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**The role of supervisors and human resource management in
mitigating stress: Bus driving in a pandemic context**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the occupational stress of bus drivers in New Zealand (NZ), particularly within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Urban bus driver is recognised as a high-risk occupation with elevated stress associated with adverse well-being outcomes. The nature of this occupation, along with its working conditions, which include strict schedules, traffic congestion, hostile passengers and low pay, has contributed to concerns about well-being and industrial disputes. The pandemic further intensified these challenges, creating a unique context for exploring the work experiences of bus drivers who were categorised as essential workers during the pandemic. The study employs the job demand-resource (JD-R) model in conjunction with the psychological contract theory to explore how working conditions and the pandemic influenced the well-being of drivers and employment relations climate within the NZ bus sector, as well as what measures were taken to address them.

The study is guided by two research questions: 1) What job stressors impact the well-being of NZ bus drivers? and 2) What have bus companies (including the Auckland Transport) done to mitigate stress to safeguard their bus drivers' well-being and improve the employment relations climate? The findings of this study are informed by 62 semi-structured interviews with drivers, supervisors, managers, and trade union representatives. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that pandemic-specific stressors, such as anxiety about Covid-19 contagion, hostile passengers' behaviour, work disruption, job insecurity, and financial strain, compounded pre-existing stressors, including low pay, long working hours, split shifts and traffic congestion. The lack of organisational and supervisory support further exacerbated these stressors and undermined drivers' perceptions of the organisation's commitment to their well-being. The findings are presented in two parts. The first area of findings highlights how increased job demands and limited resources influenced drivers' stress and coping ability during the

pandemic. Second, the psychological contract lens demonstrates how perceptions of fulfilment or breach, mediated by perceived organisational support (POS), perceived supervisor support (PSS), and peer support, influenced both drivers' well-being and the broader employment relations.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the refinement and development of organisational psychology theories from an integrated perspective of the JD-R and psychological contract frameworks through a qualitative, interpretive approach. Unlike the predominant quantitative focus of prior research, this study captures rich, content-specific narratives and provides a more nuanced understanding of how POS, PSS, peer networks, and person-job fit (PJ fit) influence employee well-being and employment relations. This integrative perspective advances both theory and methodology by demonstrating the value of qualitative inquiry in refining established frameworks. Practically, the findings inform managers and human resource (HR) practitioners by emphasising the importance of supervisory training and support in enhancing frontline leadership competence, communication and trust to foster relational human resource management (HRM) as well as more systematic engagement with employee representatives. Given the physical remoteness of bus drivers, the supervisory relationship is potentially problematic, but no less critical. This highlights the importance of effective supervisor and organisational support in influencing drivers' well-being as well as their perceptions of fairness, recognition and commitment to their well-being and positive employment relationships.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Consistent with current studies of bus drivers (e.g., Chen & Hsu, 2020; Tse et al., 2006), this occupation in New Zealand (NZ) is widely recognised as stressful, with poor working conditions contributing to frequent industrial disputes in the NZ transport sector. When I started my PhD journey in NZ, my initial interest was in understanding the challenges of bus drivers within this contested industrial environment. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, provided a unique lens and context through which systemic employment relations challenges were both exposed and exacerbated. As a regular user of public transportation, I became increasingly aware of the challenges that bus drivers faced, which intensified under pandemic conditions. Their daily predicaments, coupled with inadequate institutional support, caught my attention, and the more I investigated, the more it became increasingly evident that this was an area that had received insufficient attention. This realisation shaped my doctoral research, which seeks to examine the impact of the enduring employment relations issues and pandemic crisis on the working conditions of bus drivers and the consequent implications for occupational stress. In this opening chapter, I establish the research area and outline key concepts. Then I explain research rationale that underpins the study and set out the research objectives and questions. Following this, I highlight the research contributions and present the thesis structure, along with a summary. (For clarity, the terms *job stress*, *occupational stress* and *stress* will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis).

1.1 Establishing the research area

Public transport has gained increased importance in NZ, as it plays crucial role in improving accessibility and supporting the government's effort to reduce carbon emissions. However, the sector is currently facing a significant challenge due an acute shortage of bus drivers. Reports

indicate that public transport authorities are facing persistent challenges in providing and maintaining reliable services, as they struggle to attract and retain drivers. Some bus companies have reported that their staffing levels are below eighty per cent with drivers working overtime (Hancock, 2023; Todd, 2022). These shortages hinder the capacity of the public transport sector to build its networks and expand services, forcing bus companies to adopt reduced schedules. This situation results in a negative public perception of the service and contributes to stress and fatigue among drivers (Todd, 2022).

