



LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF PLAYFUL WORK DESIGN ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract:

Individuals can use various tactics to positively influence their psychological well-being in both personal and professional life. One of the tactics is playful work design. Regarding the numerous positive outcomes of psychological well-being in the workplace, such as motivation, performance, and job engagement, identifying its antecedents is crucial. The analysis of relevant studies indicates that this work design allows workers to enjoy their work more, have a better relationships with others, enhance their motivation, boost creativity, and cope more effectively with stress and challenges, ultimately improve their psychological well-being. Therefore, the study highlights the role of Self-Determination Theory, developed by Ryan and Deci (2011), in explaining the impact of playful work design on psychological well-being. This research contributes to the literature by providing a structured synthesis of previous studies and offering directions for future research.

Keywords:

Playful Work Design, Psychological Wellbeing, Play, Playfulness

1. Introduction

In today's business world, developments such as rapid technological advancements, global competition, and economic uncertainty within the framework of globalization dynamics have made it crucial for organizations to maintain their sustainability and competitive advantages in the market. In order to continue their existence and achieve their goals, they need not only economic capital but also a qualified human workforce that is psychologically healthy. Considering the challenging, competitive, uncertain, complex, and stressful nature of the business world, this situation can lead to a loss of motivation, increased anxiety, and stress, negatively affecting employees' mental, emotional, and physical health (Ji et al., 2022). So, employees may turn to an innovative and enjoyable, individual initiative-based job design to cope with these challenges. In this regard, a new concept in the literature, known as "playful work design," emerges. Playful work design offers an innovative and enjoyable, game-based work design model. According to this concept, it is about redesigning the job in such a way that employees enhance their experience by adding playful and challenging themselves, without changing the essence of the work (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017; Bakker et al., 2020). This job design essentially makes the work more interesting, challenging, and meaningful. Therefore, this game-based job design is actually a useful strategy to overcome challenging situations. Bringing playful and play into the work experience positively affects employees' psychological well-being. In other words, it helps employees to easily overcome the stress created by a demanding work environment, feel better in the workplace, establish healthier relationships, become more social, feel more meaningful and enjoyable, maintain self-respect when making mistakes by using the comfort provided by playful, and become more autonomous by taking more initiative. Based on these points, this study will discuss the positive effects of playful work design on employees' psychological well-being.

In summary, the aim of this study is to explain the positive effects of playful work design on employees' psychological well-being, considering Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2011). However, although there are

limited studies in foreign literature that indirectly address the effect of playful work design on psychological well-being, it has been found that there are no studies in the domestic literature addressing this relationship. In fact, there is very little information about how play affects work life (Scharp et al., 2019). Therefore, more research is needed to investigate the impact of playful-based job design on work life (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017). In the Turkish literature, there is only one study by Çağlın (2024), which involves the adaptation of the Playful work Design scale into Turkish. In this study, an empirical study was conducted with a total of 422 people working in the public or private sector within the borders of Şırnak province to assess the reliability and validity of the scale. Thus, the scale questions were translated into Turkish, and the concept was introduced to the domestic literature.

In this context, the current study is important in terms of contributing to the existing literature on the subject and providing readers with a new perspective and new research ideas. Furthermore, due to the originality of the topic in terms of development and discovery, this research is expected to fill gaps in the relevant literature by presenting both practical and theoretical benefits. The study will first explain the concepts of playful work design and psychological well-being, and then examine the relationship between the two concepts from a theoretical framework perspective.

2. Literature Review

In this section, playful work design, psychological wellbeing and their relationship will be explained within the framework of the theoretical background.

2.1. Playful Work Design

The concept of playful work design is relatively new in the literature. It refers to the proactively redesigning of employees' task-related activities to make them more fun and challenging (van Wingerden et al., 2017). In other words, it is a strategy carried out by the individual (Parker & Morgeson, 2017). It is a redesign of tasks through play that encourages individuals to challenge themselves while also aiming to have playful (Scharp et al., 2023). Therefore, the core of this concept, which can also be translated as game-based job design, is rooted in the concept of play. Play universally brings enjoyment. For this reason, everyone somehow becomes part of these forms of playful or play issues. Although concepts like play, playful, and humor were once considered contrary to the seriousness and professionalism valued in work life, particularly in the early 2000s, they began to be seen as important indicators for organizational development (Mcgonigal, 2006). However, there are still few studies on how work is affected by a play. According to existing definitions, play or playful is "a behavioral approach to conducting any activity, not a series of events" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Playful work design in this context has playful characteristics, meaning it is the reorganization of a situation, task, or activity to incorporate playful and humor for oneself and others. People who are inclined to playfulness generally show behaviors such as being "humorous, active, energetic, extroverted, cheerful, happy, and playful" (Barnett, 2007). Moreover, playfulness allows individuals to reframe challenging situations with a playful or humorous approach. Thus, in playful work design, employees can use their psychological resources while making tasks more fun. Bakker (2020) emphasizes three key features of play. The first is that play aims to provide enjoyment or challenge. The second is the enthusiastic attitude within the moment, which is linked to Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. When people play, they become concentrated in the moment, distancing themselves from stress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The third feature is that play inherently creates interaction with others (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015). In the literature, two types of play are mentioned: "ludic play and agonistic play" (Bakker et al., 2020). These two types of play form the basis for the two dimensions of playful work design: fun and competitive design (Scharp et al., 2023). Therefore, the ludic concept is a kind of playfulness because it is based on creating playful by showing humorous, , imagination, creativity, and role-playing to make work more enjoyable (Barnett, 2007). For instance, joking with colleagues in the workplace or discussing a project by using humor are the examples of ludic play in this job design. Employees can make their work more playful by approaching it with a playful mindset through humor and imagination. Playful design enhances interpersonal relationships, meets social needs, and increases the chances of employees enjoying and meaning in their work (Bakker et al., 2020).

