrates the significance of the investment in the body among white-collar workers: *“I know employers look at the way you dress. I dress well. Some people try to show the money they earn through their bodies.”* The emphasis on looking good is not only a personal disposition but a structural code on the body of the labor market. Participant 2 suggested that she was chosen to meet the CEO instead of her colleague, who was told she had ‘messy’ hair, due to her presentable appearance.

4.2. New ‘Normal’: Reorganization of Working Models of White-Collar Professionals

Our research indicates that the remote and hybrid working models that became prevalent during the pandemic continue to shape working practices in the post-pandemic era. Moreover, these increasingly widespread working styles have now become a significant criterion for white-collar professionals in Türkiye. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that, although some employees have experienced difficulties adapting to this transformation due to a lack of remote working experience, remote working conditions have become a norm since the onset of COVID-19 (Kong et al., 2022; Pacheco, 2024). When participants were asked to compare the key characteristics of their working models before and after the pandemic, they identified the most fundamental shift as the transition from in-person to hybrid or remote working models. Our respondents expressed that although they had never worked remotely before the Covid-19, they now work either in a hybrid or remote model. As Participant 7, a sales representative, put it

“I work in a hybrid model, which provides me with significant comfort. I don't need to be in the office. Sometimes I consider changing jobs, but the flexibility of hybrid work is a major advantage in my life. I set my own working hours, and the thought of being in the same office at 8 AM every day seems daunting to me now. This flexibility has become a crucial benchmark for me.”

The most common clarity our participants sought in employment was the ability to work in a hybrid or remote environment, which is also seen as a “new” working culture. As Participant 6 described it, *“the situation has changed irreversibly for me. No one is seeking full-time, in-office jobs anymore, including myself. I also consider international opportunities, where remote work is the norm. At our level, we negotiate these terms.”* The comfort sought by the participants is closely related to how this working model allows white-collar workers to organize their daily lives and lifestyle. Within these adaptable working models, white-collar professionals can structure their work hours, location, and free time according to their preferences. A hybrid or remote working style, which allows workers to use their time and space flexibly, presents a significant advantage for white-collar professionals who associate white collariness with constant intensity and hustle. However, this transformation appears to also alter the nature of the control mechanism and power relation between employees and employers, affecting all aspects of time management, workspace, and work execution. First, remote or hybrid working has enabled white-collar workers to organize the labor process both temporally and spatially, affecting their lifestyle and spatiality. This shift has partially transferred control to white-collar employees and made the control process more flexible. In this regard, it is an extension and consequence of the flexible working models that we now consider the new “normal” (Değerli, 2023). Conversely, the shift in control has caused discomfort among employers, leading them to adopt various strategies to monitor and manage white-collar employees. In a sense, this monitoring stems from advances in communication and information technologies that have blurred the boundaries between work and non-work, generating expectations among employers and clients that employees remain accessible beyond working hours (Neely, 2020: 276). Our participants cited several strategies implemented by their employers, including phone calls, requests to keep cameras on, increased meeting frequency, flexible working hours, and attempts to enforce in-person work. Participant 13, reflected:

