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Silenced by design: The collapse of gig worker voice under algorithmic control in an authoritarian labour market

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ABSTRACT

Digitalisation is reshaping the organisation of labour through algorithmic systems that govern work with minimal human involvement. While a growing literature examines these systems in Global North contexts, their operation within politically centralised and institutionally fragile environments remains insufficiently understood. This study investigates how algorithmic management intersects with authoritarian labour regimes to restructure worker voice. Drawing on a critical thematic analysis with 41 gig workers in Turkey, the analysis identifies a layered process in which voice is structurally foreclosed, psychologically internalised, and informally reassembled under constraint, extending theory on algorithmic governance and worker agency in authoritarian settings. The findings highlight the risks that opaque digital management systems pose for dignity, accountability and democratic oversight in contemporary HRM and labour policy.

1. Introduction

Research on gig worker voice, agency and algorithmic control has expanded rapidly (Cameron, 2024; Wu & Huang, 2024). Despite this growing attention, the ways in which algorithmic silencing functions within authoritarian labour regimes remain insufficiently examined. Most existing work focuses on contexts where collective representation, employment law and associational life still offer channels for recourse. Little is known about how digital management operates in political economies where institutional weakness, fear and coercion shape everyday employment relations. Studying these environments is essential for understanding how voice, obedience and resistance take form when algorithmic systems are deployed within regimes that already restrict participation.

Turkey provides an ideal context in which the toxic triangle of limited regulatory oversight, unsupportive discourses and practices (Küskü et al., 2021) mar effective and moral governance of algorithmic systems in governance and human resource management (Yabancı, 2025). Turkey exemplifies a broader pattern of authoritarian labour regime observed in other contexts (Anner et al., 2024; Ford & Gillan, 2024; Gillan & Ford, 2024; Mrozowicki, 2024), characterised by low union density, limited associational life, legal liminality of self-employed courier arrangements, widespread precarity, high youth

unemployment, and political surveillance (Güney, 2023; Tansel, 2019). Platforms such as Yemeksepeti (food delivery), Getir (on-demand grocery and courier service) and Trendyol Go (e-commerce logistics), as well as global intermediaries like Uber (ride-hailing and delivery), now coordinate large parts of urban service work. Couriers are formally independent but economically dependent on algorithms that define pay, performance and access to tasks (Öztürk, 2023). Youth unemployment exceeded twenty per cent in 2023 (TÜİK, 2023), and courier organisations reported at least sixty-three worker deaths in 2024, mainly caused by accidents under time pressure (Kurye Hakları Derneği, 2025). These realities indicate that algorithmic systems in Turkey are not neutral instruments of coordination; they reproduce and amplify existing authoritarian mechanisms of control (Erbil, 2025). Institutional designs are never neutral technologies; they sediment particular arrangements of power, visibility and accountability within the labour process (Özbilgin et al., 2025). In contexts where algorithmic management reconfigures the internal state of the workplace, these design choices crystallise into regimes that pre-structure how control is exercised and how silence becomes reproduced.

To ground this contextual claim more explicitly, we follow recent scholarship that defines an authoritarian labour regime as a configuration in which the state actively narrows the institutional space for independent worker organisation and voice, governing labour through

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discretionary enforcement, legal ambiguity and the selective suspension of rights rather than through stable rule based protection (Anner et al., 2024; Ford & Gillan, 2024; Gillan & Ford, 2024; Mrozowski, 2024). Turkey exhibits these features in a sustained form: union density below fourteen per cent, a one per cent sectoral threshold for collective bargaining, the routine suspension of strikes on national security grounds, compulsory arbitration of disputes, and inspection regimes shaped by political proximity (Erbil, 2025; Tansel, 2019; Çelik, 2016). We treat these as the constitutive elements of the authoritarian labour regime within which platform algorithms operate, rather than as a generic backdrop of difficult conditions.

The Turkish case is used here not as an exception but as an intensified expression of a global tendency in which technological and political domination reinforce one another. By analysing an intensified case, this study illuminates a worldwide trajectory in which authoritarian governance and poorly regulated algorithmic management mutually reinforce one another, reshaping the possibilities of worker voice far beyond the Turkish context. As seen in other contexts with similar authoritarian labour control, such as Mexico, these practices combine state discretion and institutional fragility to limit collective worker action (Anner et al., 2024).

Comparable dynamics of algorithmic intensification under authoritarian conditions have also been documented in China, where opaque ratings, gamified targets and punishing time pressures govern a vast food delivery workforce (Huang, 2023; Sun, 2019; Sun & Chen, 2021; Van Doorn & Chen, 2021). China and Turkey are not equivalent, yet their juxtaposition is analytically productive. What distinguishes the Turkish case, as we develop in the context section, is not the presence of algorithmic control as such but the specific mode through which an institutionally fragile and discretionary state articulates with platform power, in contrast to the high capacity, developmentally integrated platform governance observed in China (Lei, 2021; Sun et al., 2023).

The study introduces the concept of an algorithmic silencing regime, describing how algorithmic governance and authoritarian labour institutions interact to shape control and expression. This regime operates through three connected processes. The first is the structural foreclosure of voice through opaque and unilateral data architectures that remove negotiation and appeal. The second is the production of anticipatory obedience and self-blame, as workers interpret algorithmic metrics as objective and adjust behaviour to avoid sanctions. The third is the emergence of covert, digitally mediated forms of informal voice that circulate through encrypted groups, tactical compliance and shared emotional support, described here as digitally mediated empathy or *e-empathy*. Silence within this configuration is a designed outcome of technological opacity combined with institutional coercion.

The contribution of the study is fourfold. Theoretically, it extends research on worker voice by showing how algorithmic management acquires distinct significance in politically coercive and institutionally fragile contexts. Contextually, it reveals how platform power merges with authoritarian governance to redefine the boundaries of voice and compliance. Analytically, it advances a hybrid framework that connects Hirschman's (1970) *Exit-Voice-Loyalty* model with Foucauldian disciplinary power, data colonialism (Coudry & Mejias, 2019) and cognitive capitalism (Hardt & Negri, 2004), explaining how structural, psychological and affective mechanisms of silencing converge. Methodologically, it applies critical thematic analysis informed by abductive reasoning to link workers' lived experiences with the broader political structures that condition them. Forty-one in-depth interviews with platform workers provide the empirical basis, analysed through iterative coding and reflexive interpretation to connect individual stories to systemic patterns of domination and resistance. The theoretical contribution extends beyond Turkey, illustrating a global pattern in which democratic backsliding and inadequate regulation of algorithmic management interact to produce new forms of worker silencing.

The findings demonstrate that algorithmic management in authoritarian environments functions as a political technology governing

labour and expression simultaneously. Our study explains how workers internalise, negotiate and occasionally subvert algorithmic power where institutional voice is absent. It contributes to debates on human resource management, digital labour and political economy by revealing the moral and organisational consequences of algorithmic governance in centralised labour markets, together with the fragile possibilities for voice that persist within them.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework and reviews research on algorithmic governance, worker voice and authoritarian labour regimes. The following section outlines the methodological design and analytical process. The findings are then presented across three critically informed themes that trace the structural, psychological and informal dimensions of worker silencing. The final section discusses theoretical and practical implications and suggests directions for future research on algorithmic governance and labour agency in coercive political settings.

1.1. Gig-work voice and agency

Algorithmic governance extends managerial oversight into the smallest units of labour time. Through digital infrastructures that allocate, monitor and evaluate tasks, it fuses coordination and control within a single technological apparatus (ILO, 2025). What began as an administrative solution to manage dispersed labour has matured into a system that governs by calculation. Authority is no longer embodied in supervisors but encoded in interfaces that determine visibility, reward and sanction (Kellogg et al., 2020). The promise of flexibility that once surrounded platform work has given way to a regime in which autonomy is reframed as continuous self-presentation, and communication is measured rather than heard (Vassilopoulou & Kyriakidou, 2025).

Worker voice, conventionally defined as participation in organisational decision-making and the articulation of discontent (Dutta et al., 2023; Hirschman, 1970), presupposes institutions capable of listening. Algorithmic management erodes that capacity. Communication becomes an input for optimisation, filtered through opaque metrics that claim neutrality while translating every expression into data (Bucher et al., 2024; Koch & Park, 2023). Managerial dialogue is displaced by automated evaluation, producing a relation in which decisions appear procedural but remain inaccessible to those they affect (Jarrahi et al., 2021). The authority of the algorithm depends on its opacity: it governs by hiding the grounds of its judgement.

Research on platform work documents how workers adapt to and contest algorithmic control through everyday improvisations. Acts of humour, selective disengagement and the strategic manipulation of metrics have been observed as modes of practical resistance (Cameron, 2024; Scott, 1990; Wu & Huang, 2024). Such studies reveal the creativity embedded in precarious labour but largely derive from contexts where dissent, however limited, remains legally protected. They do not account for settings in which silence itself is politically produced and where expression carries systemic risk. The present study turns to those conditions, examining how algorithmic governance functions when the very capacity to speak has already been undermined by authoritarian rule.

1.2. Theorising algorithmic silencing

The regulation of labour through algorithmic systems extends a long-standing managerial project of securing consent and limiting resistance within the labour process (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). What distinguishes the current phase is not the presence of new technologies but the way digital infrastructures reorganise relations of visibility, dependency and expression (Kellogg et al., 2020). Algorithmic management converts the communicative elements of work into mechanisms of surveillance. Voice no longer operates as participation in decision-making but as a monitored input, registered, evaluated and redistributed according to managerial design (Bucher et al., 2024;

Jarrahi et al., 2021). Understanding this transformation requires theoretical tools that connect behavioural adaptation, subjective formation, structural asymmetry and affective labour.

Hirschman's (1970) Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework provides an initial map of the behavioural field within which workers operate. The triad of exit, voice and loyalty defines the repertoire of possible responses to dissatisfaction. The framework originated in political economy as a general account of how members respond to decline in firms, organisations and states, and it travelled into organisational research through successive reworkings. Rusbult et al. (1988) added neglect to the triad and recast the model as a typology of individual responses to declining job satisfaction, a move that anchored voice in organisational behaviour as a discretionary and individual act. Employment relations scholarship pushed back against this psychologisation, insisting that voice is also a collective and justice-oriented practice whose fate depends on institutional channels of representation (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016). Platform studies have since carried both strands into algorithmic settings, asking what happens to the repertoire when the addressee of voice is an interface (Kougiannou & Mendonça, 2021; Wu & Huang, 2024). Yet it assumes reciprocity and legitimate channels for articulation, both of which collapse under algorithmic management. Exit becomes technologically and economically constrained, voice is absorbed into algorithmically processed feedback, and loyalty depends on platform reputation systems that mediate access to work (Wu & Huang, 2024). Hirschman identifies the grammar of reaction but not the political and technological forces that delimit it.

Foucault's (1975/2020) concept of disciplinary power illuminates how those limits are internalised. The concept carries its own trajectory. Developed through the analysis of enclosed institutions, discipline described how continuous observation, examination and normalising judgement produce subjects who monitor themselves. Foucault (2008) later widened this account into governmentality, the government of conduct through calculative rationalities that operate beyond institutional walls, and scholars of algorithmic systems have extended this lineage by showing how metrics and rankings work as technologies of governmentality that constitute self-governing subjects (Introna, 2016). Our use of Foucault draws on both moments: platforms discipline through visibility and evaluation, and they govern through calculative infrastructures that shape what workers can know, expect and become. Visibility produces conformity through anticipation. Workers absorb algorithmic expectations and regulate themselves to maintain employability (Ferreira & Gromova, 2025). Evaluation operates as a moral technology that transforms monitoring into self-surveillance. Responsibility becomes individualised, and subordination is maintained through continuous self-adjustment. Discipline functions not through command but through the persistent possibility of assessment.