The second concept, agonistic, can be translated as competitiveness. This concept relates to the competitive design dimension of playful work design. It's about redesigning tasks in which individuals compete with themselves. Competitive design, as the name suggests, is based on competition, success, rules, goals, challenges, seriousness, rationality, and challenges (Scharp et al., 2019). Thus, when employees redesign tasks to compete with themselves,

they use the agonistic type of play. An example of this can be completing tasks under time pressure or trying to beat one's own record. For example, someone want to prepare a presentation only with visuals rather than text, or someone may set a time limit and try to send more emails than they did the day before. By introducing competition into their work, employees can gamify their tasks. Therefore, agonistic characteristics (competitiveness) contrast with ludic (playfulness) by incorporating seriousness, reality, competition for success, rules, and behaviors. In contrast, playfulness features enjoyment, lightheartedness, imagination, and playful (Bakker et al., 2022).

The foundation of playful work design involves not only play but also proactivity. Because, this job design is rooted in the interaction between playfulness and proactive work behaviors (Scharp et al., 2023). The reason for its proactive nature is that it relies on personal initiative to make current work experience more enjoyable and challenging. Since proactive work behavior involves taking initiative to improve and develop the current situation, playful work design is considered proactive. By changing the work method and incorporating elements of playful and competition, individuals transform the work experience into a more positive. In doing so, they create a solution for dealing with difficult, stressful, boring, or unpleasant situations in the future. Additionally, as a proactive strategy, playful work design allows individuals to use playfulness and competitive features to cope with routine jobs and monotony. In this way, employees can change their attitudes toward unpleasant tasks and replace them with more positive experiences and productive outcomes (Bakker et al., 2017; Scharp et al., 2019). Opinions related to play, playfulness, and proactivity suggest that employees have motivations to gamify their task (Dishon-Berkovits et al., 2023). According to Petelczyc (2018), employees tend to game design to avoid any boredom of monotonous tasks, increase flow at work, and reduce stress from work. So, it might be thought that play can offer employees a chance to escape work demands, take a short break and relax (DesCamp & C. Thomas, 1993). Moreover, according to humanistic and positive psychology, employees turn to play because it is rewarding, intrinsically satisfying, and leads to a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). During play, individuals let go of their sense of control and self-awareness, experiencing flow. This can be enjoyable for them. Today, competition in the labor market is intensifying, and job demands are increasing, which affects employees' well-being, happiness, and productivity. Therefore, employees can use play and playful as a coping strategy to deal with this challenging environment, resulting with the higher efficiency and productivity (Bakker et al., 2020).

In light of these findings, playful work design can be defined as employees proactively changing their work experience by incorporating playful and competition into their tasks. Thus, the goal is not to change the essence of the work but to redesign the work experience in a, enjoyable, playful and competitive way (Dishon-Berkovits et al., 2023).

Playful work design stands out as a factor that supports employees' taking more personal initiative in their work processes, making their tasks more engaging, and increasing their commitment to work. According to Tabirta and Virga (2024), playful work design is positively related to personal initiative, task complexity, flow, work engagement, and performance. In another study, it was found that playful work design is a kind of proactive behavior which can be used by employees to maintain their work commitment, particularly when facing boring, monotonous, or challenging tasks (Kjendlie & Dahlquist, 2024).

A study by Caracuzzo et al. (2024) concluded that this game-based work design influences work engagement through the job demands-resources model, positively affecting job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. Overall, studies suggest that promoting playful work design is an useful strategy for the efficiency and the welfare of workers and organizations.