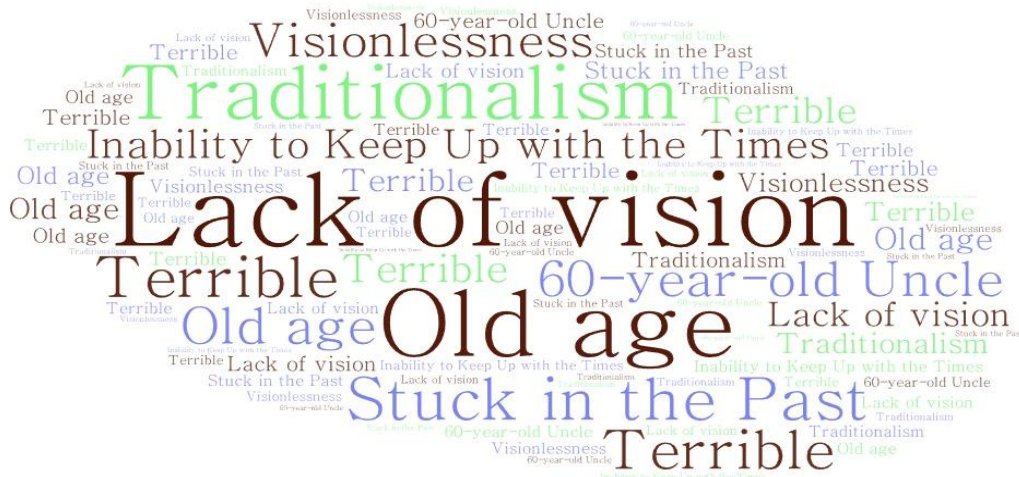
“Our previous manager closely monitored activity on Teams, where inactivity for five minutes triggered a yellow ‘away’ status. This led to intrusive check-ins like ‘What are you doing?’ or ‘Are you okay?’ Working remotely, we often resorted to constantly moving the mouse to avoid scrutiny.”

When we asked our participants to describe employers who support remote or hybrid work and those who do not, they described employers who support it as modern, while those who do not support it were described as outdated. This reflects a prominent tendency among employees to adapt to this new working norm in a lasting manner after the pandemic. As Waldrep and colleagues (2024: 19) suggest, employees have come to view remote work as ‘non-negotiable,’ indicating that, if their preference for remote or hybrid arrangements, which bring flexibility to their lives, is not met by their employer, they are willing to quit and seek alternative employment to maintain control over their work arrangements. It becomes more comprehensible why employees in our study describe employers who are reluctant to adopt remote or hybrid work using expressions such as ‘stuck in the past,’ ‘lacking vision,’ and ‘outdated,’ as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Participants' Views on Employers Embracing Remote/Hybrid Work



Figure 2: Participants' Views on Employers Resistant to Remote/Hybrid Work



Although some managers and employers are cautious about this new normal, it has turned into a working culture for white-collar employees and even a component of the symbolic capital of the white-collar world. For instance, participant 16, who are customer relations professional, noted that white-collar workers in this industry increasingly prefer remote work, especially after the pandemic. They expressed surprise upon learning that someone in the same sector still commutes to the office, commenting, “Wait, you’re going into the office for that?”. The same participant stated that it is impossible for her to imagine using connecting public transportation to commute to the office, which is consistent with research highlighting that reduced travel time is an important factor in opting for remote work (Stefaniec, et al., 2022).

As Figures 1 and 2 show, shifting from face-to-face to remote/hybrid work means catching up with what is contemporary for participants, while full-time face-to-face work is defined as anachronistic. Moreover, these symbolic expressions demonstrate that remote or hybrid work has become a widespread trend within white-collar professions. As Eşici and colleagues (2024) demonstrated in their study, organizational flexibility and adaptability to emerging working models is regarded by white-collar professionals as crucial to the establishment of work–life balance. Conversely, in-person, on-site work is increasingly perceived as

unacceptable. Changing preferences of white-collar workers concerning the working model, and the conflict between white-collar workers and employers over the division of hybrid/remote and face-to-face working models, are primarily engendered by the Covid-19, which has revealed the possibility and applicability of remote/hybrid work.

4.3. The Reorganization of the Lifestyle of White-Collar Professionals

Our study shows a nexus between the lifestyles of professionals within the white-collar world, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the economic crises in Türkiye. In the most basic terms, the lifestyles of white-collar workers as a shared cultural identity have changed due to the pandemic. Remote/hybrid work has evolved beyond a mere working arrangement to encompass a fundamental aspect of lifestyles, shaping relationships and interpersonal interactions. First, the shift in work practices, which has minimized the need for face-to-face interaction, has resulted in a predominance of indirect communication. This transformation has inevitably led to distancing among individuals. Consequently, remoteness has become the new “normal” not only in the context of professional work but in interpersonal relationships. However, in indirect communication, the absence of face-to-face interaction necessitates greater effort from individuals to ensure they are understood. For example, Participant 10 articulates the change in human relations as follows:

“Outside the office, we experienced a lot of tension due to misunderstandings related to emphasis, exclamations, and similar factors. We often wrote something intended to be friendly, but the other party interpreted it differently. Even if we included a smiley face in our emails, it was scrutinized for hidden meanings.”