In recent years, trade unions have criticised the NZ bus sector for offering poor working conditions that contribute to the stress of drivers. Inadequate compensation is the central concern among the drivers (MacManus, 2021). The failure of the government and bus companies to address these conditions led to recurring industrial disputes. This also affected the recruitment and retention of drivers, leading to a large and enduring driver shortage in the sector (Todd, 2022). Many of these issues were traced to the Public Transport Operating Model (PTOM), introduced by the NZ government and informed by the deregulation of the UK bus industry (Van De Velde & Wallis, 2013). The PTOM reform introduces the commercialisation of the public bus services, co-funded by the councils and Waka Kotahi (NZ Transport Authority), with contracts awarded to private companies through competitive tendering. Although the model aimed to facilitate innovation and cost efficiency, it has also generated unintended consequences for drivers.

This reforms under PTOM, mainly driven by economic pressures, created an entirely new environment and set of problems for drivers (George, 2019). Despite early suggestions of improvements in the quality of public transport services, much of this was achieved at the expense of drivers working condition; that is, their employment terms and conditions bearing

the brunt of this model with increased pressure on pay and general working conditions, such as the requirements to work longer hours, unmanageable split shifts, and unpaid shift breaks, to such an extent that their well-being is compromised (George, 2019; MacManus, 2021). Consequently, many NZ bus drivers are overworked and fatigued, which impacts both their personal and work lives (Lock, 2019). These changes, coupled with the increased cost of living, especially in cities like Auckland, further placed a significant strain on drivers' physical and psychological health (Lock, 2019; Zimmerman & Katon, 2005). Efforts to address these issues, including a tripartite forum involving unions, local councils, and bus companies, have made limited progress. Negotiations around paid rest breaks, wage and roster arrangements were frequently stalled, leading to strikes and further disputes (Arora, 2023; Campbell, 2023; Lock, 2019). The industrial disputes underscore the mounting employment relations challenges within the sector.

The Covid pandemic that emerged in late 2019 added a new set of strains to the health and well-being of drivers. Concerns about job loss, health risks and exposure to infections exacerbated physical and psychological strain (Qi et al., 2023). While the pandemic represents a universal hazard, public-facing occupations categorised as *essential workers*, including bus drivers, formed high-risk populations with elevated exposure (Burdorf et al., 2021; Lluch et al., 2022). Research investigating the experiences of non-healthcare essential workers is limited (at the time of data collection), though emerging studies suggest that food workers, public security guards, and transport workers have reported increased stress and anxiety (Bu et al., 2022). For NZ bus drivers, these risks were further compounded by the workforce demographics, in which more than sixty per cent of drivers are aged 50 or above (Stats NZ, 2019), making them more vulnerable, especially those with declining and underlying health

issues (Pit et al., 2021). Moreover, an additional stress factor for migrant drivers was that many still have families overseas, which compounded worries about their well-being.

The significant shift in the work environment demonstrates how the pandemic not only introduced new stressors but also amplified existing employment relations challenges within the sector. However, limited empirical insight exists regarding how organisations and leadership have responded to these compounded challenges in a sector already affected by poor working conditions and industrial disputes. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of bus drivers during the pandemic, with a particular focus on how the crisis exacerbated existing stressors, altered the working conditions, and exposed deficiencies in organisational support and leadership practices. The insights aim to expand our understanding of systemic employment relations issues and crisis conditions, while drawing our attention to the vulnerabilities of an essential yet often overlooked occupational group.

1.2 Research rationale and key concepts

Over the last two decades, working conditions of bus drivers have gained interest from both practitioners and scholars, as this occupation has been consistently identified as highly stressful, with high rates of absence, turnover, illness and mortality (Chen & Hsu, 2020; Tse et al., 2006; Useche et al., 2018). Recurring bus drivers' strike actions in the NZ bus sector reflect widespread dissatisfaction among drivers and their representatives (trade unions) regarding poor working conditions, including low wages, unpaid rest break, long working hours, split shifts, lack of breaks, and safety concerns that have impacted their health and well-being (Forbes, 2020). The pandemic further compounded these stressors and anxiety through the fear of infection and job insecurity (Rogers et al., 2020). At the same time, NZ bus companies, workers and their representatives have a mutual interest in preventing stress and other

unfavourable conditions as employers also bear the costs of illness, labour turnover, recruitment problems and collective disputes.

Despite attracting significant attention, there remains an inadequacy in the present field of research concerning how bus companies actually address these working conditions issues. Much of the existing literature has focused largely on the causes and individual consequences of stress, often overlooking organisational responses and leadership roles that can alleviate these stressors (Tse et al., 2006). Nearly a quarter of a century ago, it was observed that "there is a remarkable distinction between the impressive number of studies that demonstrate adverse health effects of the bus driving occupation and the small amount of documented prevention and intervention projects in bus companies" (Kompier et al., 2000, p. 12), and little has changed since. This discrepancy underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the stressful working conditions in this occupation. To explore this, I employed two complementary theoretical frameworks: the job demand-resource (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1998).

