The Value of Work

for Information Workers in Turkey

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The main field of Study - Leadership and Organization
Degree - Master of Arts (120 ECTS) with a Major in Leadership and Organization.
Master Thesis - Focus on Leadership and Organization: Societal Challenges and Organizational Changes (OL675E), 30 ECTS.
Spring 2023
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This publication has been produced during my scholarship period at Malmö University, funded by the Swedish Institute.
ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand the value assigned to work by information workers in Turkey. Benefiting from the global literature on the meaning of work (Graeber, 2019), how work affects one’s character (Sennett, 1998), and how postmodern jobs are pushing individuals to a state of pretense (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016), I am trying to understand how the information workers in Turkey are experiencing global trends, what kind of value they assign to work, and what are some of the influences on their understanding of work. There is a growing information sector in Turkey, but very limited resources on their experiences.

By utilizing the lens of the Marxist theory of alienation (Marx, 1992), this study explains the experiences of research participants in four categories: Alienation from self, from others, from productive activity, and finally the product. Research findings show that the alienation from self was heavily experienced by the research participants and the situation got severe when there was increased bureaucracy and workplace politics. Due to the increased division of labor and the nature of the information work, increased levels of alienation from productive activity and the product were also shared by participants of the research.

The study concludes with my suggestions on potential future research to be conducted in the field to better understand the trends and conditions in Turkey.

Key Words: Value of work, Meaning of Work, Information Workers, Theory of Alienation
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1. Introduction

In Ancient Greek myths, one is often punished by Gods and the punishment includes repetitive tasks that serve no value. The punishment of Sisyphus is to push a boulder to the top of a mountain, just to find it at the starting point the next day. Hercules takes over a range of duties from cleaning the stables to killing mystical beings. The collection of these duties is called Hercules’ labors. Repetitive over time and not directly connected to these characters’ daily needs as living beings, these labors can be a representation of post-modern jobs.

Our relationship with work and labor is ever-changing, and this relationship is not prone to the societal or technological shifts around us. Women becoming an incremental part of workforce during the World War II (Schweitzer, 1980) created many new practices and discussions that continue today. When the Western youth in the 60s adopted a new language around antiwar and liberalization, previous generations were concerned this new wave of seeing the world would destroy their wealth-nations (Porter, 1965). These occasions were forthcoming over time, but they became visible in a specific era of the world, almost universally.
Following a global pandemic, many financial crises, wars, and troubles of all kinds, the workers of the 21st century started a search for meaning at work that is leaving employers worried (Espada, 2022). Searching for meaning or better conditions in their jobs, the current Western workforce led two major trends: Great resignation and quiet quitting. Coined by Anthony Klotz (2021), the term “great resignation” refers to the unprecedented rates of job quitting following the pandemic, especially in the US and UK markets. The exact reasons for this wave are yet to be analyzed, some explanations mentioned by Klotz are as follows: Some people were on hold to resign during the lockdown and they resigned immediately when things started to get normal, some were unhappy with the back to office policies of their employers, some acquired new skills during the pandemic and wanted to pursue a better job, and so on. Quiet quitting on the other hand has started as a social media conversation and was followed by many. Klotz and Bolino (2022) define quite quitters as “Continuing to perform all their regular work, but refusing to go above and beyond and engage in what researchers refer to as citizenship behaviors.” One article in The Economist (2022) pointed out the reason behind quiet quitting and how some managers are so annoyed by the trend is the alienation between the folks in corner offices and cubicles and their lack of understanding of each other’s circumstances. More than a century ago, Karl Marx (1992) anticipated a similar trend when he wrote about how humans are alienated from their work, their surroundings, or even themselves due to the nature of the capitalist workplace.

All in all, employees of today are arriving at a crossroads regarding the meaning of work and the value of their jobs. While some prefer to resign from their jobs and search for a new one, some others are choosing not to go above and beyond at work. The current trends are signaling a change of practices in the Western work culture and I am curious about the implications in Turkey.

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1.1. Background of Research

The increasing discussions around the meaning of work and the value work might represent in workers’ lives make me grow curious about the experiences of office workers in Turkey. In this chapter, I explain how the global trends might be reflected in the Turkish work culture and specifically, in the field of information work.

1.1.1. Why Turkey?

Turkey being my homeland, I’ve always been curious about the effects of global trends in the Turkish sphere. Starting this research, I thought Turkey could be an interesting geography of study for a couple of reasons.

First of all, my research showed me that most of the existing research on the value of work, and the recent trends like quiet quitting are focused on the Global West, especially the English-speaking world; mainly the USA and the UK. There were very limited resources on the experience of Turkish employees which intrigued me to take a closer look at it.

The country has been going through economic fluctuation over the past decade. The inflation sky-rocketing post-pandemic, the salaries have started to lose monetary value from the beginning of the month to the end of it (Bianet, 2023). One grows curious if and how this change in monetary value would affect the value workers may assign to their work.

The increasing brain drain from the country might be signaling a search for better job opportunities among the youth. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the number of Turkish citizens migrating internationally increased by 40% from 2021 to 2022. Consistent over the years, the 25-29 age group is the leading group to migrate out of the country (TUIK, 2022). According to a 2021 survey, among the Turkish youth who wished to migrate internationally, 32% wanted to do so because of advanced living conditions in other countries which included the working conditions as well as salary expectations (Caglar & Caglar, 2021).
Considering all the reasons listed above, Turkey has become an interesting geography to follow global trends. Of course within Turkey, there are millions of employees in many sectors with varying work conditions. Once an office worker myself, I am intrigued to look at the conditions of perceptions of this group.

1.1.2. Why Office Workers?

The prominent economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that by 2030, the quality of life for humankind would progress by four to eight times compared to 1930. With technological and economic improvements, he expected his grandchildren to work far less than he did. Keynes even expected sorts of nervous breakdowns and existential crises as a result of the lack of paid work and the abundance of time to engage in philosophical thinking (Keynes, 1963). Looking at the most recent data on employment, he is proven to be wrong. International Labour Organization (ILO) announced that 3.4 billion people all around the world were employed in 2022, among the 3.6 billion people who were available to work. That means 94% of the global labor force was utilized. And the average work week stays around 40-48 hours despite technological advancement (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Contemplating the difference between what Keynes imagined and what actually happened, the late American anthropologist David Graeber claims Keynes did not predict the increasing consumerism, and that “people would prefer more toys over less work” (Graeber, 2019, p. xvii). But Graeber does not stay there and carries the conversation further, by focusing on the sectoral aspect of the issue. By looking at the employment data from the last 150 years, anyone can see the rapid growth of the services sector while agricultural employment decreases swiftly, and industrial employment decreases slowly over time. Graeber researches the growth of the services sector compared to the overall population growth. Did we need more waitresses compared to 100 years ago? According to Keynes, some processes that needed human labor in the past would be automatized and it is indeed the case. Although we might still need waitresses, nurses, and pilots, many staff hired to support the documentation of these jobs no longer exist. Most of the documentation is done via computers which in the end creates less and less need for humans to be employed to populate or go through dusty documents in archive rooms.
Graeber then looks at the ratio of what he calls the information sector within the service sector employment data. The findings are intriguing, proving the service sector did not actually grow that much, it was the information sector that peaked over the last decades, and in most data, information jobs were included in the service sector. (See Figure 1) Eventually, the modern individual did not need more waitresses or nurses, but they had more bank officials, IT experts, media producers, and so on.

![Sectoral Growth](image)

The information sector has been growing in Turkey, too. Although not as drastically as it did in the Western countries. It was not possible to find the exact percentage of the information sector within the Turkish labor force as the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) does not separate the information sector from the services. However, a quick look at the data from 2005\(^2\) to 2023 shows a continued increase in service sector employment which might be signaling an increase in information workers (See Figure 2).