The structural basis of this control lies in what Couldry and Mejias (2019) call data colonialism, a regime not of political conquest but of unilateral data extraction. Platform systems capture behavioural and emotional information and repurpose it as a resource for coordination and prediction. This one-way visibility removes reciprocity. Workers are observable but cannot observe or interrogate the systems that govern them. Appeals are processed through automated interfaces that register presence without recognition. Governance proceeds through dispossession, the removal of communicative agency from those who generate value (Duggan et al., 2023; Varoufakis, 2024). Silence is not the absence of speech but the programmed outcome of informational asymmetry.

Surveillance capitalism sharpens this account by specifying what platforms do with the data they appropriate. Zuboff (2015, 2019) argues that extracted behavioural traces are converted into prediction products and fed back into the environments in which people act, so observation shades into the modification of conduct, a form of power she names instrumentarian. The two perspectives are complementary and distinct: data colonialism explains the unilateral and asymmetrical appropriation of workers' behavioural and emotional life, whereas surveillance capitalism clarifies how the appropriated material becomes a resource for

prediction and behavioural conditioning. In the settings we study, this second movement is visible in performance metrics, ratings and rankings, task allocation and route optimisation, which anticipate and steer conduct and thereby cultivate the anticipatory self-regulation our findings document (Zuboff, 2019). We retain data colonialism as the structural frame of the analysis and draw on surveillance capitalism to explain how extraction acquires behavioural force.

Cognitive capitalism situates these mechanisms within a broader reconfiguration of labour and value (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Varoufakis, 2024). Work depends on communicative and emotional capacities that are quantified through metrics, ratings and feedback loops. Algorithmic infrastructures appropriate these affective energies while converting them into measurable performance indicators (Vassilopoulou et al., 2024). Yet these same capacities occasionally enable workers to create fragile networks of solidarity and mutual care. In digital spaces such as WhatsApp groups, workers share information, manage exhaustion and enact small gestures of endurance. These moments do not overturn control but reveal the persistence of social life within systems designed to erase it.

Algorithmic silencing thus emerges through the convergence of behavioural confinement, disciplinary internalisation, data extraction and affective capture. Each dimension sustains the others, producing a mode of governance that fuses technological design with institutional fragility. What appears as efficiency rests on the management of dependency, obedience and dispossession. Algorithmic management does not replace earlier labour regimes; it digitises their logic, embedding the historical techniques of control into the infrastructure of everyday work.

We are careful to specify what algorithmic silencing adds to established ideas. The opacity of the algorithmic black box, the asymmetry of platform information, and the displacement of managerial dialogue are by now well documented (Bucher et al., 2024; Kellogg et al., 2020; Kougiannou & Mendonça, 2021). Algorithmic silencing does not restate these mechanisms. It names a regime level outcome in which technological opacity and institutional coercion become mutually reinforcing, so that silence is neither an incidental by product of poor communication nor a purely individual choice, but a designed and politically secured condition of labour. In this respect our account extends recent theorisations of algorithmic labour regimes and flexible despotism (Rahman et al., 2024; Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024; Wood, 2025) by showing how the disciplinary effects of platform design acquire additional force where the surrounding political economy already forecloses associational voice. Silencing, on this reading, is the joint product of code and regime rather than of code alone.

The four frameworks assemble a field of explanation that no single lens can sustain. Hirschman maps the horizon of possible reactions, yet this horizon narrows once placed within the disciplinary dispositions that, following Foucault, fold external surveillance into anticipatory self-regulation. Data colonialism exposes the unilateral architecture through which such dispositions acquire force, converting communication into extractive visibility that secures managerial sovereignty. Cognitive capitalism locates the affective and relational labour that circulates through these circuits, revealing how care, endurance and exhaustion become resources for organisational continuity. The result is a configuration in which behavioural repertoires, disciplinary habituation, informational asymmetry and affective capture reinforce one another, generating an algorithmic order that reproduces the logics of authoritarian labour governance in digital form. The interaction among these frameworks is summarised in Table 1.

This configuration also discloses the moral architecture of ostensibly neutral systems. Algorithmic evaluation presents itself as merit based and impartial, yet the rules of scoring, ranking and sanction are authored and revised by the platforms whose interests they encode. Inequality is thereby reproduced through procedures that appear fair while responsibility for failure is individualised and displaced onto workers, producing an illusion of meritocracy that obscures the asymmetry of power on which it rests (Jabagi et al., 2025). Far from operating

Table 1
Theoretical frameworks explaining algorithmic silencing.

Theoretical frameworks	Analytical contribution	Relation to algorithmic management
Exit–Voice–Loyalty (Hirschman, 1970)	Maps behavioural repertoire of worker responses to dissatisfaction	Reveals how algorithmic systems restrict exit, absorb voice into feedback, and manipulate loyalty through reputation metrics
Disciplinary power and anticipatory self-regulation (Foucault, 1975/2020)	Explains how workers internalise algorithmic control through visibility and evaluation	Shows how fear of assessment produces self-discipline and voluntary compliance
Data colonialism (Coudray & Mejias, 2019)	Frames algorithmic control as one-way extraction of behavioural and emotional data	Exposes informational asymmetry and loss of communicative agency
Cognitive capitalism (Hardt & Negri, 2004)	Identifies the commodification of affective and communicative labour	Reveals how endurance, care and sociality sustain value creation under digital control

without morality, such systems institutionalise a selective and value laden morality under the guise of calculation.

1.3. The research context: authoritarian labour regimes and algorithmic governance in Turkey

Turkey offers a critical setting for analysing how algorithmic management interacts with authoritarian labour governance (Yabancı, 2025). Political authority and economic regulation operate through interlocking structures that prioritise control over negotiation (Yeşilbağ, 2022). Labour rights formally exist yet their enforcement depends on administrative discretion and political loyalty (Erbil, 2025). Compliance is maintained through dependence and uncertainty rather than overt repression, creating a system in which silence is structurally produced (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2026).

Informality and precarity remain defining features of the Turkish labour market. Youth unemployment exceeds twenty per cent (TÜİK, 2023), while union density has fallen below fourteen per cent. The 2012 Union Law, which requires unions to represent at least one per cent of the national workforce in their sector to gain collective bargaining rights (Çelik, 2016), restricts worker organisation to a small minority. Strikes are regularly suspended on national security grounds and unresolved disputes are diverted into compulsory arbitration (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2024). Regulatory inspections are inconsistently applied and often influenced by political ties. In practice, these mechanisms transform worker voice into a formal right without material effect.

Unlike other contexts where informality results from weak institutions, in Turkey it is maintained through political design (Erbil, 2025). The state remains a central actor in economic life, governing through discretionary interventions that sustain both economic dependency and political loyalty. Employers use the ambiguity of legal categories to reduce accountability, while workers adapt to uncertainty as a condition of employability. The moral economy that emerges from this arrangement rewards restraint and compliance. Voice becomes risky, and silence functions as a pragmatic survival strategy (Bulut & Yeşilyurt, 2024). Further, Eger and Özbilgin (2026) explain that silence could be generative, strategic and agentic in non-confessional contexts such as Turkey.

Worker voice in this setting is not only an organisational outcome but a culturally and institutionally mediated phenomenon, and the silence we document has roots that predate platform labour. Voice and its withholding are shaped by enduring norms surrounding authority, hierarchy and deference, and by an industrial relations order in which independent collective expression has been repeatedly curtailed since

the 1980 military intervention and its restrictive legal legacy (Erbil, 2025; Tansel, 2019). Studies of employee silence under authoritative bureaucracies in Turkey show that reluctance to voice grievances is sedimented institutionally well before any algorithm intervenes (Erbil, 2025; Erbil & Özbilgin, 2024).

These patterns carry a longer history than the post-1980 order. Makal's (1999, 2002) histories of Turkish labour relations show that worker identity, collective organisation and the boundaries of legitimate participation were constituted under close state tutelage: the single-party era combined paternalist protection with the prohibition of strikes and independent association, and the transition to multi-party politics licensed unions while withholding the right to strike until 1963, so collective voice entered Turkish working life as a concession defined, and revocable, from above. Deference to authority and reluctance to voice are, on this reading, produced historically through labour law, state policy and controlled representation, and are misread when treated as timeless cultural traits. Bugra's (1994) political economy complements this account by showing that markets themselves have been constituted through state-mediated arrangements: business activity has depended on discretionary state favour, while a familialist and informality-tolerant welfare regime tied social protection to formal employment status and personal networks, leaving those outside it reliant on discretionary support (Buğra & Keyder, 2006). The state is therefore more than an external regulator that fails to protect platform workers; dependency itself is a state-mediated institutional product. Algorithmic management does not enter an institutional vacuum. It is layered onto these historically developed arrangements of state authority, labour regulation, business dependency and constrained representation, and platform-based dependency can be understood as the digital reconfiguration of this longer state-mediated regime.

We therefore do not claim that platforms invent silence. We argue that algorithmic management encounters a workforce already habituated to discretionary authority and constrained voice, and then encodes, automates and intensifies that disposition. The distinctiveness of the Turkish case lies in this layering: a historically constituted culture of deference and a legally fragile associational order are absorbed into algorithmic infrastructures, which lend them the appearance of neutral and technical necessity. This is the sense in which the dynamics we identify are specifically Turkish, even though their surface features are shared with other precarious labour markets.

Digital platforms have expanded within this institutional terrain. Companies such as Getir, Trendyol Go, Uber and Yemeksepeti (Kamasak et al., 2024) recruit from a workforce already accustomed to instability and indirect supervision. Most couriers are classified as *esnaf kurye*, the legally self-employed courier: a designation that removes them from the protections of employment law and transfers the costs of work, including insurance, maintenance, equipment, fuel and risk, onto workers themselves (Öztürk, 2023). After these deductions, earnings often remain only slightly above the statutory minimum wage (Çeki, 2025). The classification externalises risk and, in the same movement, normalises precarity as flexibility.

Algorithmic management builds upon these pre-existing asymmetries. Platforms govern through opaque infrastructures that determine who works, when and under what conditions. Yemeksepeti assigns tasks and shift access through performance rankings; Getir and Trendyol Go employ dynamic pricing and automated route optimisation (Çelik & Mutlu, 2023). DİSK-AR (2023) reports that couriers can be penalised for delays, rest breaks or route changes, as these actions lower algorithmic scores and reduce future income. These mechanisms replicate the selective enforcement and discretion characteristic of authoritarian bureaucracy, translating them into code. Algorithmic evaluation appears neutral yet reproduces political arbitrariness. Oral (2024) describes this as a form of digital despotism, in which managerial authority is exercised through interfaces that conceal its political nature.