2.2. Psychological Wellbeing

The concept of well-being holds significant importance because it focuses on various positive aspects, ranging from individuals' psychological health to their life satisfaction and even happiness in the workplace. There are many different definitions of well-being in the literature. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines "well-being not only as the absence of disease but as a state of complete physical, mental, and social health" (WHO, 1946). The OECD, within the framework of its "Better Life" initiative, has developed objective welfare indicators and, in addition, defines subjective well-being as individuals' positive or negative evaluations of their lives, along with their emotional responses to these experiences (OECD, 2013: 29). The Turkish Language Association defines well-being as "welfare, health, well-being, safety, soundness, and the opposite of illness." This concept, translated from English

as "well-being" or "wellness," is used to express the well-being and happiness of employees (Örnek et al., 2022, Bağcıoğlu & Kaygın, 2018).

Ryan and Deci (2011) define well-being as a form of experience and optimal psychological functioning (Şeker & Aslan, 2024). The concept of well-being is coming from positive psychology. Positive psychology, while not ignoring mental health issues, focuses on individuals' strengths and positive skills. Within this perspective, topics like happiness, psychological well-being, optimism, emotional resilience, welfare, or well-being, positive emotions, empathy, meaning and purpose in life, and gratitude have become main topics in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore, it focuses on people's strengths and positive characteristics. One of the founders of this school, Seligman (2002), emphasized the importance of individuals finding their purpose in life, realizing their potential, and living a productive and happy life. Therefore, he points out that individuals should develop their strengths.

Psychological well-being is part of the concept of employee well-being. The concept of psychological well-being is related to individuals discovering their potential, growing, establishing positive relationships with others, setting life goals, overcoming challenges, achieving success, and increasing their well-being in the workplace by gaining autonomy (Ryff et al., 1995). In this context, psychological well-being can be considered as a multidimensional concept. According to Ryff (1989), based on the model of positive psychological functioning, stated that psychological well-being consists of six basic dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, life purpose, and personal growth (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Kagan & Atalay, 2018). Self-acceptance encompasses the individual's positive evaluation of their own self and past experiences, maturity, high levels of functionality, and self-actualization. Secondly, having positive relationships with others refers to the trust-based, sincere, and satisfying relationships with other people, maintaining them, caring about their happiness and well-being, being able to empathize, sympathize and showing compassion (Kuyumcu, 2012). The third dimension is autonomy. It is defined as the individual's capacity to use their free will and act independently (Kagan & Atalay, 2018; Gültekin & Bayramoğlu, 2021). The fourth dimension, life purpose, refers to the individual having a meaningful goal in life that they aim to achieve. The fifth dimension, environmental mastery, involves the individual being able to organize and manage their environment according to their values, needs, and priorities, adapt to it, and effectively use the opportunities around them. The final dimension, personal growth, relates to the individual constantly developing themselves and their abilities, being open to new experiences, realizing and fulfilling their potential, and broadening their point of view. Optimal psychological functioning is not limited to possessing the best characteristics but also involves realizing and growing one's potential (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Kagan & Atalay, 2018).

In the local literature, there has been an increase in studies on psychological well-being, and its relationship with many variables is being investigated. In a study conducted with 400 sales employees in Istanbul, it was found that emotional intelligence played a full mediating role in the relationship between psychological well-being and work engagement (Şeker & Aslan, 2024). A study conducted with 330 academic and administrative staff from Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University studied the relationship between employee work efficiency and their well-being. The results showed that increased work efficiency is positively, supporting employees' psychological well-being (Örnek et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the studies indicate that positive workplace antecedents positively affect employees' psychological well-being. Particularly, in workplaces where humor is present, employees' psychological well-being appears to increase. Therefore, the objective of this study is to confirm that playful work design, by encouraging play, humor, playfulness, and competition, can make the individual's work experience more enjoyable and motivating, thus supporting employees' psychological well-being.

2.3. The Effect of Playful Work Design on Psychological Wellbeing

Playful work design, as its nature, is feeding three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness (through the play aspect), and competence (through the competitive aspect). In this context, it can be argued that playful work design positively affects employees' psychological well-being within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2011). According to the theory, meeting these three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is crucial for individuals' mental health, personal development, and overall psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Therefore, when employees experience these three needs, six dimensions that define psychological well-being are likely to be positively influenced.

Within the scope of the current study, a literature review was conducted to determine how playful work design impacts employees' psychological well-being. Literature reviews aim to bring together diverse studies to generate new perspectives (Torraco, 2005). In line with this objective, this search was conducted using the keywords "playful work design" and "psychological well-being" in the Web of Science database. However, it was found that both national and international literature on this specific topic is limited. All the identified studies were included in the research, and their summary findings are presented below.

Some studies in the literature indicate that playful work design is positively associated with various work outcomes such as work engagement, belongingness, well-being, meaning, performance, creativity, and reduced job stress and burnout (Bakker et al., 2020; Dishon-Berkovits et al., 2023).