\(^2\) 2005 was the first year with online data available on labor force sectoral segregation.
Looking at the sectoral segregation by the International Labor Organization, one can see that the general term service sector is no longer used. But it is replaced by several sub-sectors including postal and telecommunications services and the public services (ILO, -). Graeber’s definition of the information sector is inclusive of many subsectors named by the ILO, to put it simply: The information sector can be seen as an umbrella term that includes all occupations creating, managing, or distributing information. A variety of modern occupations can be covered under this umbrella including sales, marketing, media production, IT related jobs.

Graeber also suspects this fast-growing Information Sector to be the source of what he calls “bullshit jobs”. These are the jobs that serve no clear purpose or value and were created to sustain the capitalistic system, culture, work codes, etc. Reading through Graeber’s interviews with some employees who claim to have bullshit jobs (IT consultants, secretaries, publishing house editors, army servants, and so on), one may see clearly how they assign no value

Figure 2: Employment by Sectors (TUIK)
whatsoever to their work other than paying the bills. Graeber only calls a job bullshit when the owner of the job claims so, anyway.

The book “Bullshit Jobs” intrigued me to have a closer look at the thoughts and practices of Turkish people employed in the information sector. In Turkey, the distinction between jobs is often made via color codes where white collar means an office job, blue collar means industrial worker, green collar refers to civil society employees, etc. Although most of my focus group fell under the definition of white-collar, I preferred the term office worker as white-collar might have connotations in the Turkish context. I used office workers as an umbrella term throughout my research, and explained to stakeholders whenever needed, what I meant by it.

In this paper, office workers refer to people who are employed in an information job. An information job is a branch of occupation where one needs to deploy, use, publicize, or marketize a set of information.

1.2. The Research Goal

The rising employment in the information sector combined with global trends around the value of work creates a unique opportunity to discuss these trends in the Turkish context. Benefiting from the ideas of many scholars including above mentioned Keynes and Graeber as well as the Marxist theory of alienation, this paper aims to understand the experiences of information workers in Turkey with a focus on if and how they assign value to their work.

**Research Q1:** How office workers based in Turkey are defining the value of work?

**Research Q2:** What are some of the reasons behind an increased or reduced understanding of one’s work’s value?
2. Literature Review

The existing literature on the value of work, as well as the practices of office workers, is extensive. Especially within Critical Leadership Studies, there are a number of classical and contemporary scholars trying to better understand the trends in the field and the motivation of single individuals. Throughout my research, I benefited from the work of authors in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and management/leadership. However, as I mentioned before, most of the international publications often focus on the Western work culture which was heavily shaped by the capitalist work code. The most influential works in developing this research are as follows:

One of the main resources I benefited from while thinking about the meaning of work was David Graeber’s book “Bullshit Jobs” (2019). In this book, Graeber does not only define what bullshit jobs are but also shares real-life cases from around the world to better stress the sense of meaningless people experience in some jobs. He also discusses the cultural, economic, and political reasons that might create and sustain these meaningless and unfulfilling jobs. In his own words, “A bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” The perspectives in the book provided this research with a unique new lens to look into different sectors, the types of bullshit jobs there might be out there, and how society would talk about these jobs. Maybe the most important contribution of Graeber’s book to this research was his piece on subjectivity. He recognizes his own definition is quite subjective, the level of meaningless assigned to a job can change from one day to another depending on the employee’s mood. However, Graeber also recognizes there hasn’t been a globally accepted way of measuring a job’s value for the job holder or anyone of that sense (Graeber, 2019, p.10). For the purpose of this research, I looked into the other resources around measuring the personal or societal value of a job. Graeber was right in saying there is not a universally accepted method, but there are important schools of thought and I will mention them in the upcoming chapters.
Another beneficial resource was from Lund University – Business Administration scholar Mats Alvesson’s book, “The Stupidity Paradox” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). In this book, Alvesson and Spicer talk about how organizations that are supposedly made of smart people end up making stupid decisions and engaging in non-efficient, non-strategic activities. The book talks about how new entrants to the job market are expected to build their intellectual capacity on all fronts, whereas anyone with a couple of years of experience may choose to practice what authors call “functional stupidity” at the workplace. This conscious act of not activating one’s intellectual capacity to the fullest as well as the reasons and consequences of such an act are discussed in depth. The most interesting aspect of this book in regard to my research was its focus on information workers which is a term I use interchangeably with office workers throughout this thesis.

Richard Sennett’s infamous book “The Corrosion of Character” is another important source discussing the relationship of individuals with their work and simply how work shapes one’s life (Sennett, 1998). From a critical perspective, Sennett explains how the work culture of new capitalism affected individuals’ personal lives and their thoughts on work. Two trends he discusses in the book were also interesting to my research: The ideas around flexibility and risk in late capitalism. When talking about flexibility, Sennett touches upon flexibility in many fields including the flexible location, time, and skills. He also talks about how this new interpretation of flexibility is putting more pressure on employees in the form of increased surveillance (p. 59) or a sense of agility that enables decision-makers to cut off any personnel at any time but especially in the time of mergers or acquisitions (p. 56). Then from a risk perspective, Sennett talks about the constant pressure to take risks in the capitalist work environment in order to earn more and more whereas this idea of taking a risk for a higher prize seems to be misleading (p. 80). The constant pressure to be flexible workers who are eager to take risks on a daily basis is eventually changing the employees’ characters, often involuntarily.
This international literature review was followed by an extensive review of theses, papers, and books written by authors and researchers in Turkey. The open-source publication platform of the Middle East Technical University\(^3\) has been especially helpful. Existing contemporary papers mostly focused on the unemployment experiences of higher education graduates in Turkey (İnce, 2022; Erdoğan, 2017) as well as the workplace harassment or discrimination faced by various groups (Karlı & Koçak, 2004; Kutlu, 2007). There was some cross-sectoral research conducted on the differing experiences of office workers (Bilgiç & Can, 2019; Öner Özkan & Kantaş, 2018), but they did not discuss the value or meaning issue in detail. One interesting qualitative study was conducted in Kırklareli, Turkey: “X and Y Generation: Is There a Change in the Meaning of Work?” (Çetin Aydın & Başol, 2014). The variables used as a comparison to the meaning of work were as follows: Job satisfaction, Opportunities to get a promotion, Colleagues, Socio-political support, Participatory work relations, Job ambiguity, Access to resources, Access to information. Although this study and the variables used were helpful while thinking about the meaning of work for employees in Turkey, the scope of the study (comparison between the generations), as well as the geographical focus, was not entirely in alignment with this research.

All in all, the literature review was beneficial to better understanding emerging perspectives, and the prior work in the Turkish labor market. The use of Marxist theories by international scholars working in this field also shaped the theoretical framework of this research. The existing literature dealing with workers in Turkey provided a good starting point for my research design. In the next chapter, I will explain my methodological structure for this research and how the process was designed.

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\(^3\) **Open METU**
3. Methodology

3.1. Philosophy of Science

The value of anything could be a tricky subject to tackle as part of research due to the very subjective nature of the issue. What defines value, how do we define what is valuable and what is not, and can value be measured? Any given answer to these questions could be subjective, affected heavily by the respondent’s context, cultural setting, and personal history. Due to these reasons, this research’s ontological ground was built on social constructivism.

Social constructivism is rooted in the thinking that “no rational warrant makes sense without the relativity of culture or paradigm” (Kukla, 2000). It was influenced by the sociology of knowledge which was led by Marx, Manheim, and Durkheim (Kukla, 2000). Marx and Engels claimed that the language of real life for humans was interwoven with the production of ideas, conceptions, and consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1968). As the theoretical background of this research relies on many Marxist scholars’ ideas, it was inevitable to use social constructivism as the setting stone behind the research method.

Other methods such as Critical Realism or Action Research were not included in the design of this research as I had little to no influence or power over the research environment. I did not have the opportunity to observe the subjects in their work environment, thus I had to rely on the subjective statements of research participants when it came to the value of their work. In order to better analyze the forces of power coming into play with the experiences of research subjects, I made use of international and Turkish literature further.