Acts of resistance emerge but remain fragile. The 2022 Trendyol courier protest achieved a forty per cent wage increase (Umman, 2022),

yet participants faced dismissal and digital exclusion. Courier unions have grown but remain unrecognised and under surveillance. [DİSK-AR \(2023\)](#) identifies extreme workloads, fatigue and long hours as persistent conditions, while the [Kurye Hakları Derneği \(2025\)](#) recorded sixty-three courier deaths in 2024, most caused by traffic accidents linked to delivery time pressures. These fatalities illustrate the bodily consequences of algorithmic control in the absence of institutional protection.

The ownership and market structure of this sector has shifted markedly in recent years and bears directly on the forms of algorithmic control workers encounter. The Turkish delivery and ride hailing market is now highly concentrated and increasingly under foreign ownership. Yemeksepeti is owned by the Germany based Delivery Hero; Trendyol, the parent of Trendyol Go, is backed by Alibaba; and Getir, after a rapid international expansion, withdrew from the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe in 2024 and refocused on Turkey following a recapitalisation ([Kumar & Barrick, 2024](#)). In May 2025 Uber acquired an eighty five per cent controlling stake in Trendyol Go for around seven hundred million United States dollars, a platform reported to serve customers nationwide through some nineteen thousand couriers and more than two hundred million orders in 2024, and Uber subsequently agreed terms to acquire Getir's food delivery business, subject to clearance by Turkey's Competition Board ([Ergocun, 2026](#); [Reuters, 2025](#)). Aggregators now account for the majority of delivery sales. This consolidation matters for our argument because concentrated, capital intensive and foreign owned platforms standardise opaque rating and routing systems at scale, deepen worker dependence on a small number of intermediaries, and widen the distance between couriers and any accountable decision maker, intensifying precisely the silencing dynamics we analyse.

The Turkish case thus reveals how authoritarianism and algorithmic governance converge into a shared regime of control. The state provides the infrastructure of obedience, and the platform converts it into digital routines. Algorithmic management does not replace authoritarian labour relations but extends them into new technological forms. Evaluation becomes the digital continuation of surveillance; discretion becomes embedded in algorithmic opacity. Worker voice is not simply constrained by technology but actively reconstituted through the interplay of political centralisation, economic dependency and digital monitoring. In this configuration, participation is inseparable from compliance, and silence becomes the default language of labour governance.

The role of the state in this configuration warrants explicit analysis. In Turkey the state operates as an active architect of the platform labour regime, and its authorship runs through three connected moves. It constructs the *esnaf kurye* category described above, writing workers' exclusion from employment protection into law. It then sustains that exclusion through regulatory forbearance, inconsistent inspection and the diversion of disputes into compulsory arbitration ([Erbil, 2025](#); [Erbil & Özbilgin, 2024](#)). Finally, it accommodates platform expansion while withholding the associational rights that might contest it. Algorithmic management therefore does not operate alongside the state; it operates through arrangements the state actively maintains.

A comparison with China clarifies what is distinctive here. Chinese food delivery platforms exercise dense algorithmic control through gamification, ranking and tight delivery windows, and workers respond with everyday tactics and informal solidarities that resemble those we observe ([Sun, 2019](#); [Van Doorn & Chen, 2021](#); [Huang, 2023](#); [Yu et al., 2022](#)). Yet the Chinese regime rests on a high capacity developmental state and an elaborate architecture of third party labour supply companies that absorb employment liability, fragment the workforce and dampen collective contention, producing what has been called sticky labour ([Lei, 2021](#); [Li, 2026](#); [Sun et al., 2023](#)). Turkey presents a different articulation. Control is secured less through bureaucratic capacity and corporatist intermediation than through legal liminality, discretionary enforcement and pervasive economic uncertainty. The Turkish case

therefore contributes not a claim that authoritarian gig work is unique to Turkey, but an account of a distinct state to platform articulation in which fragility and discretion, rather than developmental coordination, are the operative mechanisms.

While opacity, unilateral communication and rating-based evaluations are widely documented in Global North platform economies, their consequences in Turkey are qualitatively different because algorithmic control operates within, rather than alongside, a pre-existing authoritarian labour regime. In settings such as the UK or Germany, algorithmic opacity primarily generates managerial ambiguity, whereas in Turkey it combines with political surveillance, legal liminality, and discretionary enforcement to render voice not only economically costly but politically risky. Thus, mechanisms that function as efficiency tools in regulated markets become instruments of intensified silence in contexts where institutional protections are weak, and dissent carries systemic consequences. These examples highlight what is specifically Turkish in our case: algorithmic governance interacts with political centralisation, discretionary enforcement, and legal liminality to produce a form of platform-voice that is simultaneously economically and politically risky, distinguishing it from experiences in other national contexts.

Specifying this distinctiveness also requires situating platform work within the alternatives realistically available to workers, rather than against an idealised standard of secure employment. The Turkish labour market is marked by extensive informality, with a substantial share of employment unregistered, alongside youth unemployment above twenty per cent and widespread underemployment ([TÜİK, 2023](#); [WEC, 2023](#)). For many participants the practical alternatives to platform work are not stable, voiced or protected jobs but informal construction, small scale manufacturing, unregistered retail and service work, or agricultural and casual day labour, settings that frequently combine low pay, long hours, occupational hazard and an equal or greater absence of voice.

Read against this horizon, gig work is experienced by many participants less as a sharp deterioration from a better prior condition than as a lateral move within an already entrenched precarity, and at times as a marginally preferable option offering flexible entry, immediate cash flow and distance from an abusive supervisor. Several participants narrated platform work as comparatively better than previous factory or retail employment in these limited respects (see [Wolf et al., 2025](#)). We take this seriously in analytical terms. It does not redeem the regime, since the relevant comparison is itself a field of constrained and degraded options, but it reframes our argument: algorithmic silencing in Turkey is best understood as the digital reconfiguration of a pre existing precarity, in which platforms inherit, encode and extend forms of insecurity and voicelessness that already structured informal work ([Montgomery & Baglioni, 2021](#)), rather than as the sudden arrival of the exploitation into an otherwise protected labour market.

The institutional and technological configurations outlined above form the ground on which worker expression is shaped and constrained. The following analysis traces how platform couriers in Turkey navigate this terrain, how they express, withhold or disguise voice within a system that governs through data and discretion. Three patterns organise this inquiry: the closure of voice through algorithmic procedure, the shaping of conduct through anticipatory discipline, and the emergence of fragile spaces of collective endurance. These dynamics show how digital systems absorb the logic of authoritarian governance while workers continue to carve out small acts of survival within it.

2. Methods

The expansion of the gig economy has fundamentally transformed the nature of worker voice. While some literature describes worker voice historically as a reciprocal dialogue between employer and employee, this was never a universal norm and was largely confined to post-World War Two Global North economies. In Turkey's authoritarian and economically centralised labour context, worker voice is structured

differently, constrained by institutional fragility and political oversight, and often shaped by algorithmic management. To investigate how this process unfolds, we adopted a critical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Lawless & Chen, 2019), guided by an abductive analytical approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This methodological combination enabled us to examine how workers narrate and interpret their experiences under algorithmic governance while situating those accounts within the broader political economy that renders them intelligible. Rather than fragmenting accounts into isolated statements, we treated participants' stories as discursive accounts that reveal how workers articulate and negotiate power relations during early stages of analysis before moving toward thematic abstraction.

Critical thematic analysis focuses on the power-laden nature of storytelling. It treats narratives not as transparent reflections of experience, but as meaning-making practices shaped by structural forces and institutional constraints. The critical dimension of our analysis ensured that narratives were examined as isolated stories and situated expressions of power, ideology, and resistance. Guided by abductive reasoning, the research maintained a continuous dialogue between data and theory, remaining open to contradiction and surprise while iteratively refining interpretation. This reflexive oscillation allowed us to move beyond description toward theoretical insight into the institutional and technological architectures of silencing.

2.1. Participants and data collection

We began our recruitment with purposive sampling to identify initial contacts across distinct forms of platform work, including courier and food delivery services, platform-based taxi driving, and online freelancing. The sample also included online freelancers, whose experiences are analytically comparable to locally embedded workers and are discussed in the findings. However, given the politically sensitive climate in Turkey, where formal mechanisms of labour representation and dissent are constrained, many potential participants were hesitant to engage in open discussion. To navigate this challenge and build trust, we adopted snowball sampling as a methodological necessity rather than convenience, relying on referrals through existing networks of trust to access participants who would otherwise remain unreachable.

This approach was grounded in the recognition that authoritarian labour governance in Turkey restricts associational life and fosters self-censorship, making conventional recruitment strategies ineffective and ethically risky. Snowball sampling thus became essential for ensuring both the safety of participants and the authenticity of their narratives, allowing us to reach workers across different sectors while maintaining confidentiality and psychological comfort.

Through this process, we conducted 41 in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews over a period of four months. The interview guide contained 21 open-ended questions and probes, each developed from the literature on algorithmic management, worker voice, and critical thematic analysis. The questions were organised into four broad domains that structured the dialogue while leaving space for participants' own emphases: (1) everyday encounters with algorithmic systems, (2) experiences of voice, silence and dissent, (3) coping and resistance practices, and (4) expectations regarding organisational and policy support. A brief socio-demographic section (age, gender, platform, tenure, and employment history) preceded the open-ended questions.

The final sample was diverse, encompassing participants aged from their late teens to late fifties, with educational backgrounds ranging from secondary school to postgraduate level. Workers were engaged in a variety of sectors, including food and grocery delivery, ride-hailing, and online freelancing, and their tenure in platform work ranged from a few months to over seven years (see Table 2). All interviews were conducted face to face, with full ethical approval obtained from the principal author's university. Informed consent was collected prior to participation, and all data were anonymised and securely stored in line with

institutional research ethics requirements.

Participants were drawn predominantly from Turkey's major metropolitan labour markets, principally Istanbul, with further participants in Ankara and Izmir and a smaller number in medium sized provincial cities, reflecting the concentration of platform density, customer demand and dark store infrastructure in large urban centres. Because local labour markets and alternative employment opportunities differ across these settings, we attended to location in our interpretation. The socio demographic section also recorded prior employment histories, including previous work in manufacturing, retail, construction and hospitality and periods of unemployment or informal work, which allowed us to analyse how workers evaluate platform labour against the concrete alternatives they had previously experienced.

2.2. Data analysis

Our analysis followed a four-stage abductive process (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) situated within the principles of critical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Lawless & Chen, 2019). Rather than treating interview accounts as isolated statements, the analysis approached them as situated discourses that reveal how workers negotiate power, discipline, and silence under algorithmic governance. It moved recursively between participants' accounts, contextual structures, and theoretical interpretation to uncover how individual experiences are shaped by and reproduce wider configurations of control. The analytical lens was informed by comparative studies of authoritarian labour governance and digital control that conceptualise the meso-level interplay between technological infrastructures and institutional coercion (Anner et al., 2024; Ford & Gillan, 2024).

We began analysis with open coding of all participant accounts, focusing on how workers described their everyday encounters with algorithmic control (Stage 1). In critical thematic analysis, the initial phase of analysis aims to identify experiential codes that capture how everyday discourses are shaped by dominant ideologies and power relations. This first interpretive movement surfaced recurring accounts such as 'sudden drops in ratings', 'receiving no reply to messages', and 'constantly changing payment rules.' Participants expressed confusion and frustration over opaque metrics, unexplained penalties, and the absence of any human interlocutor. Phrases such as 'seeing a friend get deactivated overnight' and 'not being given the right to defence' illustrated how workers came to internalise uncertainty as an ordinary condition of labour. Early codes such as 'non-transparent performance measurement', 'structural foreclosure of dialogue', and 'incoherent rules and confusing updates' captured how opacity and volatility were experienced not as technical failures but as deliberate mechanisms of managerial design that foreclosed voice and accountability. These dynamics were evident in participants' earlier examples of unexplained rating drops, automated warnings that denied their right to respond, and constantly shifting pay systems that eroded any sense of stability or control.