The JD-R model is a comprehensive work design theory that provides an overarching framework for examining how job and personal resources can buffer the negative effects of job demands and support employee well-being. Within this framework, perceived organisational support (POS) and perceived supervisor support (PSS), including peer support are explored as vital resources. POS and PSS pertain to workers' perceptions regarding the extent to which the organisations and supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Similarly, peer (co-worker) support, refers to individuals with shared experiences often offer emotional, social, and practical assistance to one another in the workplace, is widely recognised as an essential resource in creating a positive and supportive

work environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Cohen & McKay, 2020; Thoits, 2011). Despite the recognised value of these resources (Cohen & McKay, 2020; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008), their relevance in the context of bus driving remains insufficiently explored. This gap is important, as the pandemic further disrupted workplace dynamics and reduced opportunities for informal peer interactions, which raises questions about how support is perceived and accessed in such structurally isolated settings.

In addition to organisational and interpersonal resources, personal resources also play a critical role in how employees experience and respond to workplace stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Personal resources refer to those resources attributed to individuals, such as intrinsic motivation, character traits, and mental, emotional and practical abilities (i.e., knowledge and skills), which shape how individuals cope with the demands of their work environments (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). This personal resource is conceptually aligned with person-job fit (PJ fit) theory, which is defined as the alignment between an individual's abilities and traits and specific job demands and rewards (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). While PJ fit has been recognised as a crucial buffer against stress in high-demand occupations, it has not been adequately explored within the bus driving context. Importantly, when personal resources are integrated with organisational and interpersonal resources, they form a holistic framework that not only mitigates stress but also fosters resilience, engagement, and productivity. Within the broader JD-R model, I examined these resources to understand their influence on bus drivers' experience of stress and coping.

Nevertheless, the JD-R model has been critiqued for its narrow focus on employees' subjective interpretations of organisational actions, which tends to overlook relational dynamics and perceived obligations (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). This extension is imperative because

perceptions of fairness, support, treatment and relationships are salient for bus drivers, who often work autonomously in isolation with limited oversight. To address this limitation, I incorporated psychological contract theory as a complementary framework. The psychological contract theory refers to the unwritten set of expectations between employees and employers (Rousseau, 1998) and explains how unmet expectations and breaches influence stress and employment relations. Importantly, breach of the psychological contract is strongly linked with negative work-related attitudes and behaviours, such as workers' hostility, dissatisfaction, and labour disputes, even if these are often formally presented as explicit contract demands regarding work hours and pay (Topa et al., 2022).

The psychological contract framework is also especially pertinent in structurally detached occupations, such as bus driving, where supervisory relationships are remote, communication is limited, and perceptions of neglect may exacerbate feelings of alienation and undermine drivers' sense of organisational support. As Argyris (1960) noted in the study that first set out the term psychological contract, the relational aspect primarily involves the worker-supervisory relationship, which is largely determined by the supervisor's leadership and exercise of discretionary behaviour. Supervisors, who embody a dual identity as both employees and team leaders, play a pivotal role in mediating these dynamics. However, the remote supervisory capacity makes the supervisory relationship potentially problematic but no less critical. The pandemic intensified supervisory responsibilities as they had to deal with the emotional burden of supporting their teams while coping with their own anxieties and pandemic-related challenges, often without adequate organisational support (Sinclair et al., 2020; Udod et al., 2024). The implications of these distal supervisory relationships are insufficiently understood, especially during times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The integration of psychological contract theory into the JD-R model enables the study to adopt

a more relational perspective on employment dynamics, highlighting how perceptions of fairness, trust, and support influence stress and well-being.

Moreover, the concept of the psychological contract, and its elaboration in empirical research, has also come under some criticism for being too individualised and lacking sufficient attention to power dynamics and the collective aspects inherent in employment relationships (Ali, 2020; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Korczynski, 2022). This is because the psychological contract has become more “psychological” as it developed, moving away from its origins in industrial relations and sociology (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008). As Guest has argued (1998, 2004), this individualist and positivist approach should not detract from the utility of the concept when adopted in a broader and contextualised way, focused on issues such as perceived fairness, trust and support. Hence, insights from psychological contract theory may be usefully applied to better understand employment relations in the bus sector, even if the concept remains subject to debate, and a collective dimension should not be eschewed. Notably, the pandemic event led to a shift in employee expectations, representing a change in the psychological contract as perceived by employees in terms of the obligations and support they anticipate from their organisations (Kniffin et al., 2021; Spurk & Straub, 2020).