3.2. Research Design

As mentioned before, the existing literature on the experience of office workers in Turkey provided me with a good starting point. However, the lack of resources on my specific target group made it challenging to advance the research design. Realizing this, I decided to conduct preliminary research before I moved on to designing the qualitative inquiry.
Inspiration came from Sara Ahmed’s words (Ahmed, 2019) about her own online blog⁴ and how she sees that platform as an opportunity to interact with the subjects of her research, almost immediately. Ahmed, the prominent social scientist of gender and race theories mentioned during an interview that online interactions might not always qualify as research data, but sharing opinions from an anonymous account can liberate the research subject as well as the researcher on the receiving end (Ahmed, 2019). With this goal, I published an article in Turkish (Okutan, 2023), in a newsletter magazine⁵ that had 6,000+ subscribers at the time. The article summarized the starting point and the goal of this research and invited readers to take part in a volunteer survey to share their experiences. It quickly became one of the most read and shared articles of the publication and the survey was filled in by 62 readers.

The goal of the online survey was to get initial input from the potential research participants about their routines at work, how they make use of their time at work, the value assigned to different pieces of work life, and the ideal working conditions (if any) for them. The questions can be found in Annex I: Online Discovery Survey. In order to protect the sense of privacy with the survey, filling out the name and contact information was optional. As mentioned before, this survey was designed as a discovery survey in order to understand the potential participants’ relations to work and its value. It included many open-ended questions with the hope of creating space for as much participant input as possible. The survey mainly served the purpose of better designing the qualitative part of this research, reinforcing necessary limitations, and testing out some of the initial assumptions about the research subjects. I will not be sharing the responses to the survey at length, but some key findings should be shared to explain the logic behind the qualitative research design.

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⁴ Feminist Kill Joys Blog. It has been active since August 2013, Ahmed still shares her ideas with readers through the blog, interacts with them in the comments, occasionally requests to hear readers’ personal experiences.

⁵ 20’lik by Aposto: Aposto’s model relies on daily or weekly newsletters and replaces the newspapers for most Turkish readers in the age of online resources. 20’lik is one of the many branches of Aposto with a specific field. Although 20’lik means 20s in Turkish, the publication aims a wider audience than the people in their 20s, shares thematic articles and blogs by the authors. I’ve been an author of 20’lik for a year, and my article related to this research was highlighted in April 2023 as part of their “Honestly, why are we working?” issue. The article was later on highlighted at the main publication of Aposto and many related social media channels.
Among the survey respondents, there was a small crowd from different cities in Turkey. Initially, I expected more attention from Istanbul where the major institutions are located. Seeing responses from Kutahya, Eskisehir, Zonguldak, Aydin, and so on, I’ve decided to meet with research participants online. This allowed me to reach individuals in different cities.

The initial plan was to focus on private sector employees as I assumed they would have certain similarities in their work experiences; however, survey results showed me the nature of the work is more critical than the sector of the work when it comes to a discussion on the meaning of that occupation. There were two respondents to the survey with the same occupation, one of them was working for a private company, whereas the other one was working for a public institution. Surprisingly their experiences were very similar to each other as their work included a very specific kind of knowledge that was demanded by consumers. There was another respondent who was a research assistant employed by one of the private universities in Istanbul and her experience resembled the experience of public sector workers although she had a very well-known private employer. Thanks to these insights, my focus remained on the information workers; regardless of their sector of employment.

Last but not least, the respondents kept referring to conversations with their friends or colleagues on the meaning of work. This inspired me to organize focus groups rather than one-on-one interviews. A facilitated conversation between people with similar experiences could have been a good way of discussing perceptions, values, and feelings around work.

Thanks to the responses of discovery survey, I defined many specifics of my research design including the profile of the attendees, the way of qualitative inquiry, and the platform to meet with participants.

### 3.3. Focus Groups for Qualitative Research

Following the findings of the discovery survey, focus groups have emerged as a potential method to collect qualitative data from office workers in Turkey. It is crucial to separate focus groups from group interviews. In a focus group, the researcher triggers a conversation among
the participants with previously set questions. In a group interview, the researcher often has one-on-one interaction with the members of the group (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). The goal of using focus groups in this research was to allow participants to contribute to each other’s thoughts, ask new questions, and share the trends they might realize at that moment. The recent increase in focus group methodology was often connected to the benefit of group settings for research subjects to feel at ease with talking about their feelings and values (Liamputtong, 2011). Merton & Kendall (1946) explained the goal of focus group research as “gathering qualitative data from individuals who have experienced some particular situation”. For this research, the shared “particular” situation was their employment in the Turkish information sector. As this collection could have led to a very wide range of people, I made use of other limitations while defining my focus group participants.

The first limitation I wanted to pursue was regarding the seniority of the research subjects in their careers. Walking into this research, I have been interested in the experiences of workers who had some power in their working conditions, but not enough to change the work code of the employer. The years of experience, which was the first limitation coming to mind, was not a good measure for this as it could lead to different consequences in different fields of work. Two respondents of the discovery survey were in positions that were above the mid-management level. They both had 10-15 years of experience in their respective fields of work. In the answers, they revealed their expectations from a job changed over the years, one of them said the reason for this change could be the rising salaries and benefits after a certain point. I suspected another reason to be their newly found powerful position within the team. They now had the power to lead their team in a more meaningful way or bargain with upper management to reduce the amount of unnecessary paperwork for everyone. With survey inputs in mind, I have decided to invite participants who are not in managerial roles to the focus groups. Anyone who worked as a consultant or a freelancer was also included as potential focus group attendees.

The second limitation was regarding the geographical focus. The research was always meant to be concerned with people employed in Turkey. As I continued, I narrowed it down to people who were “educated and employed” in Turkey, because this did not only mean being fluent in the Turkish language but also being fluent with the Turkish cultural signs and norms.
This also led to facilitating the focus groups in Turkish, so that everyone would feel comfortable communicating.

Once these criteria were set, I started forming the focus groups. Each group consisted of 3 to 5 people. In total, I conducted 4 focus groups with 16 participants. Most of the focus group invitees were the respondents to the online survey who left their contact information for a deeper discussion on the topic. Among the survey respondents who left their contact information, I chose a group of people to invite based on their seniority (managerial role mentioned above), geographical location, and job descriptions. The other invitees were contacted by me with the aim of bringing diversity to each group. One participant was invited because there was no other corporate communications expert in the existing invitee list, another was invited to represent the civic organizations, and another participant was invited because she changed her career path after contemplating the meaning of her work. These participants were selected after careful consideration of the employee types that were repeatedly mentioned in the literature on the meaning of work.

In their book “Focus Groups: Theory and Practice”, Stewart et al. talk about group dynamics that might influence the way the conversation advances (2007). In summary, they talk about not only the material conditions (the physical room, the journey one might take to that room, any powerful signs or messages hung on the walls, etc.) that might influence the conversation but also the demographic, socioeconomic, physical characteristics of the participants as well as the interpersonal dynamics such as group cohesiveness, social power in between participants, homogeneity of the group, and so on. Forming the focus groups did not only require careful consideration of participants’ demographic or socioeconomic status but also how they would have a group conversation. For this purpose, I put at least two people from either the same university/college or the same field of work into the groups. In other words, in each group, there were at least two participants who were meant to build a closeness because of their past experiences.

Focus groups are perceived as a fun activity for participants (Steward, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007), but it is also a space where participants share confidential information and very personal thoughts on the research issue. Different from the one-on-one interviews, in a focus
group, the researcher is not only obliged to protect the confidentiality of each participant but must also ensure confidentiality within the group in order to build trust prior to the conversation. Especially when talking about work, the anticipation was for some participants to hold back on sharing their thoughts with the fear of coming across other participants in a professional environment or even worse, someone from the rest of the group sharing their thoughts with their current employer. To avoid issues related to privacy and confidentiality, every participant was given the option to anonymize themselves during the group discussion. As the researcher, I knew everyone’s names, titles, and detailed job descriptions, but the research participants decided the portion to share with other participants. Only one participant among the sixteen preferred to use a nickname during the discussion.