In this context, our findings show that emojis have come to serve as substitutes for gestures and facial expressions during and after the pandemic. The transformation in socialization patterns, a component of daily routines, has led to discomfort among white-collar workers, and they seek to reestablish their social interaction practices. As argued in the literature, remote work may have detrimental effects on social interaction among employees, reducing opportunities for contact and leading to social isolation (Lyzwinski, 2024). Our participants articulated their strategies for resuming daily interaction routines during and after the pandemic, such as organizing Monday breakfasts, using emojis, or team activities. Our research indicates that activities such as coffee breaks, breakfasts, wine tastings, happy hours, and after-work events are characteristic symbols of the white-collar lifestyle, consistent with studies showing that white-collar professionals exhibit patterns of cultural consumption that indicate their socio-cultural position (Aydın, 2009). The pandemic has inevitably affected the frequency of these activities, prompting white-collar workers to develop tactics to preserve their white-collar world. We can even consider our participants' preference for hybrid work over remote work as an effort to maintain these social interactions, lifestyle and protect this world. The practices mentioned by our participants—such as hanging out, meeting at a café or bar, dressing up, and even going to the office—serve both as parts of daily routines and symbols of the white-collar lifestyle. In this context, our participants prefer hybrid work because it preserves this cultural milieu. Indeed, the office increasingly functions as a socializing space rather than merely a work environment, as will be detailed below. Therefore, employees' preference for remote or hybrid work over face-to-face, in-office work should not be understood solely in terms of productivity and job satisfaction (Waldrep et al., 2024; Kong et al., 2022; Stefaniec et al., 2022), but also in relation to the symbolic capital of white-collar status they seek to maintain.

On the other hand, it can be observed that employees prefer hybrid work as an attempt to preserve the embodied of white-collariness, as argued above. The changing working models of white-collar workers have significantly influenced how the body is projected and perceived. Participant 10 highlighted this shift in embodiment based on her hybrid working experience and added: *“I turned into a bear woman (laughs). I just washed my face and hands. At home, I usually wear the same clothes, but when I go to work, I dress differently. It feels special and makes me feel beautiful. It's related to taking care of my body.”* Another factor that has disrupted the white-collar lifestyle and embodiment is the deepening economic crisis in Türkiye following the pandemic. This crisis has not only reduced consumption opportunities but made it difficult to maintain

white-collar lifestyle practices. Our research indicates that the economic crisis has jeopardized this lifestyle and hindered white-collar workers’ ability to preserve their cultural capital. Put another way, the economic capital of most professionals has become insufficient to sustain their lifestyle practices. In this context, our findings show that the white-collar world is in a “crisis”. The corresponding lifestyle holds a distinctive position due to the combination of cultural and economic capital needed to participate. Therefore, the volume and forms of capital individuals possess become crucial. Particularly during economic crises, those rich in economic capital may maintain their previous practices, while others develop certain tactics to protect their lifestyles. In both cases, preserving the white-collar image remains of utmost importance for our participants. In general, white-collar professionals tend to prioritize maintaining the same level of consumption over adapting their lifestyles to economic constraints. For instance, Participant 7, a sales representative aged 34, reflected on how her life has been affected by the economic crisis:

“We still go on those damn vacations, even if it means taking out loans, using credit cards. People go to Europe, buy new phones, and wear the latest outfits, but it's unclear how they manage it. This lifestyle is not sustainable. White-collar workers are motivated by the mindset: 'Everyone else is doing it, so why can't I?'. The economic situation has only made this more apparent.”