We then compared and clustered these first-order codes across occupational groups and platforms to identify converging mechanisms of adaptation and control (Stage 2). In this phase, interpretation moved beyond description to explain how patterns of experience reflected wider organisational and political logics. Following Lawless and Chen's (2019) critical thematic analysis, we applied closed coding by asking how everyday discourses are enabled and constrained by social systems, dominant ideologies, and power relations. Through this critical lens combined with abductive reasoning, patterns were reinterpreted as expressions of a broader authoritarian rationality embedded in algorithmic management. Workers described 'thinking I should have been faster', 'fear of receiving a low rating', and 'hesitation to complain due to consequences', illustrating how responsibility was individualised and risk internalised. What initially appeared as personal frustration was reframed as a disciplinary effect: the transformation of fear into a self-regulating disposition. This stage yielded three central clusters:

Table 2
Participants' demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education Level	Previous Work Experience	Type of Gig Work/Platform	Tenure at Current Platform	Total Gig Work Experience	Overall Work Experience	Income Dependency	Household Status	Social Security Status	Disability Status
Arda	22	Male	University Student	Part-time café worker	Food Delivery	1.5 years	1.5 years	~2.5 years	Secondary	Single, lives with family	Covered by parent	None
Baha	42	Male	High School	Laid-off factory worker	Platform-Based Taxi Services	3 years	3 years	~22 years	Primary	Married, 2 children	Self-paid (Bağ-Kur)	None
Cemile	31	Female	Master's Degree	Marketing Assistant	Online Freelancer	2 years	4 years	~7 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None
Doruk	28	Male	High School	Construction worker	Grocery Delivery	1 year	2 years	~10 years	Primary	Single, supports family abroad	Uninsured	None
Ece	21	Female	University Student	None	Grocery Delivery	1 year	1 year	1 year	Secondary	Single	Covered by parent	None
Fatih	48	Male	High School	Textile worker	Grocery Delivery	4 years	4 years	~30 years	Primary	Married, 1 child	Self-paid (Bağ-Kur)	None
Hasan	29	Male	Bachelor's (Engineering)	Couldn't find a job in his field	Food Delivery	2 years	2 years	~5 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None
Itri	35	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Accountant	Online Freelancer	3 years	5 years	~12 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	Yes (Physical)
Jale	38	Female	High School	Homemaker	Online Freelancer	2.5 years	2.5 years	~2.5 years	Secondary	Married, 2 children	Uninsured	None
Kemal	20	Male	University Student	None	Food Delivery	6 months	6 months	6 months	Secondary	Single, lives with family	Covered by parent	None
Mert	52	Male	Middle School	Market vendor	Food Delivery	5 years	5 years	~35 years	Primary	Married	Self-paid (Bağ-Kur)	None
Naci	26	Male	Bachelor's (Sociology)	Retail sales associate	Grocery Delivery	1.5 years	2 years	~4 years	Primary	Single, with roommate	Self-paid	None
Oktay	23	Male	University Dropout	Waiter	Food Delivery	2 years	3 years	~5 years	Primary	Single	Self-paid	None
Pars	33	Male	High School	Ex-military personnel	Platform-Based Taxi Services	4 years	4 years	~12 years	Primary	Married, 1 child	Self-paid	None
Rengin	25	Female	Master's Degree	Contract research assistant	Online Freelancer	1 year	3 years	~3 years	Secondary	Single	Uninsured	None
Sami	19	Male	High School Student	None	Food Delivery	8 months	8 months	8 months	Secondary	Single, lives with family	Covered by parent	None
Talip	45	Male	Bachelor's (Business)	Owned a business (bankrupt)	Grocery Delivery	2 years	2 years	~20 years	Primary	Married, 3 children	Self-paid (Bağ-Kur)	None
Umay	27	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Graphic Designer	Online Freelancer	3 years	5 years	~5 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None
Veli	30	Male	High School (Syria)	Informal translator	Grocery Delivery	2 years	4 years	~10 years	Primary	Married, 1 child	Self-paid	None
Yakup	39	Male	High School	Tourism sector (unemployed)	Platform-Based Taxi Services	3.5 years	3.5 years	~18 years	Primary	Single	Self-paid (Bağ-Kur)	None
Zeki	24	Male	Bachelor's (Recent Graduate)	Intern	Food Delivery	1 year	1 year	1 year	Primary	Single, lives with family	Uninsured	None
Atiye	32	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Banker (resigned)	Online Freelancer	2 years	2 years	~8 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None
Batu	29	Male	High School	Warehouse worker	Grocery Delivery	4 years	6 years	~10 years	Primary	Married	Self-paid	None
Ceyda	41	Female	High School	Secretary	Online Freelancer	3 years	3 years	~20 years	Secondary	Married, 2 children	Covered by spouse	Yes (Hearing)
Demir	26	Male	Bachelor's Degree	None	Food Delivery	3 years	3 years	3 years	Primary	Single	Self-paid	None
Emre	55	Male	Primary School	Construction foreman (retired)	Grocery Delivery	6 years	6 years	~40 years	Secondary	Retired	Retired	None
Firaz	22	Male	University Student	None	Online Freelancer	1.5 years	1.5 years	1.5 years	Secondary	Single, lives with family	Covered by parent	None
Galip	36	Male	High School	Sales representative	Platform-Based Taxi Services	1 year	1 year	~15 years	Primary	Married, 2 children	Uninsured	None

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education Level	Previous Work Experience	Type of Gig Work/Platform	Tenure at Current Platform	Total Gig Work Experience	Overall Work Experience	Income Dependency	Household Status	Social Security Status	Disability Status
Harun İsmail	28	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Public Relations	Grocery Delivery	9 months	9 months	~5 years	Primary	Single	Self-paid	None
Koray	43	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Store manager	Platform-Based Taxi Services	2.5 years	2.5 years	~20 years	Primary	Divorced, 1 child	Self-paid	None
Leyla	21	Male	University Student	None	Food Delivery	2 years	2 years	2 years	Secondary	Single	Covered by parent	None
Mikail Nafiz	30	Female	Master's Degree	Academic (contract ended)	Online Freelancer	1 year	2 years	~5 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None
Oya	37	Male	High School	Truck driver	Grocery Delivery	2 years	2 years	~18 years	Primary	Married, 1 child	Self-paid	None
Rami	19	Male	High School Graduate	None	Grocery Delivery	1 year	1 year	1 year	Primary	Single, lives with family	Uninsured	None
Servet	29	Female	Bachelor's (Architecture)	Architect (underpaid)	Online Freelancer	4 years	4 years	~6 years	Secondary	Single	Uninsured	None
Tahir	46	Male	High School	Security guard	Platform-Based Taxi Services	3 years	3 years	~25 years	Primary	Married	Self-paid	None
Utku	25	Male	Bachelor's (Tourism)	Hotel receptionist	Food Delivery	2 years	3 years	~4 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None
Volkan Yaşemin	24	Male	University Student	None	Grocery Delivery	1.5 years	1.5 years	1.5 years	Secondary	Single, with roommate	Covered by parent	None
	58	Male	Civil servant (retired)	None	Food Delivery	4 years	~30+ years	Secondary	Retired	Retired	Self-paid	None
	27	Male	High School	Waiter	Food Delivery	5 years	7 years	~9 years	Primary	Married, 1 child	Self-paid	None
	26	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher (unappointed)	Online Freelancer	2 years	4 years	~4 years	Primary	Single	Uninsured	None

opaque evaluations and unaccountability, internalising blame and obedience, and informal practices of voice under constraint, each reflecting a different layer of how algorithmic systems naturalised obedience and converted dependency into compliance.

Interpretation then turned toward theoretical engagement with behavioural, disciplinary, informational, and affective frameworks to deepen analysis (Stage 3). Hirschman's (1970) Exit–Voice–Loyalty model illuminated how algorithmic systems restrict exit, absorb voice into feedback loops, and manipulate loyalty through performance metrics that determine access to work. Foucault's (1975/2020) notion of disciplinary power clarified how visibility and evaluation transform fear of assessment into anticipatory self-regulation. Couldry and Mejias (2019) situated these dynamics within data colonialism, showing how behavioural and emotional data are extracted unilaterally, producing informational asymmetry and eroding communicative agency. Hardt and Negri (2004) and Varoufakis (2024) extended this to the domain of cognitive capitalism, where affective and communicative capacities become commodified and endurance itself sustains value creation under digital control. This theoretical engagement operationalised the second guiding question of critical thematic analysis: how macro- and micro-level discourses, practices, and systems intersect and reproduce dominations and oppressions (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Bringing these perspectives into dialogue with the data reframed opaque evaluations and unaccountability as the institutional expression of extractive visibility, internalising blame, and obedience as the affective and disciplinary interiorisation of algorithmic logic, and informal and affective voice as the re-emergence of social interdependence within architectures of abstraction. Subthemes such as whisper networks and mutual protection, strategic compliance, and hidden transcripts of resistance, and e-mpathy in virtual settings demonstrated how workers repurposed digital infrastructures into circuits of mutual care and survival. The organisation of these analytical movements is presented in Table 3, which traces the connection between coded segments, interpretive mechanisms, and final themes.

Finally, we consolidated the three themes across participant accounts, examining how they intersected across job types and employment histories (Stage 4). Couriers and online freelancers experienced similar architectures of opacity but mobilised different adaptive repertoires: couriers relied on whisper networks and collective risk management, while freelancers cultivated digital empathy and mutual support through informal online communities. The recurrence of these patterns confirmed that algorithmic silencing operates simultaneously as structural foreclosure and psychological governance. Reflexive discussions among the research team interrogated interpretive bias and ensured that theoretical frames did not overshadow the situated meanings expressed in participants' accounts. The final analysis positioned algorithmic management as a political technology of labour control that fuses technological opacity with affective exhaustion while still generating residual solidarities of care and resistance.

3. Findings

Our analysis of participants' accounts revealed a dense and contradictory landscape of labour under algorithmic control within Turkey's politically centralised and institutionally fragile labour market. Gig workers' narratives show how technological infrastructures and authoritarian governance converge to produce a distinctive configuration of silence. Three interrelated dynamics organise this account: (1) the structural foreclosure of worker voice, (2) the internalisation of blame and obedience, and (3) the emergence of informal practices of voice under constraint. These themes depict how algorithmic management digitises the political logic of obedience and transforms labour into a process of continuous self-adjustment. Fig. 1 summarises the multi-level architecture that structures the findings presented below.

Although our three themes cut across the sample, the forms of gig work in our study are not interchangeable, and we differentiate them in

Table 3

Coding structure and thematic development.