Another precaution was to send a memorandum of understanding about confidentiality prior to each call. Participants were asked to confirm via e-mail that they read and agree that they would not share the other participants’ information outside of the focus group conversation. It was also shared in this memorandum of understanding how the researcher will protect and respect the participants’ privacy in line with Malmö University’s code of privacy\(^6\).

The focus group discussions were designed in a semi-structured manner where there were some guiding questions for starting the conversation, but the members were also invited to ask new questions to each other or mention any of the issues they considered as crucial. The discussion points can be found in **Annex II: Focus Group Discussions – Guiding Questions**. The categorization of questions was designed in alignment with the Marxist theory of alienation which will be explained in depth in the Theoretical Framework chapter.

As mentioned before, focus groups were held online, via Zoom video conference tool. Although it was encouraged to turn on the video during the conversation, it was not obligatory due to confidentiality reasons. The calls were recorded upon participants’ consent and were later used for transcription purposes. Transcriptions were translated into English by myself. I will make use of additional notes whenever cultural interpretation is needed with the transcribed notes. The discussions took 90-120 minutes depending on the number of attendees in each group.

\(^6\) Malmö University website
3.4. The Role of Researcher

The relationship between the researcher and the research subject can be better understood from the perspective of poststructuralist scholars: Foucault repeatedly points out that the researcher is none other than a part of the socially constructed reality she is researching about (Fadyl & Nicholls, 2013). From 2016 to 2021, I worked full-time as an office worker in Turkey. As I worked with social entrepreneurs as part of my employment at a global nonprofit, my close acquaintances often assumed the existence of a greater value in my work. I was working to support the people who started initiatives with great social impact, at the end of the day. Since this was my first job and the office in Turkey was just being built, I acknowledge that I learned a lot in that position. However, when I think of that specific time frame, I am unable to realize a superior meaning or value compared to the others who had an office job. From time to time, some bureaucratic tasks or political tensions at the management level would also lead me to question the value of the time I spent there.

Throughout the focus group interviews and the analysis, I try to distance my personal experiences at work -as much as possible- from the experience of research participants. Luckily, I had prior experience in facilitation which allowed me to focus on an ongoing conversation with participants rather than my reflections on their thoughts. But we must also recognize the potential implications of my past experience in how I interpret the empirical findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Being a woman from Turkey, with some years of experience at an office job, being one of the first members of my family to hold a bureaucratic position which sometimes required unnecessary paperwork, etc. could have affected the way I drew findings out of the focus group conversations. My increased awareness of issues of gender and class, the exercising of power in certain contexts, and the contemporary issues of Turkey might have also affected how this paper’s problematization was built.

3.5. Summary of Methodology

Deciding on the methods of data collection and analysis was a crucial moment in this research. The careful review of the existing literature combined with a review of methodological options for social science led me to conduct a qualitative inquiry with a social
constructivist point of view. Focus group discussion is selected as it presents opportunities for interaction between participants.

Having carefully designed the method of the research and better defined the scope, I led the focus group discussions which were defined as a much-needed conversation by many participants. Even through Zoom screens, participants were able to share genuine revelations on the value of work and interact with each other especially when one shared a story of a challenging time at work. One group wanted to stay in touch after the group discussion whereas another group asked for more resources on this subject. I share a table representation of group settings in order to provide the reader with a bird’s eye view of the process. I will also use this table to refer back to specific group discussions and specific participants when needed.

**Focus Group Attendees Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group / Participant #</th>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
<th>Group D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>A1: IT consultant, private sector (international company)</td>
<td>B1: Quit job recently for not seeing any value</td>
<td>C1: Marketing consultant (national)</td>
<td>D1: Expert, private sector (international media institution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>A2: Research assistant, private sector (university)</td>
<td>B2: Corporate communications expert, private sector (national company)</td>
<td>C2: Project manager, non-profit (international)</td>
<td>D2: Marketing expert, private sector (national company)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>B4: Strategy expert, private sector (international company)</td>
<td>C4: Quit job recently for not seeing any value</td>
<td>D4: Expert, private sector (national company)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D5: Expert, non-profit (international)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Theoretical Framework

The etymology of theory is rooted in the late Latin noun “theoria” and the Greek verb “theorein” which are usually translated as “to look at”, “to observe”, and “to see” (Abend, 2008). In this sense, theories are products of a systemic examination of situations, events, and experiences or processes (Bhattacherjee, 2012). While exploring a phenomenon or better understanding an existing paradigm, as we do with this paper, theories serve as a useful lens for looking at things.

When it comes to the value of work, it is impossible to look past the Marxist theory which was also mentioned by many scholars we discussed in the Literature Review chapter. As I believe Marx’s perspective can provide us with a systemic way of looking at the value of work, I aim to utilize it for the analysis of this research. In the last months, I spent extensive time on his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1992). I also benefited a lot from Bertell Ollman’s book Alienation - Marx's Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society (1977).

4.1. Marxism in the New Capitalist Era

Although written more than a century ago, Marxist theory is so prominent that it still shapes the contemporary perspectives on looking at work, labor, and so many other aspects of our societies. Maybe the simplest explanation for Marxism is that it is Karl Marx’s interpretation of capitalism; how our society developed, how it works, and how will it evolve in the future (Ollman, 1977). For this research, the most appealing side of the Marxist theory was it is concerned with human beings, at all times. It is humans who fight on both sides of the class struggle, it is they who sell and buy labor, and their relationship with each other forms the society as we know it. As he was concerned with humans in this society, his discussions covered a wide array of topics, but one of his theories is the most relevant for this research: The theory of alienation.

Marx’s theory of alienation tries to understand the effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states, and how they interact with each other (Ollman, 1977). Over the years, the theory was critiqued by many for being too ambiguous or
controversial (Oversveen, 2022). However, it still stands as one of the prominent theories when trying to research one’s relationship with oneself at work. Of course, the era in which Marx lived and produced his thinking was the nineteenth century when the industrial workers were booming across Europe. Most of the cases he would share while trying to explain alienation include feudal peasants of the past or the industrial workers of his day.

The contemporary followers of his school provide us with perspectives to understand alienation in post-modern jobs. For instance, Alvesson (2016) mentions how the development of capitalism created a working class that is increasingly sophisticated. He then discusses the working conditions of this group in relation to Marxist perspectives although most of the jobs he mentions (Human Resources manager, marketing associate, etc.) did not exist at the time Marx produced his writings. Oftentimes, the workers’ cognitive and social skills are the main force of production in the new capitalist era. Thus, intensively information-induced jobs are not necessarily the exact opposite of pin factory jobs when we engage in a discussion of alienation. But of course, it will be the task of this research to understand the theory of alienation as Marx meant it and then to discuss how it might be interpreted in the experiences of information workers in this new capitalist era.

Marx claims that alienation could only be fully understood when in comparison with the state of “unalienation” (Ollman, 1977). Similar to understanding sickness in comparison to a healthy state, Marx proposes to compare man in capitalist work to his version in a communist state. However, it was neither possible nor necessary for this research. Instead of measuring a so-called level of alienation for the information works, I try to understand if they are alienated at all. Alienated or not, do they still find value or meaning in their work? Thus, I do not intend to fully incorporate the alienation theory into this research but rather make use of its philosophy in essence. I also benefit a lot from the types of alienation Marx mentioned in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1992).