One study conducted in the Netherlands with 501 bank employees found that fun work design was effective in coping with stress, chaos, and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported that making their work tasks more fun helped them distance themselves from negative thoughts and worries. This had a positive effect on well-being, and a negative effect on depression and burnout (Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021).

Other research in the literature has explored the relationship between playful work design and psychological well-being through the lens of stress. A study with 72 volunteer nurses in the U.S. health sector revealed that gamification helped nurses to deal with stress and provide them relaxation (DesCamp & Thomas, 1993).

Additionally, several studies have focused on the relationship between playfulness, games, and well-being. According to recent research, playfulness is linked to certain forms of well-being (Masek et al., 2024). Playfulness helps employees enjoy their work, reduce stress, increase creativity, and support overall psychological wellness. In particular, the use of gamification techniques in the workplace has been shown to enhance not only employee well-being but also motivation and engagement (Masek et al., 2024).

Petelczyc et al. (2018) argue that employees actively change their work experiences to be fun in order to avoid boredom, increase stimulation levels, and derive greater enjoyment from their jobs, thereby reducing stress. Consequently, game-based work design strategies such as fun work design may positively impact employees' psychological well-being.

In addition to research focusing on playfulness, Fluegge-Woolf's (2014) study suggests that playfulness in the workplace positively influences positive emotions, creativity, and productivity. Adapting play into work tasks can enhance interpersonal interactions as well as task-related performance. These types of playful or humorous approaches can lead to more positive work attitudes, work enjoyment and increased motivation and performance (Webster & Martocchio, 1993; Dishon-Berkovits et al., 2023).

Finally, another important area of research in the literature is the reliability and validity of playful work design measurements (Tăbîrță & Virgă, 2024). In the Romanian version of the scale, fun work design is defined as an individual job crafting strategy (Scharp et al., 2023). The application of such strategies may help employees add meaning to their jobs and, over time, enhance their well-being. As a result, by using gamified job design, employees can enjoy playful experiences at work that help improve relationships with colleagues, support their well-being, and make them perform better (Bakker et al., 2020).

Tablo 1: Systematic Review Table

Authors & Year	Purpose	Sample	Findings
Bakker & van Wingerden, 2021	The effects of playful work design on the relationship between obsessive thoughts about Covid-19 on psychological wellbeing	150 Bank employees	Playful work design has mitigated the negative impact of anxious thoughts about COVID-19 on psychological well-being.

DesCamp& C.Thomas, 1993	The effects of gamification at work	72 volunteer nurses	It has been stated that gamification at work helps to cope with stress and tension, providing a sense of relaxation.
Masek vd.,2024	The outcomes of using gamification techniques at work.	46 students	Playfulness helps employees enjoy their work, reduce stress levels, enhance creativity, and support overall psychological well-being.
Dishon-Berkovits, 2023	The effect of boredom and attentiveness on the relationship between playful work design and employee commitment and performance.	370 employees	It has been found that fun work design improves performance through employee commitment.
Caracuzzo vd.,2024	The concept of playful work design and its organizational outcomes through the job demands-resources model.	339 employees	The playful work design has been found to enhance employees' happiness and job performance by inducing the experience of flow at work.
Kjendlie & Dahlquist, 2024	The positive impact of playful work design on monotonous days.	27 military students from the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy.	It has been shown that playful job design reduces the negative impact of monotonous tasks on employee engagement.

Scharp, 2022	The effect of PWD on work engagement through Self-Determination Theory	162 white collar employees	PWD's dimension: fun and competition have positively influenced work engagement and wellbeing by fulfilling the needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence.
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3. Conclusion

The concept of playful work design, introduced in 2020, has become increasingly important in companies and is being explored more in the current literature (Bakker et al., 2020). In the context of playful work design, the intentional actions taken by employees to redesign their job experiences by incorporating elements of fun and self-competition contribute to their psychological well-being. Based on the existing literature, this study aims to provide insights into the impact of playful work design on employees' psychological well-being within the framework of self-determination theory, offering new perspectives for researchers in this field. Furthermore, considering the positive role of playful work design on psychological well-being, the findings have been evaluated in the context of the business world. Today, companies place greater emphasis on the well-being of employees. Companies, managers, and HR specialists are taking various initiatives and implementing them to support employees' psychological well-being. For instance, online training, seminars, or face-to-face workshops can be offered to inform employees about what playful job design is, what it serves, and how they can apply it in their own work routines (Bakker et al., 2023). Therefore, companies should collaborate with HR and department managers to foster a company culture that encourages employees to apply their individual job strategies. This way, employees can improve their psychological well-being in their individual work lives. In the future, empirical studies can be conducted to examine the effects of playful job design on employees' psychological well-being. Additionally, strategies related to what is required for playful work design and how this process can be managed can also be explored. Furthermore, in light of current globalization, new studies conducted in different cultures will contribute to the development of the field.

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