Narrative/ descriptive codes: what happened and what was felt	Critical/theoretical codes: what is the broader meaning?	Subtheme	Theme
'sudden drop in ratings', 'inability to learn the reason', 'searching for a human contact', 'seeing a friend get deactivated overnight'	'non-transparent performance measurement', 'absence of accountability mechanisms', 'elimination of human authority', 'disciplinary effect of peer punishment'	Opaque evaluations and unaccountability	Structural foreclosure of worker voice
'system sending one-way notifications', 'receiving no reply to messages', 'not being given the right to defence', 'reporting an app bug', 'questioning an incorrect payment'	'channeling of monologic control', 'structural foreclosure of dialogue', 'removal of due process', 'technological failures blamed on worker', 'opacity in financial calculations'	Asymmetric communication and automated Penalties	
'constantly changing payment rules', 'prevention of strategy-building', 'inability to understand the bonus system'	'intentional creation of confusion', 'unpredictability of labour', 'learned helplessness'	Incoherent rules and confusing Updates	
'seeing low income as one's own fault', 'thinking I should have been faster', 'assuming the system is objective', 'feeling inadequate compared to others'	'individualisation of responsibility', 'mechanism of internalising blame', 'subjection to algorithmic logic', 'internalisation of competitive metrics'	From disappointment to self-blame	Internalising blame and obedience
'anxiety about account deactivation', 'hesitation to complain due to consequences', 'fear of receiving a low rating', 'worrying about future punishment', 'avoiding any kind of conflict'	'fear created by employment precarity', 'pre-emptive self-censorship', 'strategy of remaining invisible', 'anticipatory obedience', 'risk aversion as a survival tactic'	Fear of deactivation and future punishment	
'losing the energy to fight back', 'unwillingness to start work', 'creating emotional distance from the system'	'psychological wear and tear; burnout', 'depletion of affective labour', 'indifference as passive resistance'	Emotional exhaustion and withdrawal	
'communicating via WhatsApp', 'being warned about risky areas', 'feeling of protecting one another', 'listing	'informal solidarity networks', 'collective risk management', 'communication channels outside of surveillance', 'creation of an	Whisper networks and mutual protection	Informal practices of voice under constraint

Table 3 (continued)

Narrative/ descriptive codes: what happened and what was felt	Critical/theoretical codes: what is the broader meaning?	Subtheme	Theme
problematic customers'	informal reputation system'		
'avoiding dangerous routes', 'using small tricks to fool the app', 'bending rules for one's own benefit', 'pretending to follow a route', 'secretly extending break times'	'protecting bodily autonomy', 'counter-tactics against algorithmic control', 'practices of everyday resistance', 'performative compliance', 'reclaiming personal time'		
	'venting about the loneliness of the job', 'seeking support after a difficult day', 'seeing that others have similar problems'		
	E-mpathy in virtual settings		
		'collective coping against isolation', 'mechanisms for emotional relief', 'peer-based solidarity'	

the analysis that follows. Food delivery and courier work are locationally embedded and time pressured, exposing workers to road risk, weather, and street level surveillance, and to the bodily consequences documented above. Platform based taxi and ride hailing work centres on face-to-face customer encounters, licensing exposure and safety within the vehicle. Online freelancing is geographically dispersed and globally mediated, governed by client ratings, completion metrics and isolation rather than physical danger (Sutherland et al., 2020). These types intersect differently with the authoritarian labour regime: couriers and drivers are most directly exposed to street level state authority and physical risk, while freelancers experience the regime more through legal liminality, payment insecurity and the absence of any domestic institutional recourse. Where our themes manifest differently across these groups, we make the distinction explicit.

These forms are also weighed against the work participants did before. As Table 2 records, many entered platform labour from laid-off factory and textile jobs, a bankrupt small business, an unappointed teaching post, or informal and casual work, and several described platform work as a less supervised and more immediately remunerative option than the employment it replaced, even as they named its insecurity. One participant, Fatih, who had moved into delivery work from a textile workshop, captured this ambivalence directly:

In the textile workshop, the hours were long, and the supervisor was always standing over us. The pay was not good either, or sometimes you waited for it. With delivery work, at least I can start quickly and bring money home the same week. But it is not secure. If the app gives me fewer orders or my score drops, there is no one I can ask. So, it is better in some ways, but still very fragile. (Fatih, 48, Male, High School, Grocery Delivery, 4 years Total Gig Exp.)

4. Structural foreclosure of worker voice

Algorithmic systems in Turkey's platform economy do more than coordinate the flow of work. They govern the boundaries of communication, translating the political logic of obedience into a technical form. What appears as optimisation operates as containment: dialogue becomes procedurally impossible, and silence is produced through design rather than decree. Within a labour market shaped by weak institutions, dependence on authority and pervasive surveillance, platform infrastructures replicate the asymmetries of authoritarian governance through digital means. The worker's capacity to speak, question or

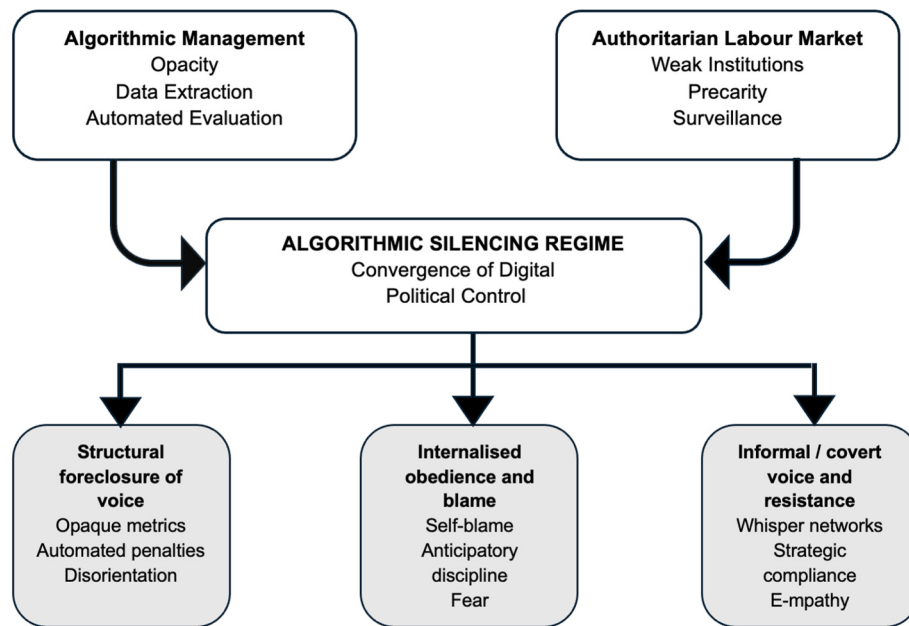


Fig. 1. Algorithmic silencing regime.

appeal is not prohibited but dissolved within code.

4.1. Opaque evaluations and unreachable managers

Participants described the opacity of algorithmic evaluations as both a source of anxiety and a mechanism of discipline. Hirschman's (1970) model illuminates how the option of 'voice' collapses in such settings, while loyalty is sustained by fear of deactivation and exit is constrained by economic precarity. Arda, a 22-year-old courier, described a performance score that dropped 'for no reason,' leaving him feeling 'punished by a ghost:'

My performance score dropped last week, and I have no idea why. I delivered everything on time. Was it a customer rating? Was I not fast enough between orders? The app doesn't tell you. There is no one to call, no office to visit. It just says 'low performance,' and now I get fewer shifts. It felt like being punished by a ghost. (Arda, 22, Male, University Student, Food Delivery, 1.5 years Total Gig Exp.)

Arda's experience captures how algorithmic opacity translates managerial authority into abstraction. His inability to locate accountability reflects a wider institutional pattern in Turkey, where administrative discretion operates without transparency or recourse (Erbil, 2025; Tansel, 2019). The worker's dependency on the platform mirrors the citizen's dependency on the state, both governed by distant systems that speak but do not listen. Galip, a 36-year-old taxi driver, echoed this displacement of authority:

I had a customer who left her phone in my car. I wanted to report it to the company to arrange its return. I spent an hour searching the app for a support number or a direct contact. All I found were pre-written answers. In my old job, I could walk down the hall and speak to my manager. Here, the manager is an algorithm, and it has no office. (Galip, 36, male, High School, Platform-Based Taxi Services, 1 year Total Gig Exp.)

Galip's account illustrates how Foucauldian power operates through invisibility rather than confrontation. The absence of a human interlocutor transforms the act of speaking into an administrative absurdity. Under authoritarian governance, this technological unreachability reproduces a familiar social order: obedience is achieved not through coercion but through routinised resignation. For platform-based taxi and

ride-hailing drivers such as Galip, this unreachability compounds an exposure that couriers do not share: drivers manage face-to-face encounters, licensing scrutiny and in-vehicle safety alone, yet meet the same absent interlocutor when an incident demands a response.

4.2. Asymmetric communication and automated penalties

The communicative infrastructure of platforms reproduces the asymmetry of power embedded in data colonialism. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue, data extraction operates as a one-way capture of human life that transforms social communication into a resource for accumulation. For gig workers, this extraction erases reciprocity: their utterances are stored as data, not recognised as speech. Doruk's frustration captures this condition:

The platform sends me constant notifications: 'New Order!', 'Go Faster!', 'Customer Waiting!'. But when a customer falsely complained that I was rude, I tried to reply to explain my side. All I got back was an automated message saying my account received a warning. They can speak to me, but I can't speak back. (Doruk, 28, Male, High School, Grocery Delivery, 2 years Total Gig Exp.)

This asymmetry embodies what Foucault called a unilateral visibility. Workers are fully legible to the algorithm (quantified, tracked, and ranked) while the system that governs them remains opaque. The panoptic relation is thus inverted: visibility is weaponised downward, while authority hides in code. Umay's experience, as an online freelancer, extends this logic into domains of platform work that appear organisationally distinct yet remain governed by the same one-way architectures of algorithmic visibility:

I was given a 24-hour deadline for a project. The client's instructions were unclear, so I sent three messages asking for clarification. I got no reply. The deadline passed, and my completion rate was automatically penalised. The platform can penalise me in a second, but it cannot facilitate a simple conversation. (Umay, 27, Female, Bachelor's Degree, Online Freelancer, 5 years Total Gig Exp.)

Online freelancing appears distinct in form, yet it is governed by the same one-way architectures of algorithmic visibility that confine couriers and ride-hail drivers within Turkey's discretionary labour regime. Her experience exposes how algorithmic rationality substitutes due

process with automation. Punishment is instant, but explanation is structurally impossible. In authoritarian political economies, this reflects a familiar asymmetry of power: citizens may appeal, but the system does not answer. The same logic of unidirectional accountability migrates into digital labour, where managerial invisibility is naturalised as efficiency. Algorithmic communication thus performs a double function: it extracts economic value while reproducing the political logic of nonreciprocity.

4.3. Incoherent rules and confusing updates

If opacity disciplines through silence, instability disciplines through exhaustion. Participants repeatedly described the perpetual recalibration demanded by the platforms' ever-changing systems. Volkan, a courier with seven years in the gig economy, captured this sense of permanent disorientation:

Every month, the payment system is different. First, it was a fee per delivery. Then, a bonus for distance. Now, it's a 'quest' system that changes every week. You can never figure out how to maximise your earnings because as soon as you do, they change the rules again. It's designed to keep you confused and just accept whatever they give you. (Volkan, 27, Male, High School, Food Delivery, 7 years Total Gig Exp.)