**4.2. Types of Alienation**

This chapter aims to provide the reader with simple definitions of the above-mentioned types of alienation. By understanding this categorization, one can make sense of the following analysis chapter better.
4.2.1. Alienation from the productive activity:

“... The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home.” (Marx, 1992)

The division of labor is widely discussed by Marx in many of his writings. By dividing the process of creating something, the system puts each worker on the quest of a repetitive task. As Chaplin skillfully portrays in Modern Times (Chaplin, 1936), the laborer in front of the assembly line tightens the same screw repeatedly so many times, he becomes a part of the machine. The contemporary representation of this work could be a content writer at any advertising agency, writing tens of brand slogans every single day. After a while, it wouldn’t be a surprise if she started doing that almost automatically, just for the sake of doing it. Thus, the alienation from the productive activity (or the process as I call it) keeps existing in many forms of work.

4.2.2. Alienation from the Product

In the division of labor, one of the most interesting changes happens with the actual commodity that is being sold. If a carpenter sells a chair, it is the chair that is on sale. But when a worker gets a job at a chair-producing factory, it is the time of the worker that was on sale, and now it is acquired by the business owner. I believe one of the most interesting representations of this in the information sector is the pricing logic of the strategic consultants. A company hires a consultant to make their team more “agile”, the consultant reads through materials, interviews people, and comes up with a strategy. This is charged on an hourly basis because probably there is no other universal way of measuring the value of that work. The case becomes even more interesting when we look at things from the perspective of the junior analyst who is assisting that consultant. They are given the task of going through hundreds of data cells and creating good-looking reports with pie charts, regardless of the customer, their sector, or the change they might want to initiate. This analyst may end up having little to no idea about the pie charts she created served in the real world.
Marx (1992) ties this type of alienation closely with the alienation from productive activity. As one is more and more alienated from the process, they are also alienated from the product. And here he sees a danger as alienation from the product is almost an alienation from life for the products of works are parts of life themselves (Ollman, 1977).

4.2.3. Alienation from Self

“Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or it is only because he is a species-being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity-free activity. Estranged labor reverses the relationship so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his essential being, a mere means to his existence.” (Marx, 1992)

Loss of creativity in capitalist work as well as the loss of control over one’s activity, according to Marx, creates alienation from self which leads to a disconnect with their sense of purpose. Having contemplated at length about the human beings’ nature -that is social and involves creative activity-, Marx has concluded that this estrangement results in physical and mental afflictions in capitalist society.

4.2.4. Alienation from the Fellow Humans

“Thus through estranged labor man not only creates his relationship to the object and to the act of production as to powers that are alien and hostile to him; he also creates the relationship in which other men stand to his production and to his product, and the relationship in which he stands to these other men.” (Marx, 1992)

Though Marx often thinks about the capitalist a.k.a. the owner of the means of production when he says fellow men, he also refers to humans’ alienation from other colleagues while continuing the capitalist work. For Marx, humans are social beings with the need to do activities with others and for others (Ollman, 1977). The estrangement of humans from themselves leads to an alienation from others in their social class, neighborhood, society, and so on.
4.3. Summary of Theoretical Framework

Marx’s perspective of our society, the history of its customs, and the effects on individuals is quite comprehensive and still relevant. Specifically, the theory of alienation he discusses at length in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1992) is proven to be a very good way of looking at individuals’ relationship with work. The categories of alienation helped me in this research to organize not only the flow of conversations but also the flow of analysis the reader will see in the next chapter.

5. Findings and Analysis

This research aims to understand the value assigned to work by information workers in Turkey. Relying on qualitative inquiry, focus groups were designed and run; now is the time to share some of the findings from these discussions and discuss them in relation to the Marxist theory of alienation.

5.1. Should work have any value at all?

In all instances, focus group discussions started with a very generic question “What is the value of your work?”. Although the participants were not given directions to talk about the value of that occupation in society or the value of that job in their lives; they always chose either of these options to talk about their work. Two participants in two separate focus groups asked later if they should have mentioned the value for society or value for themselves.

It was interesting to see that no one among the focus group participants explained their job’s value as a means to survival, a tool to help them pay the rent and buy groceries. In this part, only one participant had a very materialistic view of things:

“Value? Meaning? I do not think my job has any meaning. It is just something we do to help someone else make bigger profits. But I have a very realistic perspective of things, I help them make a profit, and they pay me a good salary.”
It is as simple as that. Of course, society assigns a certain value to my job, but I try not to do that.” (Participant A1)

Another participant from the same group shared;

“In order for anyone to think about the value of their work, they should be higher up in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs⁷. I remember the time I graduated from college and I needed a job to pay my rent, and I remember loving full-time employment at that time. It gave me a great amount of freedom, earning enough money to live by myself was good enough motivation back then. As time passed by, I started questioning the meaning of my job, what it serves, if it serves anything at all…” (Participant A3)

This comparison of the past and present reminded me of Marx’s comparison of human in the alienated or unalienated state. The notion of work for a new starter can represent a not-so-repetitive, creative process that provides the worker with the means to continue their life. Marx also discusses the man’s nature at length. He recognizes that in addition to his desire for power and societal collaboration, man also has animal-like needs like accommodation or proper food (Ollman, 1977). From this perspective, we can claim that when someone is new in their careers, their animal needs are primary, their survival is at stake. As time passes by, people accumulate wealth, and their income increases also. This could lead to self-questioning and the realization of alienation.

Another interesting finding was that three out of sixteen participants (enumerated as B2, D1, D2 in the “Focus Group Attendees Matrix” – p.18) saw the value of their work in the new things they learned thanks to that job. Among these three, two of them (D1 & D2) were relatively new to their occupation (compared to other participants). They had less than three years of experience and they thought this learning process also contributed to their intellectual capacity in life, thus they found meaning in this. The third person (B2) was working in a

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position where she had to read a lot to keep up with the sectoral and global trends. She stated this to be creating value for her although she might continue this learning by herself anyway if she could maintain her life without the salary of a full-time job.

Two other participants (A2 and C1) found value in helping others. In the case of participant C1, a marketing professional, the value was found in helping the new entrants of the sector or the job market:

“It gives me joy to help others at work, showing an intern how to use the copier, for instance, it seemed like a great value added by me. Or I work with small enterprises, and my goal is not to make them my customers forever. I want them to learn how this is done so that they can empower themselves and maybe not need me in the long term. I do this, especially with women, this is one of the many ways I support women.”

In the case of a research assistant at a university (A2), the value was in being able to help the students or other constituencies of the institution:

“At the end of the day, what I do is not what I trained for. I spend most of the day completing the administrative tasks. But when a professor or student comes to me and says “Thanks for completing the piece of work I needed.”, then I see value in my work. The value could be to help others.”

The above-shared responses remind Marx’s views on human nature again: He believed humans to be social beings with an ultimate drive to do things with others and for others. Even before starting to discuss their relationship with others in the workplace, at the very beginning of the conversation, these participants stated clearly that they find meaning in helping other humans, one way or another. Participant C3 even saw the workplace as a space for socialization and creating connections with fellow workers:

“I have a friendly relationship with my colleagues, I wouldn’t meet them often outside of the workplace, but I wouldn’t hate them either. Maybe the worst thing about the pandemic was to lose that social environment of the office. It was like
forced socialization you might not like in the morning, but you would be glad you attended at the end of the day.”