Professionals are actively seeking ways to reproduce the cultural capital necessary to conform to the ideal type. Yet, the embodiment experience of white collars, which constitutes their symbolic capital, is jeopardized by the negative economic effects of the pandemic. It appears that they respond reflexively to this threatened experience in two ways: (1) strategically striving to preserve their existing practical consciousness based on internalized habits; or (2) adapting those habits to fit into a new practical consciousness. Our participants explained they had to change their lifestyle and Participant 2, shared her observations: *"I have a colleague who epitomizes the white-collarness. When her expensive perfume ran out, she chose to wait until her next salary to repurchase it rather than switch to another brand. She doesn't abandon her habits but postpones them, sustaining her lifestyle through these practices."* Our research indicates that despite being impacted by the economic crisis, white-collar participants tend to exhibit a preference for maintaining a lifestyle that suggests the crisis does not exist. Maintaining this lifestyle necessitates the strategic utilization of economic and cultural capital to align with the expectations of the white-collar professional sphere. In this respect, the practices of professionals are also symbolic properties that serve as signs of distinction within the white-collar world.

Third and finally, concerning re-organization of lifestyle, our research points to a relationship between spatial utilization and the changing working models that emerged due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the transition in working styles has obviated the necessity for physical presence in office spaces. This shift has, in turn, afforded white-collars spatial flexibility, altering the dynamics of workplace interaction. This flexibility has enabled professionals to work in various locations, including homes and cafés. While it presents significant advantages, it has also disrupted the office routine, a longstanding symbol of the white-collar lifestyle. The office itself, its design, the materials used in it, and the surrounding neighborhood can also be considered distinctive symbols of the white-collar world. As Participant 6 put it: *"I believe a good office is crucial. For instance, my desk faced the Bosphorus on the 13th floor. It featured an open office layout, a modern design, a workshop, and even a bar, exemplifying new-generation office spaces."* In this context, one reason why the participants prefer hybrid working over fully remote arrangements is to preserve these distinctive symbols of their lifestyle. Therefore, the office has regained meaning as a way of maintaining the white-collar lifestyle.

Moreover, going to the office only once or a few times a week has altered the function of the workplace, transforming it into a socializing environment for white-collar workers. As Participant 5 highlighted: *"When I go to the office, I can't work anyway. I end up socializing, drinking coffee, and chatting with colleagues all day. To manage this, I prepare in advance before heading to the office."* This shift is the primary reason participants reported not engaging in work-related tasks while in the office. Participants noted that visiting the office provides a reprieve from the “monotony” of home life. Concurrently, the home has also turned into a workspace. This indicates a spatial transformation where the boundaries between the workplace and the

private sphere increasingly blur. The gradual blurring of the boundaries between the workplace and the private sphere seems to be important in terms of the re-association of white-collar workers with the home. While the home was a physical space many of our participants mostly used to sleep, it has become a space where they spend more time. In addition, with the increase in time spent at home and weakening interpersonal interactions, the tendency of white-collar professionals to spend time outdoors has decreased. Participant 9 explained how the pandemic affected the spatiality of the white-collar world: *"We used to go to places we hadn't seen before, meet our friends, try new tastes... However, we can't even stand crowds for about two years now, and that's because of the pandemic."* The replacement of these practices, which are part of the distinctive world of white-collar workers, with home activities indicates that the relationship professionals establish with space and the meaning they attribute to space has also changed. On the other hand, as a result of the lockdowns and the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, the home has increasingly transformed into an important space not only for work but also for social interaction. While participants reported a significant reduction in time spent outside the home, they also highlighted an increase in house parties and social gatherings as alternative means of maintaining social connections and distinctive lifestyles. This shift underscores the adaptability of individuals to changing conditions, reflecting their practical consciousness.

Another important finding of the research concerning spatial utilization is that changes in labor organization have facilitated spatial mobility. This mobility has essentially removed the necessity for white-collar workers to reside in the same city in which they are employed. Consequently, professionals now have the flexibility to work in one city while living in another. This development is a significant opportunity, particularly in metropolises such as İstanbul, where the economic crisis has been profoundly impactful. Participant 9, who works for a company based in İstanbul but lives in another smaller city, explained how it is possible to work in one city while living in another after the pandemic:

"My husband already works remotely. At a point when it became meaningless to stay in İstanbul, and we wondered what we were going through, I requested to work remotely... My goal was to get out of İstanbul. The economic crisis definitely affected us. Our money is melting and 75% of my salary will probably go to rent... People are fleeing, leaving. Right now, many people are working remotely at the headquarters. For example, an employee can get approval to work remotely for three months because his wife is starting a project in Germany or the US."