Furthermore, while considerable research on bus drivers has relied on quantitative, positivist orientation (Tse et al., 2006; Useche et al., 2017), qualitative methods remain relatively underutilised despite their potential to capture the lived experiences and interpretive processes of bus drivers (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This study, therefore, employs a qualitative approach to explore how bus drivers make sense of organisational practices, interpret supervisory intent, and respond to unmet obligations. Such an approach allows for an in-depth understanding of

the intertwined realities of support, engagement, and trust in a structurally isolated and crisis-affected occupation.

1.3 Research objectives and questions

Extensive studies have established the prevalence, causes, and consequences of stress associated with the bus driving occupation, yet research into prevention strategies is still developing (Chen & Hsu, 2020; Tse et al., 2006; Useche et al., 2018). In particular, the role of organisational, supervisory and peer support in mitigating stress is relatively unexplored in the bus driver context. This gap may be attributed to the remote and solitary nature of the job, which renders the support mechanism less visible and accessible. However, it is precisely this individualised work environment that may make support especially meaningful. The emergence of Covid may shine a spotlight on these existing stressors while introducing new uncertainties, which raises important questions about how operating companies responded to this acute and unusual pandemic circumstance to protect and reassure their employees, nor with what effect. Given that stress also varies across individuals due to the unique interaction of personal traits, occupational demands, and coping abilities, it is essential to examine this phenomenon through both contextual and individual lenses, such as PJ fit theory. Hence, this thesis aims to explore how contextual factors and different forms of resources impacted drivers' stress during the pandemic. To address this objective, two research questions were developed.

First, drawing on the JD-R model, strain in the workplace arises when employees experience an imbalance between job demands and resources available to meet them, with high demands and low resources predicting increased stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2003). However, little is known about the specific stressors experienced by NZ bus drivers during the industrial disputes and the pandemic. Thus, the first research question aims to explore the

aspects of working conditions and pandemic-specific stressors. In particular, a key focus is on how Covid may have reinforced or contributed additional stressors. Hence, the first research question this study aims to address is: *What job stressors (in the context of industrial disputes and the Covid pandemic) impact the well-being of NZ bus drivers?*

Second, organisational and supervisory support are crucial resources for alleviating work stress by equipping employees with the physical and emotional tools required to effectively perform their tasks (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Consistent with the JD-R model, job resources not only mitigate the adverse effects of job demands but also improve employee well-being and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Organisations can also enhance employees' personal resources through training, positive leadership, health and wellness programmes, and recognition systems. However, deficits in these resources can induce or exacerbate stress (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). A thorough analysis of how bus companies supported drivers during the pandemic is therefore imperative to identifying effective interventions. Thus, the second research question this study aims to address is: *“What have bus companies (including the Auckland Transport) done to mitigate stress to safeguard their bus drivers' well-being and improve the employment relations climate?”*.

This study is grounded in an interpretivist ontology and epistemological position, which views reality as socially constructed and knowledge as deriving from individuals' interpretations of their lived experiences (Bryman, 2016; Crotty, 1998). From this perspective, drivers' experiences of stress, support, and workplace relationships during industrial disputes and the pandemic are shaped through social, organisational, and institutional interactions. This perspective recognises the existence of multiple realities and values the meanings that participants assign to their lived experiences, thereby meriting the use of a qualitative approach,

which is best suited to uncovering the nuanced and situated meanings that underpin individual experience in a uniquely enfolding environment.

Furthermore, although previous studies of bus drivers using the JD-R model have predominantly employed quantitative designs (e.g., Chen & Hsu, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2022), such an approach, while useful for testing constructs and relationships, often lacks contextual depth in complex situations (Creswell et al., 2007). A qualitative approach enables a deeper, more nuanced exploration of drivers' lived experiences and perceptions. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, are rewarding for capturing detailed accounts and behavioural cues in natural settings that are not easily conveyed through quantitative data (Creswell et al., 2007; Silverman, 2013). Qualitative research can also serve as a prelude to more extensive quantitative research in an exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). As outlined in Chapter Three, the methodological choice selected for this study aligns with the researcher philosophical position and is well-suited to addressing the research objectives and questions.

1.4 Research contribution

This thesis advances the existing knowledge of bus driver stress within the unique pandemic context, where drivers were largely isolated from colleagues and managers, highlighting the underexplored roles that POS, PSS, peer support, and PJ fit play in influencing stressors in this occupation. Through the adoption of a holistic perspective, the study provides insights into how various job and personal resources interact to influence well-being and employment relations, and in this way have potential implications for both theory and practice.