5.2. Colleagues and More: Others of the Workplace

The presence of other humans in the workplace proved to be an important matter to discuss during the data collection. Marx saw the “alienation of man from other men” as a natural consequence of the “alienation of man from himself” (Petrovic, 1963). Thus, upon speaking about participants’ personal reflections on their work and its value, the groups moved on to a conversation about team members. Often time, participants shared a neutral or positive portrait of their colleagues including their line managers. More than half of the participants felt knowledgeable about what their close team worked on, and they felt entitled to step in if their colleagues needed an additional pair of hands. While most claimed to have a friendly relationship with their close team, only a few of them preferred to socialize with their colleagues outside of work. Group A in our matrix had a lengthy conversation on the politics of the workplace, some pieces are as follows:

“I see myself as friends with my colleagues, but I cannot be 100% sincere. I feel like I should be more political, not share my honest views on issues... I’m afraid of people using my sincere behavior against me in the future – if a work-related conflict arises.” (Participant A3)

“I’m very tired of the roleplay at the workplace. Pretending to be getting along but not really trusting each other although you work in the same office for 5 days a week.” (Participant A2)

These statements speak directly to Marx’s words on not feeling at home when one is at work. This feeling of home, the connection to one’s authentic self was longed for by the participants. The emotional burden of pretense is found to exist in all social classes but it was experienced severely by middle-class office workers (Hochschild, 2003 as cited in Graber, 2019). On this issue, Graeber compares the bullshit job owners to flight attendants which is one of the occupations Hochschild (2003) talks about when explaining the burden of smiling all the time, not showing one’s true emotions, and so on. The bullshit job owner would be
stuck in the game of make-believe at work; however, their struggle would be the fact that the rules of the game were never defined. Different than flight attendants, an office worker does not get a list of emotional performances they have to perform in order to comply with the specific environment. I believe this to be the case with the participants of Group A. This issue was mentioned in other groups, but very swiftly.

The experiences of group A mostly reflected the participants’ alienation from their own character. In the case of one participant (D5), the work was so distributed, the participant was alienated from the others to a great extent:

“I work in a department that is part of a bigger unit. I have no idea whatsoever what the other people in the unit would do ... I know little about my own department’s members’ work. I know some about my manager’s work, but only the part that is connected to my job. There are many reports created for alignment purposes, but those are shared with department heads, leaving us in the dark about what each other do ... Even today, I’m coming from a training organized by one of the other departments, but I still do not know what they do on a daily basis.”

This sense of alienation also led to a feeling of loneliness in some cases. Although I did not ask it directly, a third of the participants mentioned how they felt underwhelmed by the poor reaction of their colleagues or managers after the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş in February 2023. The disaster affected six cities of Turkey heavily, another ten cities and the north of Syria were also affected due to the strong and continuous quakes.

Participants of Group D had a lengthy conversation on the issue with genuine sharing of feelings and traumatic responses throughout the following weeks of the earthquake. I will share only the parts related to the research below:

“My family is from one of the heavily affected cities. Luckily we did not have any close members of the family in a life-threatening situation, but I was depressed throughout that week. I couldn’t stop thinking about how to help others, I would

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finish my work quickly and rush to the municipality’s aid center to help pack the goods to be sent to the affected region. My work day usually ends around 6 pm and one day my manager couldn’t reach me around quarter to 6. Then they were angry that I was absent, but in my mind I finished that day’s work and went to the aid center. Later on, I told my colleagues their behavior was not acceptable, they understood they were in the wrong after a couple of days.” (Participant D1)

“The fact that we continued the “business as usual” was unsettling. I have a colleague who had family members in the region, and she was not able to focus on anything. Still, the managers pushed her to work on a report write-up. The end product was shared with other teams in July, so there was no point in pushing that person to work in February, right after the earthquake. This was another sign that when managers say “We are a family here” it is a lie.” (Participant D5)

We must mention here that in the case of four participants, which means the quarter of focus group attendees, this experience of loneliness and alienation did not resonate. Some believed to have a genuine relationship with their coworkers. These participants were scattered across the different focus group conversations, so there was at least one participant in each group with a comparably meaningful relationship with their colleagues. These participants felt they would socialize with their colleagues outside of the work setting, they would feel comfortable sharing their emotions through rough patches of life, they felt cared for by their colleagues.

5.3. Is it productive activity or just workplace politics?

The reflections on relations to self and others were often followed by the process of working, or the productive activity as Marx would call it. One of the most interesting moments during the focus group interviews was when I asked about what people spend most of their time on. Participants had to pause for a minute and think about it. In some instances, the group could not come up with answers, so I had to give options: Do you send e-mails, attend meetings, build something, or just talk to relevant people on the phone? In most cases, participants spent more than half of their time on what they called “the political business” which included sending e-mails, updating other team members, attending meetings where they didn’t have direct input:
“I would say 60% of my time is dedicated to bureaucracy and politics at the moment, only 40% goes into my actual work. I’m thinking if it is possible to spend 90% on my actual expertise and only 10% on political business in today’s world, and I cannot see that happening. We turned this world into such a complex world, it seems impossible for someone to work without any political pretension. Everyone accepts it after a while.” (Participant A3)

One participant (A1) who believed they only spent up to 20% of their time on political business shared they put conscious effort into this. Avoiding political discussions, minimizing time spent on bureaucratic activities, sharing with team members if a meeting seemed unnecessary were among their precautionous acts. Another participant (A2) was resisting this trend together with her colleagues from time to time, but they were not able to bring about long-term change:

“The distribution changes from time to time, but my bureaucratic workload is often around 70%, and this increases even more in some seasons. Then we have to group up and object to this setting, it gets better for a while but then the same cycle starts again.”

In relation to this question, one of the two unemployed participants (B1), talked about how overwhelmed she felt by the amount of socialization she had to attend because of work. Her job required a great deal of talking on the phone to suppliers, her phone rang all the time, she had to build friendly and professional relationships with these suppliers. This consumed her energy so much that she wouldn’t pick up -even her personal calls- outside the work hours.

Only participant B2 who spent quite a significant time on reading and desk research shared this as a joyous part of the workday. This participant showed more interest in her job compared to other participants of focus groups. The statement on reading was interesting as it was also one of the repeating activities Graeber’s research participants refer to as something they would rather do. People resented when they had free time to read something at work, but their managers rather had them look busy or it was not allowed to bring a book at all.
Albeit the new toys of our modern times (social media, smartphones, etc.), office workers still longed for reading which may prove Marx to be right when he talks about man’s search for creative activity as a means of self-actualization (1992).

5.4. For whom the reports are written?

With information work, the end product of one’s work could be very vague. For instance, one participant (A1) shared he created products only from time to time, most of his job was to fix the issues in the system, as someone would do a crossword puzzle. For others, the responses varied from “an experience for consumers” (A3) to “pages of reports that are not being read” (D5). However, what surprised me was the frequent mention of distributed work and how it removed the ownership of the worker from the end product:

“I’ve never seen a clear end result due to my work. Be it at a bank or a corporate firm. We are small gears of a huge machine ... For instance, a report is created. Where do I stand in the process of its creation? Let’s say it is a hundred-page report, and I wrote 20 pages of it. But then it received maybe a hundred revisions by others. Other than the revisions of my team, other departments added something to it. At that point, I’m not in the position to think 20% of this report belongs to me, it is the product of my work. That is why I quit my job. I’m doing agriculture now, we harvested the olives recently. I brought them home and I can show it to everyone that it is the end product of my effort.” (Participant C4)

“I believe an increased corporatization results in increasing levels of bureaucracy. That amount of bureaucracy also affects your belonging to the product. When I was working for a big company, I was contemplating this a lot. Now that I work with a smaller enterprise, I’m the lead person for so many aspects of our marketing work. Thus I feel excited whenever we are about to start a new campaign or launch a new website.” (Participant C3)
“My work is highly political⁹. Every output of the projects is predefined, and each step is planned to every detail. So we as a team cannot change much. I feel no belonging whatsoever to the product or service created at the end of that process.”

(Participant C2)

Three participants (B3, D1, D4) who had the experience of working in positions where they worked on a project from the very beginning to end, mentioned an increase in motivation with this way of working. A participant who used to be a lawyer (D5) shared it gave them much more pleasure as it required understanding a case, working not only on its paperwork but also the logic of the case, and completing the case.

5.5. “To anyone who would rather be doing something useful with themselves.”

Last but not least, if time allowed, I asked participants two questions: If you had the chance, how would you work and what would you work on? The responses were shockingly similar, and they reminded the opening line of Graeber’s book (2019): “To anyone who would rather be doing something useful with themselves.”