Zeki, a younger courier, articulated how these updates produce both practical and psychological dislocation:

They updated the app again last week. The buttons are all in different places, and the map looks different. It took me two days to get used to it, and my delivery times suffered as a result. Why the constant changes? It feels like they don't want us to get comfortable. If you can't even master the tool you use for work, how can you ever question the work itself? (Zeki, 24, Male, Bachelor's Degree, Food Delivery, 1 year Total Gig Exp.)

Other workers described the same instability as an intentional tactic rather than technical noise. One participant explained, 'They keep changing the pay structure so no one knows what fair pay means anymore. You just try to survive each week.' This sense of relentless adaptation reflects what [Hardt and Negri \(2004\)](#) call cognitive capitalism, where value is extracted from the worker's mental agility and emotional compliance rather than physical exertion.

Platforms monetise the worker's capacity to adjust while suppressing the reflective distance necessary for critique ([Özbilgin et al., 2025](#)). Constantly shifting metrics compel self-surveillance and continual recalibration, keeping workers in a state of epistemic fatigue. This dynamic produces what [Foucault \(1975/2020\)](#) termed docility, but in a digital form: docile minds managing their own uncertainty. In Turkey's volatile labour market, where a single week's reduced income can endanger subsistence, this instability has a deeper political dimension. The necessity of immediate survival replaces the capacity for collective analysis. Disorientation becomes not an incidental flaw but a political technology that secures compliance. The worker's exhaustion mirrors the citizen's fatigue in navigating unstable regulations, rendering both governable through confusion.

Instability in algorithmic work operates as a method of governance rather than a technical flaw. The constant reconfiguration of rules, pay systems and performance metrics prevents workers from attaining mastery, keeping them in a state of continual adaptation. Such volatility turns uncertainty into a managerial resource, ensuring compliance through fatigue and dependence. The system rewards cognitive flexibility while punishing reflection, producing workers who monitor and adjust themselves within ever-shifting parameters. In this process, instability becomes a disciplinary device that naturalises control and suppresses critique.

This manufactured uncertainty is intensified within Turkey's authoritarian labour regime, where unpredictability has long served as

an instrument of control. As [Cameron \(2024\)](#) and [Wu and Huang \(2024\)](#) suggest, algorithmic management manufactures consent through confined choice, keeping workers compliant through the illusion of agency. In such a context, instability functions as political design rather than technical failure. The volatility of algorithmic metrics mirrors the wider volatility of governance, where abrupt policy shifts sustain dependency and erode collective organisation. Platforms thus extend the state's logic of opacity and discretionary rule into the digital domain. Exhaustion replaces negotiation, survival substitutes participation. The result is a form of digital obedience that fuses cognitive capitalism with authoritarian governance, a system in which compliance is achieved not through coercion but through the exhaustion of those who must continually adapt to stay afloat.

5. Internalising blame and obedience

Algorithmic governance does not rely on overt coercion but on the gradual reorganisation of subjectivity. What begins as the external silencing of voice is absorbed inward, as workers learn to translate systemic opacity into personal responsibility. Control becomes affective, operating through the worker's own sense of failure and fear. In this process, disappointment gives way to self-blame, anticipation of punishment replaces dialogue, and exhaustion supplants resistance. Within Turkey's authoritarian labour regime, where dependence on authority is entrenched and institutional protection scarce, these affective mechanisms acquire political force. They reproduce the moral logic of submission through digital means, transforming compliance into an act of survival.

5.1. From disappointment to self-blame

Algorithmic control in Turkey's platform economy does not simply manage behaviour; it manufactures dispositions. Workers confronting opaque evaluations and shifting rules learn to interpret systemic ambiguity as personal inadequacy. When punishment arrives without explanation, blame travels inward. This movement from confusion to self-reproach reveals how algorithmic systems, presented as objective, produce a psychological contract grounded in guilt. Nafiz, a 19-year-old courier, described how a sudden fall in earnings prompted self-doubt rather than suspicion of the platform:

My weekly income summary showed I earned 20% less, even though I worked the same hours. My first thought wasn't that the system was unfair. My first thought was, 'I must have done something wrong. I must not be efficient enough.' You start to believe that the algorithm is objective, so if you fail, it must be your fault. (Nafiz, 19, Male, High School Graduate, Grocery Delivery, 1 year Total Gig Exp.)

Nafiz's reaction illustrates how workers internalise algorithmic authority as moral authority. The algorithm's opacity invites what [Foucault \(1975/2020\)](#) described as disciplinary self-formation: individuals come to govern themselves in anticipation of unseen scrutiny. What begins as confusion becomes self-correction. The platform's claim to neutrality legitimises the transfer of structural responsibility onto the worker, who assumes that inefficiency or moral weakness, rather than managerial design, explains failure. Rengin, a 25-year-old freelancer, recounted a similar pattern when a client's unexplained low rating left her blaming herself:

I received a 3-star rating from a client with no comments. My overall score went down. Instead of getting angry at the client for not providing feedback, I was angry at myself all day. I kept thinking, 'What did I miss? Where did I make a mistake?' The system teaches you to blame yourself for everything. (Rengin, 25, Female, Master's Degree, Online Freelancer, 3 years Total Gig Exp.)

Her narrative captures the internalisation of algorithmic rationality: metrics become mirrors through which workers measure moral worth.

The object of self-blame also differs by form of work: couriers such as Nafiz audit their speed and bodily efficiency against timed delivery metrics, whereas freelancers such as Rengin interrogate the quality of their craft against client ratings that govern reputational access to future work, yet both convert opaque judgement into personal fault. This form of cognitive capture exemplifies the affective dimension of cognitive capitalism (Hardt & Negri, 2004), where productivity depends on self-discipline rather than supervision. In Turkey's authoritarian labour context, such inward blame resonates with scripts of endurance and deference that were constituted historically through state-tutored labour institutions and discretionary authority, and that continue to make questioning authority a risk of exclusion (Erbil, 2025; Makal, 1999). Algorithmic opacity thus performs an ideological function. It transforms mismanagement into individual failure, ensuring that critique is redirected inward and compliance appears voluntary.

5.2. Fear of deactivation and future punishment

Fear transforms algorithmic control from a procedural logic into an affective regime. In Turkey's precarious labour market, where workers are easily replaced and institutional protection is weak, the threat of deactivation operates as both economic and psychological coercion. It is not the act of punishment but the anticipation of it that disciplines. Pars, a driver supporting his family through platform-based taxi work, described how suspension reconfigured his everyday conduct:

My account was suspended for two days last year for 'suspicious activity.' They never explained what it was. Now, I live in constant fear. I would never dare to complain about a low fee or question a customer's rating. This job is all I have. If they deactivate me, my family will have no income. Silence is the price of survival. (Pars, 33, Male, High School, Platform-Based Taxi Services, 4 years Total Gig Exp.)

Pars' silence illustrates how the algorithm's authority operates through uncertainty. The opacity of rules, combined with the precarity of work, produces a form of anticipatory obedience (Cameron, 2024). The worker disciplines himself before any external command is issued. What Foucault conceptualised as the internalisation of surveillance is here intensified by automation, the gaze is unseen yet always present. This self-regulation is not merely psychological but political: it sustains a labour regime where compliance is rational and dissent is existentially risky. Arda, a young courier, described how this fear extends even to moments of personal danger:

The customer was very drunk and became aggressive. I wanted to report him, but then I thought, what if he gives me a bad rating in retaliation? What if the platform sees a conflict and just deactivates us both to solve the problem? It is safer to say nothing, finish the ride, and pray you don't get him again. The fear of punishment is stronger than the desire for justice. (Arda, 22, Male, University Student, Food Delivery, 1.5 years Total Gig Exp.)

Arda's calculation captures the affective logic of anticipatory obedience: workers internalise the threat of algorithmic judgement so deeply that silence becomes the rational mode of survival. Fear, in this context, functions as both discipline and dependency. Within Turkey's authoritarian labour regime, where precarity is normalised and discretion governs access to opportunity, the algorithm reproduces familiar structures of obedience through digital means. The regime supplies the material basis of this fear: *esnaf kurye* classification places couriers outside the protections of labour law, the one per cent sectoral threshold forecloses collective recourse, and courier unions remain unrecognised, so no institutional shelter stands between the worker and the sanctioning interface (Öztürk, 2023; Çelik, 2016; DİSK-AR, 2023). Control no longer requires coercion; it endures through affective capture. The worker, always uncertain yet perpetually alert, becomes the custodian of his own subordination, a condition where the anticipation of

punishment becomes indistinguishable from the performance of compliance. What deactivation would take likewise differs across forms of gig work: drivers such as Pars stand to lose a licensed livelihood, couriers the week-to-week cash flow that sustains their households, and freelancers the reputational capital accumulated over years on a single profile, so the same threat disciplines through different anxieties.

5.3. Emotional exhaustion and withdrawal

Emotional exhaustion marks the final stage of algorithmic control, where the drive to contest injustice gives way to a numb persistence. Under conditions of unaccountability and constant precarity, voice does not disappear suddenly but erodes through repetition, each failed attempt to seek fairness narrowing the worker's emotional horizon. Our participant, Samet, recounted this slow descent from anger to detachment:

In the beginning, I used to get angry. I would try to contact support, complain in the forums. Now? I feel nothing. Just tired. The system is designed to wear you down until you have no energy left to fight. So you just log on, do the deliveries, and log off. It's easier to withdraw than to keep getting disappointed. (Samet, 27, Male, High School, Food Delivery, 7 years Total Gig Exp.)

Samet's reflection exposes how exhaustion becomes a mode of governance. The platform's architecture does not silence through repression but through depletion. Constant recalibration, shifting metrics, and emotional uncertainty transform engagement into labour and labour into fatigue. Rather than naming this fatigue as resistance or failure, it can be read as a survival strategy in an environment that rewards compliance and punishes care. Cemile, an online freelancer, described a similar process of emotional depletion:

It's a feeling of total demotivation. You are just a number in a system, a rating on a screen. After a while, the constant pressure and the lack of any human recognition just drain you. I used to care about my work, about doing a good job. Now, I just do enough not to get a negative review. My passion has been replaced by exhaustion. (Cemile, 31, Female, Master's Degree, Online Freelancer, 4 years Total Gig Exp.)

Cemile's account illustrates how algorithmic management converts passion into fatigue and identity into metrics. The exhaustion she describes is not simply emotional burnout but a structural effect of cognitive capitalism, where affective labour is extracted without recognition or reciprocity. The route to depletion nonetheless differs: couriers such as Samet are worn down by the physical grind of road, weather and time pressure, while freelancers such as Cemile are depleted by isolation and the withdrawal of recognition, so exhaustion arrives through the body in one form of work and through the thinning of relational reward in the other. In Turkey's authoritarian labour regime this fatigue acquires a political texture, because endurance and dissent carry institutionally produced meanings: a labour history in which legitimate participation was defined from above moralised patience and stigmatised protest (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2024; Makal, 2002), and the contemporary order renews that lesson through suspended strikes, compulsory arbitration and the dismissals that followed the 2022 courier actions (Bulut & Yeşilyurt, 2024; Umman, 2022; Çelik, 2016). Withdrawal becomes the only viable form of exit, a silent disconnection that sustains survival at the cost of participation.