First, the study offers contextually focused insights into how the pandemic and industrial disputes have affected drivers' experiences of stress and employment relationships.

Theoretically, within the broader framework of the JD-R model and psychological contract theory, this study adds value by providing new insights into the synergistic value derived from integrating POS, PSS, peer support, and PJ fit. In doing so, it extends occupational stress literature to demonstrate how these concepts collectively explain stress dynamics in an isolated and demanding working environment. Moreover, while these constructs are conventionally investigated through quantitative methods, this study demonstrates the added value of a qualitative approach that can capture the complexity of the relationships of these factors at the organisational, supervisory, and individual levels. In combining the perspectives from the JD-R model and psychological contract theory, the study finds support for adopting the dominant concepts of organisational psychology but makes a case for an epistemological pluralism that is open to insights from qualitative and employment relations research. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry in the context where the experiences of frontline workers are complex and socially embedded. It demonstrates how qualitative data evidence can inform theoretical frameworks by revealing mechanisms of stress and support that are not always visible in quantitative models. This not only deepens understanding of stress processes but also provides a foundation for mixed-methods or sequential designs that future research could consider.

Second, the study offers some important implications for practice. Despite the unusual context in which there are limited direct supervisor-driver relationships, supervisors are important in influencing drivers' perceptions of support and fairness. The findings suggest that in the absence of consistent supervisory availability, relationships in psychological contracts risk being perceived as transactional rather than relational, thus undermining the relational aspects of the psychological contracts. The research describes the structural and agency barriers that hindered supervisory support and highlighted mechanisms such as supervisory training and

support in relational HRM, as well as more systematic engagement with bus driver representatives (trade unions). Both are especially important in this distal employment relationship. Furthermore, the findings highlight the critical role of peer support as a resource that complements formal organisational initiatives, particularly during crises.

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis begins with a brief account of the genesis of the research in Chapter One, introducing the rationale and research gaps that the study aims to address, as well as the research objectives and questions that guide the research. The prospective contributions to theory and practice are also outlined in the introductory chapter. Chapter Two consists of a literature review that examines relevant literature on stress and well-being, as well as POS, PSS, and peer support. It also specifies the problem of stress caused by drivers' working conditions and the pandemic and emphasises the importance of resources in mitigating their negative consequences. The chapter also provides a review of employment relations from the perspective of the psychological contract to demonstrate how this is relevant to the research problem. Chapter Three explains the research philosophy and details the research design and methods selected to address the research questions. This chapter also provides clarification on data collection and analysis processes, and highlights the challenges encountered during the research process. Chapter Four presents the findings from the thematic analysis, which are organised according to the emerging themes. Chapter Five discusses the findings in light of the previous literature and explains how the thesis addresses the gaps in understanding drivers' stress and employment relations issues within the context of the pandemic. Chapter Six concludes the thesis by presenting an overview of the contributions to theory, practice and methodology. It also acknowledges the limitations of the research and identifies future research directions. Table 1 presents the overview of the entire thesis structure.

Table 1. Overview of the thesis structure

Chapter	Title	Summary of content
Chapter 1	Introduction	Introduces the research area, outlines the rationale and research gaps, presents key concepts, and sets out the research questions and objectives.
Chapter 2	Literature Review	Reviews the literature on occupational stress, working conditions, and pandemic impact on bus drivers. Introduces the JD-R model and psychological contract theory as conceptual frameworks to understand employee stress, support systems, and employment relationships.
Chapter 3	Research Design and Methodology	Explains the research tradition, and justifies the interpretive qualitative methodology used. Describes participant recruitment, data collection via interviews, thematic analysis process, and ethical considerations. Reflects on the challenges encountered during the research journey.
Chapter 4	Working Conditions, Pandemic Challenges and Support	Presents empirical findings related to the drivers' perceptions of working conditions and pandemic-related stressors. Explores organisational, supervisory, and peer support as well as personal attributes influencing drivers' stress.
Chapter 5	Applying JD-R Model and Psychological Contract	Discusses the findings through the theoretical lens of the JD-R model and psychological contract. Highlights how job demands, job resources, and perceived contract fulfillment or breach influenced stress and employment relations.
Chapter 6	Conclusion	Summarizes key findings and addresses research questions. Highlights theoretical, practical contributions and methodological. Discusses limitations and provides recommendations for future research.