Three participants said they wouldn’t study Management if they went to college again. One of these management graduates said, “I do not have an occupation, I was trained to sit in an office and pretend.” Another was glad that her child did not want to study management in college. Some of the other responses included:

“I thought about this before, I’m sure of my answer! I wouldn’t want to sit in front of a computer. I wouldn’t want to work in corporate culture. I’d either do science or do something useful for others. Maybe a therapist or a dietitian... A job where I do not look at a screen all day and I can manage my own time.” (Participant A3)

⁹ Here the respondent refers to national and international politics rather than a political corporate environment. This person worked closely with the Turkish government and European Union, thus the decisions/end results were highly affected by those parties.
“If I had the chance, I wouldn’t work. Why would I? But if I had to work, then I’d choose a job that wouldn’t require me to reproduce the value assigned to it on a daily basis. A job that I do not have to legitimize in my own mind. Saving people or animals come to mind, or being a bird watcher and just keeping the birds’ records for scientists’ use.” (Participant A2)

“Both my parents were doctors. I do not know why I didn’t become one. I would either be a doctor or do agriculture or something. Nature is a part of us, a job with such a connection to nature is what I miss.” (Participant C1)

This group also added a critique of the status quo to their statements. One of the shared questions all of them asked themselves was what the system they work in serves. In all cases, respondents thought these office jobs were only serving an increased consumption in society.

Some respondents felt more passionate about some other occupation, their answers were very concise:

“I would run a children’s books store. It has been a dream of mine for years.” (B1)
“I would do theatre, start my own theatre school...” (C3)
“I would be a part-time musician and part-time writer.” (D2)
“I would run a wellness club.” (D5)
“I would taste different food and write about them. Maybe grow my own vegetables.” (B2)
“I would travel and then write about those trips.” (D1)

Some were afraid of the existential dread that unemployment would bring:

“I might turn into a slouch if I didn’t work.” (D3)
“I’m unemployed now and I’m thinking this whole work culture might have been created for a reason. It is hard to maintain self-discipline when you do not have that big routine in your life.” (C4)
Two respondents (B3 and D4) wanted to continue in their current occupation but with a change of work conditions. These wished for more autonomy, especially with their working time. This group was also relatively happy with the working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. They all worked from home and were happy to run errands in between the meetings.

5.6. **Summary of Findings**

The participants of focus groups were homogenous in some aspects while heterogeneous in others. In each group, there was sectoral diversity, gender diversity, a diversity of living conditions as well as working conditions. However, they were all university graduates with some years of work experience, none of them shared any difficulties in sustaining themselves financially, looking at their positions in respective firms we might assume they belonged to an above-average income group. Recognizing these similarities and differences is crucial as we sum up the analysis chapter. There was not a direct connection between their conditions and the value found at work. The differing life and work experiences seemed to have shaped their thinking. Although in some instances, a number of participants from different focus groups shared similar feelings toward certain topics, we are not able to group them and say “All marketing professionals assigned a lower value to their work”.

From the perspective of the theory of alienation, a certain degree of alienation was visible in most cases. The national or global trends made some types of alienation even more obvious. The COVID-19 pandemic definitely played a role in helping people realize the value of their work independent from the physical perks that might come with it. Not going to the office and thus not having the chit-chat by the water cooler definitely increased the sense of alienation, especially from fellow colleagues. At the same time, having the autonomy to manage one’s own time while working from home, being able to skip some unnecessary meetings (or doing the dishes while the meeting continued), finding more chances to avoid “office drama” helped them distance themselves from what they called the office politics. Not having to pretend (to work or to care) throughout the day seemed to increase motivation in most cases. The latter piece did not come as a surprise as Graeber’s interviews shared in *Bullshit Jobs* (2019) also revealed a trend of decreased motivation when one is obliged to pretend at work.
The recent earthquake in Turkey also triggered a contemplation of participants’ relation to their colleagues and the work in general. When individuals were not shown empathy during a natural crisis, their sense of meaningless increased as the value they assign to their work environment decreased.

The conversations regarding the alienation from self and fellow colleagues took extensive time although there were not more questions asked about those compared to the alienation from the process or the product. Regarding the latter, we can conclude the reduced feeling of ownership due to the nature of information work as well as the distributed work increased the alienation from the product. Most processes seemed unnecessary and overly bureaucratic to the ones working in large corporations. The workers in smaller team settings where they had the opportunity to lead more than one aspect of the process felt less alienation compared to the participants in large institutions.

All participants were surprisingly aware of the negative effects their work might have on society. In most cases the goal of their job was to sell more stuff and motivate the public to consume more, participants repeatedly reported that they feel guilty about being part of this culture.

6. Discussion

The aim of this research was to understand the value assigned to work by information workers in Turkey. The secondary research goal was to identify any shared trends that might be causing a change of level with the value employees assign to their own work. Focus group discussions were used for qualitative inquiry and the Marxist theory of alienation was utilized for a deeper discussion of the findings.

The main reason behind the selection of the focus group methodology was to enable the participants to interact with each other, thus benefiting from the group’s shared curiosities or issues to start new conversations. This happened to a great extent. In Group C, the interpersonal interaction between the participants was so high that we could only cover half of the prepared questions. In all groups, a closeness was formed based on the hardships faced in
the workplace. None of these hardships were material or physical ones, oftentimes the participants shared a personal crisis of meaningfulness or a hostile work environment that didn’t benefit anyone. All in all, group trust levels were high and everyone shared their work experiences genuinely. In this chapter, we will discuss the findings of focus groups in relation to our research questions.

First of all, the more the participants felt alienated from themselves, the less value they assigned to their work. Marx’s definition of human nature which defines us as social beings with a desire to engage in creative, productive work proved to be still relevant in the conversations. When information workers were pushed out of this zone, their alienation accelerated and this resulted in a constant contemplation of the value of their work. This phenomenon was traceable in the case of Participant A2. She was a skilled individual and by studying advertising she believed she could make a difference, she could produce creative content that would help someone share their amazing new idea with the rest of the world. But in reality, she had to spend hours editing footnotes of advertising posters of global companies that harmed the planet, and she was paid poorly for this. A2 then turned to academia with the hope of doing something more valuable but there she was faced with the commercialization of education that required endless paperwork. In her experience, the more she engaged in non-creative repetitive tasks, the more she was alienated and she started questioning the value of her job. As she is a social being who is a part of the society she lives in, her contemplations often led her to think about whether her work served anyone’s betterment. Although academia might alienate workers sometimes, it is still valuable in A2’s case for (1) creating space for creative productivity -scientific research-, (2) providing the opportunity to help others, specifically the students. In the cases of B1 and C4, this alienation resulted in quitting their jobs and searching for something with a concrete value. Both participants mentioned a sense of meaningless surrounding them after being a part of the corporate culture for a while. They were continuing their search for a meaningful activity at the time of the focus group discussions.

The second takeaway of this research is that times of crisis often lead to alienation from others at the workplace. On an ordinary day, fellow colleagues at work could be potential collaborators for work or friendly faces to complain about the new HR policy. During a crisis
with regional effects such as the COVID-19 pandemic or a strong earthquake, when the workers couldn’t find collegiality or the spirit of solidarity, they were disappointed to a great extent. In the cases of participants D1 and D5, they were disappointed in their colleagues, and as a result of this disappointment they started questioning the place of work in their lives. In a slightly different manner, participant C3 felt supported by her team but she still ended up contemplating the meaning of her job as a marketing lead while some other people were saving lives in the earthquake zone. From Marx’s perspective, alienation from others occurs as a natural result of alienation from self. However, in the cases of the information workers in Turkey, we didn’t see this direct connection. Participants were definitely disappointed when they felt not cared for at times of difficulty, but in other instances, they had a well-managed set of expectations from fellow workers. When they were able to build long-lasting relationships, they were grateful for it. But they did not necessarily expect to build authentic connections at work. This could be a learned habit, however, due to the scope of this research, we were not able to discuss the root causes of this.