5. Conclusion

This study explored how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the lifestyles of white-collar professionals and the reorganization of their life trajectories. Our study makes several contributions to the literature (Aldemir, 2024; Aro et al., 1986; Borozdina, 2025; De Vries, 1997; Dick 1962; Ertan and Sarılioğlu, 2022) by demonstrating how remote and hybrid working models have become white-collar professionals' lifestyles, reshaping not only their professional lives but also their overall way of living. This shift has established remoteness as the new 'normal,' further emphasizing the evolution of work culture and its impact on the white-collar habitus. Second, the findings presented here reveal that white-collar lifestyles have formed a distinctive cosmos with similar characteristics, such as the way of working, everyday life routines, spatiality, and embodiment, which have been disrupted and transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on our theoretical perspectives, we conceptualize this cosmos as a white-collar habitus that implies certain expectations and practices, part of the practical consciousness on which the ontological security of white-collar professionals is based (Giddens, 1986). As Bourdieu (2002) emphasizes, habitus is the generative principle of all practices, shaping individuals' dispositions. In all material or cultural consumption choices, including housing, furniture, paintings, perfumes, clothes, sports, and cultural forms of entertainment express their distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984: 238). In this context, the distinctive white-collar lifestyle is shaped by certain dispositions as products of habitus. Third, our findings show that white-collar professionals both (re)construct a lifestyle and try to protect it by asserting symbolic, economic, and cultural capital. The signifiers of being white-collar professionals in terms of activities and styles frequently emphasized by our participants are also the general laws of the field that impose attitudes, tastes, judgments, and activities in the Bourdieuan (1984) sense. Four and finally, our study makes theoretical

contribution to literature (Ambrasat et al., 2016; Harrington, 2017; Wright, 2019) by extending the literature on white-collar habitus and practical consciousness. It provides a framework for understanding how white-collar professionals consciously adapt to changes, balancing the opportunities and challenges they present. The findings also highlight the role of habitus in maintaining ontological security and lifestyle, offering insights into how white-collar lifestyle has evolved in the wake of the pandemic.

The lifestyles of our participants, defined through symbols such as intensity, style, holidays, cultural activities, diplomas, and knowledge of foreign languages, are indicators of their habitus and the types of capital they possess. In addition, our findings have highlighted that embodiment and the physical appearance of white-collar professionals are also parts of lifestyle. As Bourdieu (1984: 21) discusses: “most products only derive their social value from social use that is made of them”. Looking “good”, choosing certain brands of clothes, having a sterile appearance, style are reflections of white-collar professionals. However, the findings show that the disruption of the ordinary flow of the lifestyle imposed by white-collar habitus, with the pandemic and the economic crisis deepening simultaneously, have threatened the ontological security of white-collar professionals. So, the pandemic undermined the capital through which white-collar professionals practically produce and reproduce their ontological security.