1.6 Summary

Extensive research consistently demonstrates that bus drivers suffer from stress due to the occupational hazards associated with the sedentary, time-pressured, and low-paid nature of the job. In NZ, recurring industrial disputes have highlighted employment problems in the sector, particularly around low pay and unfavourable working hours, even before the emergence of

the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is less attention in research to the role of organisational, supervisory, and peer support in shaping stress and well-being in this occupation, even though these have been shown to be relevant in other professional settings. This research, therefore, explores the experience of bus drivers and their supervisors as the pandemic unfolded. Drawing on the JD-R model and the psychological contract theory, the study aims to better understand work-related stress and wider employment relations in the pandemic context.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is organised into three main parts. The first part establishes the context of the study by examining occupational stress as a universal issue and persistent threat to both employee well-being and organisational performance. Within this discussion, the study examines the working conditions and how the pandemic altered these conditions and compounded existing stressors. The second part introduces the job demand and resources within the JD-R model framework. This framework provides a valuable lens through which the study analyses job demands and resources within the unique working conditions of bus drivers under the pandemic emergency. The third part focuses on employment relationships through the lens of the psychological contract theory. It analyses employee perceptions of the mutual and implicit expectations and obligations in employment relationships, and how these perceptions may shift under the changing conditions of strain or perceived breaches during the pandemic. Table 2 presents an overview of the headings and subheadings covered in the literature review.

Table 2. Overview of the literature review headings and sub-headings

Heading	Subheading
2.1 Occupational Stress	2.1.1 Introducing occupational stress 2.1.2 Working conditions, occupational stress and supervisory challenge 2.1.3 Working in the pandemic context
2.2 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model	2.2.1 Job demands and job resources 2.2.2 Perceived organisational support (POS) 2.2.3 Perceived supervisor support (PSS) 2.2.4 Peer support 2.2.5 Personal resources
2.3 Psychological Contract	2.3.1 Theoretical overview 2.3.2 Psychological contract and job resources 2.3.3 Transactional and relational contract perspectives 2.3.4 HRM, psychological contract, and employee engagement
2.4 Summary	Summary and synthesis of key conceptual insights for the study

2.1 Occupational stress

2.1.1 Introducing occupational stress

In this study, occupational stress refers specifically to the adverse physical, emotional, and psychological responses that arise from workloads that exceed an individual's capacity and resources to manage these demands effectively. This conceptualisation is grounded in the transactional model of stress emphasised by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which frames stress as a dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment. It characterises occupational stress as a mismatch between work demands and an employee's resources in terms of knowledge, skills and coping abilities (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). Unlike short-term responses to isolated events, occupational stress here is understood as a chronic condition that develops over time in response to prolonged exposure to adverse working conditions, such as excessive workloads, limited autonomy, and inadequate support, which often leads to psychological strain (e.g., anxiety and burnout) as well as physiological issues (e.g., fatigue

and hypertension). This work-related focus distinguishes occupational stress from general psychological stress by anchoring it specifically to systemic organisational factors.

The stress-inducing conditions are particularly prevalent in high-risk, public-facing jobs, such as bus driving, where working hours are long, pay is low, and passenger hostility is a common challenge (Ferguson et al., 2022; Tse et al., 2006). Employee well-being, encompassing aspects of physical, emotional and psychological health, is widely recognised as crucial to sustaining worker productivity, job satisfaction, and the overall performance of an organisation (Harter et al., 2002; Wright & Bonett, 2007). However, occupational stress poses a significant threat to both individual well-being and organisational outcomes. The negative effects of prolonged stress have been linked to long-term health issues (Colligan & Higgins, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005) and organisational costs, including sickness, absence, underperformance, turnover, and even sabotage (Khamisa et al., 2015). Consequently, stress is no longer viewed solely as an individual employee concern but also a serious concern for employers and their representatives (Sharma et al., 2021). Scholars assert that the primary sources of stress are rooted in working conditions and management practices, including unrealistic demands, lack of support, unfair treatment, low decision latitude, lack of appreciation, effort–reward imbalance, conflicting roles, lack of transparency, and poor communication (Bhui et al., 2016). Notably, organisational interventions were perceived as effective only when they addressed these structural and relational factors through improved leadership and management (Demerouti et al., 2001).

As mentioned in Chapter One, bus drivers' working conditions have consistently been documented as highly stressful, making them among the most at-risk occupations. However, the specific role of supervisors in either exacerbating or mitigating these stressors remained

insufficiently explored. The onset of the pandemic may have further intensified not only the existing stressors of bus drivers but also increased the strain on supervisors and exposed gaps in supervisory capacity and organisational response to protecting drivers. The subsequent section examines the specific working conditions and stressors that affect bus drivers, while also highlighting the often-overlooked role of supervision, particularly in structurally remote work settings, in mitigating occupational stress.