On the third level, we must delve into the alienation from the process and the product together as those were closely tied during the conversations. Although at different severeness, all participants felt these types of alienation at their information works. Marx claimed this to be felt in all capitalist jobs and from the very beginning, I was curious if this was felt more in the information jobs. A critical portion of participants mentioned reports prepared as part of their jobs that no one reads, in a couple of instances participants complained about meetings that had no output whatsoever. Most of the participants couldn’t point out one thing as the product of their work. In Bullshit Jobs (2019), Graeber interviews a lot of information workers who claimed to have bullshit jobs. When these people quit their jobs or simply stop caring, they do not just lie around. They take on new jobs like writing a book, reading all books of Hegel, or gardening in the backyard. When our participants were asked what would they do instead of their current job, only one of them wanted not to work. All the others wanted to do something with a direct impact on society. They wanted to be doctors, booksellers, travel bloggers, and so on. So, I strongly believe, just like the bullshit job owners, our participants had a very low value assigned to their job; almost no one wanted to keep their current job in an alternative setting. From the findings of group discussions, I also believe this alienation from the product
and process is heavily felt by the information workers. Even before joining this research, most of them have contemplated what their work contributes to.

Regarding the conditions that might affect the level of value assigned to a job, there were some shared trends. First of all, the value assigned to a job decreased more and more as the bureaucracy and corporatization increased. Participants lost sense of ownership in their end product due to increased “collaboration”. Secondly, the portion of work managed by a specific participant proved to be important for the value assigned. If a worker is given the chance to run a process from the very beginning until the end, when they have the autonomy of not only managing their own time or location of work but also the outputs of their work, they find more meaning in their work. Participants B3 and D4 mentioned in a couple of instances that their ability to change the course of work or manage a whole process increased their motivation for work.

To conclude, participants assigned a certain value to their jobs when they were allowed to use their creativity, learn from others and teach new things to others, form meaningful and genuine relationships at work, to have the autonomy to change things. They felt alienated when they had to deal with a lot of corporate politics or were forced to perform in a certain way. Interestingly there was not a difference between participants with non-profit or private sector jobs although a number of private sector employees believed nonprofit jobs to be more meaningful. However, regardless of their sector of work, some participants found personal value in volunteering. Although we do not have enough data to conclude a decision, we can claim that the working space (home or office) did not necessarily play a role in the value assigned to work.

In the introduction chapter, we briefly talked about the global trends of quiet quitting and great resignation which were seen as signs of a possible existential crisis for office workers. To mention briefly, three out of sixteen participants were in the process of quiet quitting at the time of focus groups, and another two participants quit their jobs without a new job to go to.

In the future, it would be beneficial to have similar research with comparisons between different kinds of work. With this research, we were able to reach conclusions on the
experience of information workers. However in order to understand if specific terms affect information workers, a study on the other industries is needed. It would also be interesting to do a comparison of experiences between different gender identities as literature often talks about how women feel more pressured to “behave” at work (Hochschild, 2003).

7. Conclusion

This research started with the goal of better understanding the experiences of information workers in Turkey and how that might affect the value they assign to their own jobs. Benefiting from the social constructivist approach and making use of the qualitative focus group discussions, we relied on sixteen participants’ personal statements to understand the phenomenon. On the way, the Marxist theory of alienation (1992) has provided a great lens to look at things. Thoughts of scholars like Graeber (2019), Alvesson & Spicer (2016), and Sennett (1998) shaped the framing of this research.

Following the four focus group discussion with sixteen participants from different parts of Turkey, we were able to conclude that the value assigned to information jobs depend a lot on the conditions. When workers are given the chance to manage their own project, their own time, or to be creative they find a greater meaning or value in their jobs. At times of crisis or when the level of bureaucracy increases at a workplace, the sense of alienation rises which leads to a decreased sense of value with one’s work.

There is quite an extensive global literature on this issue, however, studies related to Turkey are still limited to reaching comprehensive conclusions. I conclude this paper with the hope of more similar studies to be conducted in Turkey.
Bibliography

In alphabetical order

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Annex I: Online Discovery Survey

- Year of birth (drop-down)
- Gender (self-identification)
- Where do you live? (drop-down with “other” option)
- What is the highest degree you graduated from? (drop-down with “other” option)
- How would you describe your current employment status? (drop-down with “other” option)
  - Full-time
  - Part-time
  - Freelance
  - Entrepreneur
  - I’m unemployed, looking for a job.
  - I’m unemployed, not looking for a job.
  - Other
- For how long have you been working in this employment status? (drop-down with “other” option)
  - 0-2 years
  - 2-5 years
  - 5-8 years
  - 8-10 years
  - 10-15 years
  - 15-30 years
  - Other
- How do you work? (drop-down)
  - 100% from home
  - 100% from the office
  - Hybrid / flexible
- How would you want to work? (drop-down)
  - 100% from home
  - 100% from the office
  - Hybrid / flexible
• Which sector do you work in? (drop-down with “other” option)
  o Public
  o Private
  o Non-profit
  o Academy
  o Other

• Which industry do you work in? (drop-down with “other” option)
  o Agriculture
  o Industry
  o Services
  o Information

• Do you work in one of the below listed fields?
  o Finance – Banking
  o Law – Legal
  o Marketing
  o Sales
  o I’m not in one of these fields.

• What is your title at work?

• Please mark all options that fit your situation.
  o I like my job.
  o I like my job but I would love to improve the conditions.
  o I think my job has a positive impact on other people’s lives.
  o I think I’m paid fairly for the value I create at work.
  o I often find myself questioning the necessity of my field of work.
  o The world is a better place thanks to the field I work in.
  o The world could have been a better place if my field of work did not exist.
  o I do not understand what some of the tasks related to my job serve.
  o The social circle I acquired thanks to my work is valuable for me.
  o If I could afford it financially, I wouldn’t work.
  o If I know there will not be a decrease in my pay, I can finish my tasks in less time.
  o I wouldn’t know what to fill my days with if I didn’t work.
- I would spend my time on more meaningful things if I didn’t have to work.
- I would spend my time on intellectual activities and philosophical thinking if I didn’t have to work.
- I would help my friends and family more if I didn’t have to work.
- Earthquake, political situation, news on Turkish economy lead me to question the value of my work.

- If you were getting paid the same and no one was questioning how you spend your work time, how much time would you spend to finish your tasks?
  - I would spend the same amount of time, more or less.
  - I would spend slightly less time.
  - My working hours would decrease to half.
  - My working hours would decrease 50-80%

- What do you find meaningful about your job? What are some of the things that are meaningless?

- What aspects of your work life would you like to change/keep as is? For example: I work from home and I'd like to keep it the same way, but I'd appreciate spending more time with my colleagues.

- What would change in world if people employed in your occupation go to a global strike for three months?

- Anything else you would like to add?

- Contact information
Annex II: Focus Group Discussions – Guiding Questions

Pre-interview: Shared the data consent form with a special note about respecting each other’s privacy during the focus group discussions. Received written consent from all members.

Interview / Focus Group Discussion (90 minutes):

- Introduction to the study & the researcher, permission to record the call.
- Round of introduction by the participants, their name & one-sentence description of their job.
- Does work mean something to you? What is the value of your job for you?
- Did your idea of value change since you first started working?
- How do you spend most of your work hours? What do these activities serve?
- What is the end product of your work? Do you feel a personal connection to the product, service, or knowledge that is produced thanks to your work?
- How informed do you feel about your team members’ day-to-day work? If someone on your team falls sick tomorrow, can you do their work?
- How is your relationship with your coworkers? What are some of the emotions you feel about them?
- What kind of work would you do if you had the opportunity?
- How would you work if you had the opportunity?
- Anything else you would like to add?