Individuals can only find safe spaces through their habitus. Beyond practical consciousness, the practices that create these safe spaces disrupt routine and undermine a sense of security. Moreover, what is perceived as under threat is the social position of white-collar professionals, as defined by their habitus. The link between ontological security and habitus is that white collars can only maintain ontological security through internalized habitus. In addition, the types of capital, which are an extension of habitus and mobilized through certain actions, are also a reflection of practical consciousness. Our participants described how they have adapted to the transformation of their lives during and after the pandemic. This adaptation emerges as a response to the “new normal” in order to (re)establish a sense of ontological security. The new normal involves not only a significant change in the working models of white-collar professionals but a transformation in their lives as an extension of this change. Our findings reveal that there is a multifaceted link between the change in the working model and the white-collar relationship with physical spaces (home, office, and urban spaces), their own bodies, and the white-collar world in general. This relationship, has necessitated the reorganization of life, thus adding new symbols to white-collar habitus. The most prominent symbol revealed by our study—which has also newly become a form of symbolic capital for white-collar professionals—is remoteness or hybridity in terms of the working model. Furthermore, due to the impact of these working models, remoteness in general as an irreversible ready-to-use option has settled in the practical consciousness of white-collar professionals and influenced their everyday interactions. This change reflects a deliberate consideration of the benefits and drawbacks associated with the shift in work models. On one hand, white-collar professionals seek to preserve the advantages of remote or hybrid work, while on the other, they strive to mitigate its negative impacts on their lifestyles. In doing so, they engage in a form of negotiation. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of the white-collar habitus, particularly in terms of maintaining their established lifestyle, but it also aligns with practical consciousness, as white collars reorganize their practices based on conscious, calculated decisions. In this context, the findings demonstrate that white-collar professionals use their practical consciousness to return to the boundaries of the white-collar habitus and capitalize on the advantages brought by the pandemic without overlooking them. This process further supports their ontological security by preserving their lifestyle.

White-collar workers reconstituted their ontological security, threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic, by adapting to its new normal, while also seeking to maintain their privileged social position, itself a constitutive element of their ontological security. Notably, the economic crisis and the pandemic have affected the white-collar lifestyle in the context of the contraction of the reproduction of economic and cultural capital. This effect undermines the distinctive position of white-collar professionals, threatens the white-collar cosmos, and causes ambivalence that undermines their sense of ontological security. Ontological security pertains to an individual's sense of stability and continuity in their experiences and

underscores the necessity of maintaining a continuous sense of self, rather than experiencing constant change (Giddens ,1991). Our findings assert that white-collar professionals often attempt to mitigate the impact of economic crises by striving to maintain the lifestyles to which they are accustomed. The defining characteristic of the white-collar world is that professionals adopt the lifestyle and practices discussed throughout this article, even if they lack the necessary economic capital to fully sustain the lifestyle to which they aspire. Concerning ontological security, this strategy can provide a sense of stability, helping professionals preserve the distinctive symbols of white-collar habitus, even if the volume of their economic capital is reduced.

In conclusion, the study reveals that white-collar workers have adapted to the new realities brought by the pandemic by reorganizing their lifestyle and working styles. While maintaining the benefits of remote and hybrid work models, they have also found new ways to preserve lifestyle, demonstrating flexibility and resilience in the face of ongoing changes. These results underscore the importance of practical consciousness in navigating the complexities of post-pandemic life. White-collar workers have managed to reconcile the demands of their habitus by consciously adapting their routines and social practices. In summary, the experiences of white-collar workers offer valuable insights into how the Covid-19 pandemic, with its profound and far-reaching effects, has altered various aspects of life. From reshaping in-person work practices to changing lifestyle choices, the pandemic has forced workers to navigate unprecedented changes and adapt to new realities, as the “new normal”. This disruption provides a unique lens through which to examine the broader societal shifts that emerged as a result of the pandemic. First, we observed potential differences in how male and female white-collar workers relate to their lifestyles and bodies. However, we could not explore this difference in depth due to the limited focus of our research and insufficient data. Future studies focusing on gender differences while examining how the white-collar world has been reorganized during and after the Covid-19 pandemic could shed light on the relationship between gender, lifestyle, and embodiment. Second, as a limitation, we conducted the current research only with white-collar workers living in İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir which are the three major metropolitan cities of Türkiye. Therefore, we also related the lifestyles of white-collar workers to urban life. Future studies focusing on peripheral cities could shed light on potential differences in lifestyle and work culture between metropolitan and peripheral cities. Finally, this study does not suggest that remote or hybrid working has been adopted across all white-collar sectors, as we did not differentiate between occupations or sectors. Instead, the study reveals the relationship between changing work patterns and lifestyles, highlighting how the radical shift in work dynamics has affected the white-collar cosmos. Therefore, future studies focusing on sectoral or occupational distinctions, and the relational dynamics within these distinctions, may uncover whether the relationship between work patterns and lifestyle varies across different sectors or occupational groups.

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