Across these accounts, algorithmic management emerges not merely as a technical infrastructure but as a regime that reconstitutes subjectivity. The progression from blame to fear to exhaustion illustrates how control is exercised through affective capture rather than coercive command. Workers internalise systemic opacity as personal responsibility, anticipating sanctions before they occur and regulating themselves in ways that sustain organisational order. This mechanism mirrors Foucault's (1975/2020) account of disciplinary power, where

visibility and evaluation produce self-surveillance, but it also extends into the terrain of cognition and emotion. Algorithmic systems enlist workers' adaptive and emotional capacities as productive forces, transforming compliance into a psychological habit. What appears as flexibility is, therefore, the continuous recalibration of the self to opaque demands, a dynamic that dissolves the boundary between labour and interior life.

In Turkey's authoritarian labour context, this internalisation takes on political weight. Algorithmic governance mirrors the state's dependence on uncertainty and discretion as instruments of control, normalising obedience as prudence. Faraoun (2024) observes that platform economies thrive where political structures already legitimise asymmetrical visibility and curtailed worker voice. Here, algorithmic systems do not replace older hierarchies; they automate them. The moralisation of endurance, long embedded in Turkey's political economy, fuses with the cognitive capitalism of digital platforms, producing a form of digital servility sustained by fear and fatigue. In this synthesis, emotional exhaustion functions as a stabilising device: the depletion of critique becomes the very condition of continuity.

6. Informal practices of voice under constraint

The foreclosure of formal voice and the internalisation of obedience do not produce complete passivity but give rise to covert forms of agency. Workers navigate algorithmic systems through subtle acts of adaptation, collaboration, and care that together constitute a dispersed politics of survival. These informal practices, ranging from whisper networks and strategic compliance to shared spaces of emotional support, reveal what Vilasís-Pamos et al. (2024) calls hidden solidarities: quiet, relational forms of resistance that flourish beneath surveillance. Within Turkey's authoritarian labour regime, where institutional channels for dissent are constrained, such practices become not merely adaptive but political, transforming dependence into interdependence and isolation into collective endurance. These everyday tactics expose a critical paradox of algorithmic management: while platforms are designed to individualise and control, workers persistently rebuild the social through improvised infrastructures of solidarity, reminding us that even within digitally enforced silence, the impulse toward connection and voice endures.

6.1. Whisper networks and mutual warnings

Despite the platform's structural foreclosure of formal voice, workers cultivate parallel infrastructures of communication that operate beyond managerial visibility. These whisper networks transform the communicative labour that platforms seek to exploit into a shared mechanism of protection and solidarity. Baha, a taxi driver, described this dual system vividly:

The official app serves both the company and its customers. Our real app is WhatsApp. In our group, we warn each other: 'Avoid this neighbourhood, the police are stopping couriers today,' or 'Watch out for this user, they always cancel at the last minute and give a bad rating.' This is how we protect ourselves, by whispering to each other. (Baha, 42, Male, High School, Platform-Based Taxi Services, 3 years Total Gig Exp.)

Baha's distinction between the 'official app' and the 'real app' exposes a clear awareness of algorithmic inadequacy. His narrative demonstrates how workers reconstruct communication as a collective asset, building informal circuits of mutual protection. These groups, though invisible to the platform's surveillance, act as infrastructures of counter-power where solidarity replaces silence. Kemal, a young courier, described how such informal channels evolved into a parallel justice system:

There is a customer who is known for falsely reporting orders as missing to get a refund. He is blacklisted in our Telegram group. If one of us gets an order for his address, we post a warning. The company won't protect us from fraud, so we have to do it ourselves. Our network is our only real support. (Kemal, 20, Male, University Student, Food Delivery, 6 months Total Gig Exp.)

Kemal's account exemplifies the creation of what Hardt and Negri (2004) describe as the common, a collectively sustained reservoir of knowledge and protection emerging from everyday acts of communication. Within these informal circuits, workers invert the intended purpose of digital infrastructures, transforming tools of surveillance into channels of cooperation and care. Through this repurposing, they enact a form of counter-algorithmic collectivism, where technologies of control become the foundations for mutual defence and shared endurance (Ajonbadi et al., 2025).

In the Turkish context, these whisper networks carry additional political weight. They serve as tools of survival and also as quiet acts of defiance within a labour regime marked by authoritarianism and restricted associational freedom (DİSK-AR, 2023; Tansel, 2019). By encrypting dissent within everyday communication, workers transform dependence into interdependence and surveillance into solidarity. As Röell et al. (2024) note, in adversarial environments, informal voice often becomes the only viable pathway for collective agency. The content of these networks differs by occupational form: drivers exchange warnings about policing, fare disputes and risky passengers, couriers about fraudulent customers and delivery hotspots, and online freelancers about non-paying clients and shifting platform rules, so that the same infrastructure carries different risks across the three forms. These narratives thus show that even under algorithmic control, the impulse toward connection persists, revealing the latent social intelligence of workers who rebuild community where the system designs isolation.

6.2. Strategic compliance and hidden transcripts of resistance

Within the constraining logics of algorithmic surveillance, resistance rarely takes the form of confrontation. Instead, it unfolds through subtle manoeuvres where workers appear compliant while quietly subverting the system's demands. These practices of strategic compliance are not acts of open rebellion but calibrated negotiations of control that preserve fragments of autonomy under digital discipline (Scott, 1990). Servet, a courier, described this balancing act between obedience and defiance:

The algorithm wants you to take the fastest route, but sometimes that route is dangerous, full of traffic. I accept the order and follow the app's route on the map, but I take my own safer, slightly slower side streets. The system sees me as compliant, but I am prioritising my own safety. You have to play their game, but you play it by your own rules. (Servet, 25, Male, Bachelor's Degree, Food Delivery, 3 years Total Gig Exp.)

Servet's account illustrates what Dasgupta et al. (2025) describe as performative compliance, an adaptive strategy that simulates compliance while reclaiming agency. His actions reflect a tactical mastery of the interface: he remains legible to the algorithm while privileging his embodied knowledge of urban risk. This selective disobedience reasserts the primacy of lived experience over automated command, reaffirming the worker's autonomy within a system designed for control. Similar strategies emerged among digital freelancers, where compliance is performed not through bodily movement but through intellectual withholding. Itri, an online freelancer, described a quiet form of protest embedded in his daily workflow:

Some tasks are specifically designed to improve your rating. The pay is an insult. So, I accept them to keep my score high, but I use a template I prepared earlier and spend the minimum possible time on it. My energy goes to the clients who actually pay well. It's a silent

protest; I comply with the task, but I refuse to give them my best effort for pennies. (Itri, 35, Male, Bachelor's Degree, Online Freelancer, 5 years Total Gig Exp.)

Itri's practice reflects what [Josserand and Kaine, 2019](#) identify as counter-algorithmic rationality, where workers tactically manipulate platform metrics to preserve their time, dignity, and focus. His silent protest demonstrates a fine-grained understanding of algorithmic logic and an ability to bend it toward self-preservation. These micro-acts of selective non-compliance demonstrate a form of worker intelligence that transcends the binary of resistance and control. In the Turkish context, where overt protest risks sanction, these invisible gestures constitute a quiet politics of endurance. They reveal that under algorithmic management, dissent persists not as confrontation but as improvisation: small, cumulative acts that sustain autonomy within an environment structured to extinguish it.

6.3. E-empathy in virtual settings

The isolating design of platform work fragments social relations and produces what [Alacovska et al. \(2024\)](#) call an affective deficit, a structural absence of recognition despite the constant extraction of emotional labour. While workers are expected to perform empathy toward customers, the platform offers none in return. In response, workers carve out virtual spaces of solidarity that function as informal infrastructures of care. Demir, a delivery courier, described the loneliness of his work and the relief he finds in his peer group's WhatsApp chat:

This job is incredibly lonely. It's just you, your bike, and the app. Some days are hard; you get rude customers, low earnings, you get soaked in the rain. At the end of the day, I go to our WhatsApp group and just write, 'It was a tough day.' The messages of support from the other guys, who know exactly what it's like, mean everything. It's our digital coffee break. (Demir, 26, Male, Bachelor's Degree, Food Delivery, 3 years Total Gig Exp.)

Demir's description of a digital coffee break exemplifies how workers recreate the missing sociality of the workplace through peer communication. For couriers the digital group substitutes for a shop floor that delivery work disperses across the city; for isolated freelancers it stands in for a workplace that never had a physical form at all. His words illustrate a form of unpaid affective labour directed not toward customers but toward one another, a process of emotional co-regulation that keeps exhaustion at bay. This collective repair work extends beyond shared experiences of fatigue to the management of guilt, care, and gendered expectations. Jale, a mother of two and an online freelancer, explained how her Facebook group of women workers became a refuge for emotional survival:

You feel invisible working like this, completely disconnected. But I am in a Facebook group for other women in Turkey doing the same kind of work. We don't just share tips about platforms; we talk about feeling guilty for working instead of being with our kids, about the exhaustion. It's a place where you realise you are not alone in your struggle. That emotional support is vital. (Jale, 38, Female, High School, Online Freelancer, 2.5 years Total Gig Exp.)

Jale's account reveals the gendered and relational texture of this solidarity. Her experience aligns with Turkey-based research showing that women's online spaces often operate through relational and affective forms of labour that sustain participants when institutional support is absent. [Şener's \(2024\)](#) study of digital feminist communities in Turkey demonstrates how women engage in creative, relational and affective labour to manage emotional strain, counter isolation and collectively navigate gendered expectations. These dynamics resonate strongly with what workers in our study describe, particularly the reliance on peer groups to cope with guilt, fatigue and the pressures of combining paid gig work with unpaid care.

These patterns point to a deeper process that we conceptualise as e-empathy: a form of digitally mediated, reciprocal affective labour through which workers generate emotional support, recognition, and resilience in the absence of formal organisational care. It is enacted horizontally, worker to worker, and is therefore distinct from the empathy that workers are required to perform towards customers, from the simulated responsiveness of the platform interface, and from any managerial logic of care. E-empathy materialises precisely where algorithmic governance isolates and depletes. The same systems that silence voice and erode solidarity inadvertently compel workers to rebuild social connection from below. By transforming emotional fatigue into shared recognition, e-empathy functions both as resistance and repair, resistance to the individualising logics of platform control and repair of the affective void it produces. In Turkey's precarious and authoritarian labour regime, where traditional unions and institutional protections are weak, these digital networks of care become crucial infrastructures of endurance. For HRM scholarship, this dynamic exposes a critical paradox: while algorithmic systems meticulously manage performance, they remain blind to the relational economies that sustain human persistence. Through the invisible labour of e-empathy, workers reconstitute the very social and emotional foundations that platform design neglects yet ultimately depends on.

What emerges from these accounts is the entanglement of algorithmic management with the social textures it seeks to erase. Informal practices of voice are not remnants of older solidarities but new techniques of endurance shaped by digital governance itself ([Josserand and Kaine, 2019](#); [Vilasís-Pamos et al., 2024](#)). Workers use the very circuits of extraction (apps, chats, data trails) to craft minimal but vital spaces of mutual recognition. In these exchanges, the boundaries between resistance, adaptation, and care blur, illustrating how affective and communicative capacities become instruments of both subjection and survival ([Alacovska et al., 2024](#)). What begins as tactical communication turns into the quiet reconstruction of social life under algorithmic constraint, a process that exposes the latent relational intelligence of labour even under conditions of digital enclosure ([Rahman et al., 2024](#)).