2.1.2 Working conditions, occupational stress and supervisory challenge

Competitiveness within industries and workplaces is a major contributor to challenging working conditions and workplace stress (Eurofound, 2021). The pressures to remain competitive influence work intensity and the organisation of work, health and safety, working time, work-life balance, and pay (Eurofound, 2018; Paoli, 2001). Empirical evidence consistently shows that adverse working conditions are associated with negative consequences, such as elevated stress levels, decreased job satisfaction, higher rates of absenteeism and turnover, reduced productivity, and physical and psychological health issues (Burgard & Lin, 2013; Stansfeld & Candy, 2006; Theorell, 2020). For example, Scanlan and Still (2019) found that employees with demanding working conditions reported increased stress, which in turn undermined job satisfaction and increased turnover intention.

Professional bus driving, like many other occupations, comes with a wide variety of stress-inducing factors. Urban bus drivers, in particular, work in some of the most demanding, stressful, and unpleasant environments, with increased rates of sickness and mortality, high absenteeism, and turnover (Batoool et al., 2021; Glasø et al., 2011; Kompier et al., 2000; Tse et al., 2006). Their roles require balancing multiple responsibilities concurrently, as Meijman and Kompier (1998) emphasise, the demands of this occupation are both high and conflicting,

requiring drivers to balance professional obligations and customer service while maintaining punctuality to tight schedules and compliance with safety requirements.

Extensive research confirms that bus driving constitutes a high-risk occupation with disproportionate levels of work-related stress and adverse well-being outcomes. Tse et al. (2006), who documented a comprehensive analysis of five decades of literature on the well-being of bus drivers, established this occupation risk profile, a conclusion echoed by more recent studies (Batoool et al., 2021; Chen & Hsu, 2020; Tu et al., 2021). Stressors consistently identified include long working hours, congested traffic, adverse weather, poor cabin ergonomics, extended isolation from colleagues, rotating shift schedules, insufficient rest and meal breaks, prolonged sedentary posture, limited decision-making authority, and persistent schedule pressures (Chen & Hsu, 2020; Evans & Carrère, 1991; Tse et al., 2006). Collectively, these factors contribute to chronic fatigue, psychological strain, and enduring health risks. Table 3 presents the summary of the stressors and outcomes documented by the studies referred to above.

Table 3. Common stressors and outcomes documented in bus driver research.

Psychosocial stressors	Adverse outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Split-shift work • Long-hours • Tight schedules • Decision latitude • Weather conditions • Poor reward and overcommitment • Bullying • Lower sleep quality • Poor management communication • Poor condition of bus vehicles • Lack of sleep when starting a shift • Staff shortages affecting workload • Lack of sleep • Isolation • Lack of decision-making power about the job • Poor pay • Meal breaks, either short or long • Responsibility for the safety of others • Fear of being robbed or assaulted • Traffic congestion and road works • No recognition for good work • Limited public toilets on routes 	<p>Physiological problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Musculo-skeletal problems (lower part of the back, neck, shoulders, upper part of the back, knees) • Stomach and intestinal disorders • Sleeping problems • Fatigue • High blood pressure • Cardiovascular diseases • High levels of urine-adrenaline • High levels of cortisol • Stress and burnout <p>Psychological problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tension • Mental overload • Depression • Emotional exhaustion • Substance abuse <p>Family problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor work-life balance due to long working hours • Missing out on family activities • Family/marital disputes <p>Organisational problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees' dissatisfaction and disengagement • Collective disputes • Difficulty in recruitment and retention • High absenteeism and company health costs due to sicknesses

Source: Batool et al. (2021); Evans and Carrère (1991); Chen and Hsu (2020); Glasø et al. (2011); Kompier et al. (2000); Tse et al. (2006); Tu et al. (2021).

A significant challenge bus drivers face is the limited and often distal nature of supervisory oversight, which reduces the immediacy of support in daily work. This inadequate physical closeness may lead drivers to experience a sense of disconnection from supervisors, colleagues, and the wider organisation. This remote supervision parallels the challenges observed in a work-from-home (WFH) setting, where employees are similarly isolated from supervisors and

colleagues (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Research on WFH highlights risks such as communication failures, delayed feedback and feelings of disempowerment stemming from inadequate workplace support (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In the context of bus driving, remote supervision may also hinder drivers' access to critical resources, such as emotional support or team cohesiveness, which are essential for mitigating stressors associated with demanding working conditions (Mathieu et al., 2018). Insights from WFH studies underscore the significance of improved communication strategies and support systems to address relationship and support-related challenges associated with supervision in this occupation.