In Turkey's authoritarian labour regime, such practices exceed mere survival. They embody a moral economy of interdependence that persists where institutions fail to protect ([Dasgupta et al., 2025](#)). Whisper networks, strategic compliance, and e-empathy reveal how obedience and solidarity coexist as parallel conditions of labour, each sustaining the other ([Wu & Huang, 2024](#)). Rather than heroic defiance, what takes shape is a fragile collectivism that absorbs exhaustion and converts it into care ([Cameron & Rahman, 2022](#)). This collective endurance unsettles the image of the atomised gig worker: it discloses the persistence of relational agency within architectures designed to suppress it, reminding us that even under regimes of data and fear, the social endures ([Rahman et al., 2024](#)).

7. Discussion and conclusion

Algorithmic management in Turkey's platform economy operates as an extension of long-standing forms of despotic labour control. Technological language obscures this continuity, yet platform systems reproduce familiar patterns of arbitrary supervision through opaque ratings, automated sanctions and shifting metrics. These mechanisms echo state logics that govern through uncertainty and dependence. Algorithmic silencing therefore exceeds the digital interface; it reflects a political rationality that relies on opacity and fear ([Rahman et al., 2024](#); [Wood, 2025](#)). Rather than neutralising hierarchy, automation recasts it in code. The discourse of fairness or autonomy sits uneasily beside a labour regime in which algorithmic precision conceals moral indifference ([Aloisi & De Stefano, 2023](#); [Coudry & Mejias, 2019](#)). Turkey's platform environment sharpens these global tendencies by embedding algorithmic opacity within a wider authoritarian and discretionary labour order. As [Yabancı \(2025\)](#) shows, digital authoritarianism in Turkey fuses surveillance, datafication and coercive discretion, creating

institutional conditions that make platformised control both credible and familiar. This regime depends heavily on silence, both enforced and internalised.

Coercion alone does not explain the persistence of this order. Its durability rests on the reorganisation of subjectivity, where obedience blends with aspiration and resignation is reframed as rational conduct. Workers' accounts demonstrate how anticipatory self-discipline takes shape under algorithmic opacity. Personal failure becomes the interpretive frame for systemic uncertainty; the algorithm appears unforgiving but legitimate. Foucault's (1975/2020) diagnosis of disciplinary power resonates strongly here: constraint enters through the self rather than through explicit enforcement. Cultural norms that reward deference, combined with weak institutional protection, intensify this internalisation in the Turkish context (Cameron, 2024; Wu & Huang, 2024). Anxiety becomes a method of staying employable; fear acquires a utilitarian form. This configuration blurs the line between consent and coercion and positions authoritarian governance as compatible with cognitive capitalism (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023). Bulut and Yeşilyurt (2024) further trace how mediated visibility draws workers into cycles of exposure and muteness, strengthening the moral burden of individualised self-regulation.

Even within this atmosphere of saturation and fear, the social reasserts itself. The quiet emergence of whisper networks, strategic compliance, and digital care practices reveals that the machinery of silence never fully succeeds. Beneath the architecture of algorithmic control, workers recreate the social infrastructures that the platform dissolves. These informal practices, grounded in warning, improvisation, and mutual recognition, demonstrate how solidarity persists in residual, encrypted, and affective forms (Röell et al., 2024; Scott, 1990). They are not external to the system but parasitic upon it, feeding on the communicative circuits and affective labour that platforms exploit. In transforming these circuits into infrastructures of care and information, workers engage in what Hardt and Negri (2004) call the politics of the common: everyday acts that reassert human interdependence under regimes of abstraction. Within Turkey's authoritarian labour order, where overt dissent risks punishment, such practices acquire a political charge. They mark the persistence of a collective intelligence that refuses complete capture, an undercurrent of cooperation that unsettles the fantasy of total control (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Josserand and Kaine, 2019). These fragile practices constitute a form of shadow voice that extends Hirschman's framework beyond its original triad.

The intertwining of algorithmic silencing, psychological governance, and informal voice therefore invites a broader reflection on the moral economy of platform work. What unfolds in this context is not the linear rise of digital despotism but a dialectical relation between domination and endurance. Algorithmic management, by enclosing communication and extracting affect, generates the very need for informal solidarity that challenges its isolationist logic (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2023). In this cycle, silence and voice, obedience and resistance, are not opposites but co-constitutive processes that sustain the reproduction of labour under precarity. The workers' strategies of adaptation and empathy, conceptualised here as e-mpathy, exemplify this ambivalence. They signal both survival and critique, care and resistance, repair and refusal. Such ambivalence reflects the central paradox of the contemporary platform regime: the system's capacity to thrive on the same human capacities (communication, cooperation, compassion) that it seeks to discipline (Vilasís-Pamos et al., 2024; Özbilgin et al., 2025).

This ambivalence is sharpened by the moral and meritocratic claims that platforms make for themselves. Algorithmic evaluation is presented as objective and merit based, yet the metrics, thresholds and penalties are authored by platforms and revised at will, so that procedures which appear neutral systematically privilege platform interests while individualising the costs of failure. The result is an illusion of meritocracy that conceals the asymmetry of power shaping the rules of the game, and a selective, value-laden morality enacted in the language of calculation (Rahman et al., 2024; Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024). In Turkey this

meshes with a discretionary political order in which fairness is formally asserted and substantively withheld, so that algorithmic merit becomes a digital idiom for a familiar arbitrariness.

For management and policy, these findings carry unsettling implications. The opacity of algorithmic governance erodes the ethical foundations of employment relations by collapsing accountability into automation. HRM cannot continue to regard data as a neutral representation of performance when the data themselves are the product of fear, fatigue, and adaptation (Duggan et al., 2023). To rely on algorithmic metrics without reflexive scrutiny is to institutionalise injustice as efficiency. Ethical HRM in this terrain requires technological refinement, moral and organisational courage to reintroduce transparency, dialogue, and human oversight into systems designed to exclude them (Meijerink et al., 2023). For policymakers, especially in authoritarian labour regimes, the entanglement of digital control and political coercion demands a shift from voluntary codes toward binding accountability. Regulatory interventions must guarantee the right to explanation, appeal, and data sovereignty, recognising algorithmic management as a form of governance that must be democratically bounded (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2023; Erbil & Özbilgin, 2024).

Our analysis shows that authoritarian governance and algorithmic management crystallise into a shared regime of control that shapes the conditions under which platform workers act. This convergence enables us to conceptualise shadow voice as an encrypted, informal and affective mode of agency that expands Hirschman's original repertoire. We further demonstrate that the combination of algorithmic opacity and institutional coercion generates a distinctive configuration of silencing that exceeds explanations grounded solely in platform design or economic precarity.

We can now state the contribution precisely. The individual mechanisms we describe, self censorship, information asymmetry, opacity and platform capriciousness, are established in the literature and we do not claim to discover them. Our contribution is to show how these mechanisms are recomposed at the level of a regime when algorithmic management is embedded within an authoritarian labour order, and to specify the distinctive Turkish articulation of that order: governance through legal liminality, discretionary enforcement and economic uncertainty rather than through the developmental coordination seen in China or the regulated managerial ambiguity of the Global North. Comparable insecurity, constrained voice and contested organising are documented among platform workers in the Global North, including Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States (Cini et al., 2022; Martindale et al., 2024). Within this frame, algorithmic silencing names the digital reconfiguration of an entrenched precarity, in which workers evaluate platform labour against already degraded alternatives, and shadow voice names the encrypted, informal and affective agency that persists within it. The Turkish case matters not because its mechanisms are unique but because it reveals, in intensified form, how technological and political domination compose a single regime of silence.

The wider lesson is that algorithmic management, far from being a technical phenomenon, is a political project of reordering work and obedience. It extends the logic of authoritarian rule into the intimate circuits of everyday labour while provoking its own counter-movements of solidarity and care. The gig workers of Turkey do not simply endure this regime; they illuminate its contradictions. Their informal collectivism, their quiet persistence, their acts of e-mpathy show that even within architectures designed for isolation, the human capacity for connection endures. What begins as a study of silence thus returns to the question of voice, not as a managerial variable but as the measure of our collective capacity to remain human in the face of automated domination.

7.1. Limitations and future research direction

The methodological limitations of this study stem from its deliberate commitment to depth rather than breadth. By employing a critical

thematic analysis, the study privileges lived experience and interpretive richness over statistical generalisation. Its focus on Turkey's authoritarian and centralised labour market offers a situated understanding of how algorithmic management converges with long-standing traditions of despotic control. While this contextual specificity restricts the scope for cross-national comparison, it also exposes the political rationalities that underlie platform governance in other contexts. The emphasis on voice and silencing as the central analytical frame means that other intersecting dynamics, particularly those related to gender, race and migration, remain outside the immediate focus. These absences are not peripheral but point to the differentiated ways in which algorithmic systems distribute vulnerability, exhaustion and endurance. Future research could extend this inquiry by examining how such intersecting identities shape access to solidarity, recognition and resistance within digitally mediated labour regimes.

The sampling approach, constrained by the need to protect a vulnerable workforce, prioritised participants accessible through informal communication networks. This may have unintentionally highlighted workers already engaged in whisper networks or digital support groups. Yet this limitation also indicates a valuable avenue for future study, particularly the exploration of those who remain disconnected, isolated or entirely silenced by algorithmic design. Subsequent research could adopt longitudinal or comparative designs to trace how informal voice develops over time and across settings, examining whether these networks remain spaces of coping or evolve into collective infrastructures of contestation. Further participatory and action-oriented research could move beyond critique to co-create alternative platform models that embed transparency, empathy and accountability at their core. Such inquiries would build on the critical project initiated here, turning the study of algorithmic silencing into an exploration of the conditions for digital democracy.

We also acknowledge the limits of these contextual claims more explicitly. Our comparative positioning, both against China and against Global North platform economies, is interpretive and theoretically motivated rather than based on parallel primary data, and our account of labour market alternatives draws on participants' retrospective narratives rather than on matched occupational data. The single country qualitative design that gives the study its depth correspondingly constrains causal and cross national generalisation. Comparative and mixed methods designs, including paired studies across authoritarian regimes of differing state capacity, would allow the regime level argument advanced here to be tested directly.

The recent consolidation of ownership in the Turkish platform economy offers a concrete design for such work. Because the same corporate owners and algorithmic infrastructures now operate in Turkey and in other national contexts, future studies could examine whether systems of ranking, routing, evaluation, payment and sanction are standardised internationally or adapted to local institutional conditions, and whether workers governed by the same platform encounter different possibilities for voice, resistance and collective organisation under different labour regimes. Acquisitions also open longitudinal comparisons of worker experience before and after ownership change, which would help distinguish the effects of corporate strategy and technological design from those of the surrounding regime.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Cihat Erbil: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mustafa F. Özbilgin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethics declaration

Written informed consent to take part in the study and to publish the

article has been obtained from all participants or their legal representatives. The privacy rights of participants have been observed.

This study was performed in compliance with relevant laws, regulatory frameworks and guidelines where the research took place. This study was approved by the HBV University. (Approval No. E–11054618-302.08.01-377510)

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy and confidentiality of research participants, given the politically sensitive nature of the research context.

Ethical approval statement

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University (approval letter dated 2 September 2025, reference no. E–11054618-302.08.01-377510).

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