2.1.3 Working in the pandemic context

The pandemic profoundly impacted the working conditions of employees across various industries. This situation makes it essential to examine how the pandemic introduced new challenges and exacerbated the existing stressors and demands faced by bus drivers. Under normal employment conditions, bus driving is recognised as a high-risk occupation with adverse health outcomes. These risks increased dramatically during the pandemic. Essential frontline workers, including those in healthcare, transportation, food production, retail, and emergency services, were unable to work remotely and thus faced increased exposure (Garfin et al., 2022; Ker et al., 2021). An early editorial in the medical journal *The Lancet* (2020) highlighted that transport staff were hard hit, with significant fatalities among major cities such as New York and London. The constant risk of exposure to the virus, limited personal protective equipment and the physical constraints of the vehicle elevated the risk of infection for bus drivers.

For migrant workers, the pandemic compounded their vulnerability. Many essential workers in high-income countries are migrant workers who, in many instances, hold temporary or seasonal

visa status, making their situation particularly precarious (Reid et al., 2020). Their visa conditions often tied them to their employers, granting them restricted work rights. This limitation hindered their capacity to reject poor working conditions or advocate for better conditions. Reports show that many migrant workers experienced increased job insecurity, poor health and limited awareness of their rights and entitlements in occupational health and safety (Eurofound, 2021). This phenomenon is particularly salient in the NZ bus sector, which is heavily reliant on migrant workers (Campbell, 2023).

Extensive studies have confirmed that the pandemic produced widespread psychological and social strain, including disrupted routines, anxiety, stress, and financial uncertainty (Cullen et al., 2020; Lades et al., 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Prime et al., 2020; White & Van Der Boor, 2020; Zhu et al., 2022). Rates of depression, distress, sleep disturbance, and somatic symptoms were elevated, particularly among essential workers (Brooks et al., 2020; Chew et al., 2020; Pappa et al., 2020). In NZ, the government's Covid elimination strategy, “go early, go hard”, though it helped curb the rate of infection, it also imposed high costs on the economic and mental well-being of people (Diorio et al., 2020). For drivers, these challenges were compounded by financial insecurity arising from reduced hours and pay, despite their reliance on extended hours for economic stability (Lund et al., 2010; Netemeyer et al., 2017; Vlaev & Elliott, 2013). Studies have shown that there were significant reductions in working hours and employment, including in sectors that employ essential workers, as businesses struggled to maintain continuity under pandemic conditions (Cajner et al., 2020; Lan et al., 2020).

In addition, social distancing measures, though necessary to limit transmission, restricted opportunities for interpersonal connection. Limited social interaction has been consistently linked to negative emotions, reduced psychological need satisfaction and impaired cognitive

functioning (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Seppälä et al., 2013). Prolonged isolation is also associated with depression and even mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). These social distancing measures limited engagement among drivers and passengers, as well as with family and friends, increasing feelings of disconnection and negatively impacting overall well-being (Gartland et al., 2022). The extended border closure also disrupted the mobility of migrant workers, leading to prolonged family separations and associated emotional distress (Alrob & Shields, 2022).

Despite these pandemic-imposed challenges, some drivers demonstrated resilience through their passion for driving and the perceived significance of their work. Research suggests that passion and a strong emotional attachment to work can help employees overcome adversity and maintain their performance (Albrecht et al., 2021; Allan et al., 2016; Kuntz et al., 2017; Zuckerman et al., 1978). For many drivers, transporting healthcare workers, non-health essential staff, and vulnerable passengers during the pandemic provided a sense of purpose and reinforced intrinsic motivation. Even brief interactions with passengers, albeit modified to minimise risk, offered moments of social connections, which support well-being through what Grant and Parker (2009) describe as a sense of connection and community. This aligns with broader evidence that task significance enhances motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey et al., 2007).

These dynamics also highlight the relevance of examining PJ fit. Studies on PJ fit demonstrate that alignment between employee attributes and job requirements improves job satisfaction and well-being (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Tims et al., 2016). Conversely, the misalignment under high job demands can exacerbate burnout. Consistent with the JD-R model, high job demands coupled with inadequate support often lead to burnout if personal and job characteristics are misaligned (Demerouti et al., 2001; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Although significant research

has been conducted on PJ fit across various occupations, little is known about its role in high-risk, essential work, such as that of bus drivers during the pandemic crisis. This presents a research opportunity to explore how PJ fit could be relevant in such a demanding job in the context of the pandemic. The outcome of this analysis can inform HR practices, such as talent management and overall employee support systems, in the event of future crises.

2.2 Conceptual overview of JD-R model

Employees' well-being is influenced by a combination of organisational factors, such as working conditions, and individual factors like personal abilities and traits. The JD-R model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics by integrating multiple perspectives on job stress and motivation. Specifically, this model entails the interactions between job demands, job resources and personal resources to determine individual and organisational outcomes (Demerouti et al., 2001; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Table 4 presents the components of the JD-R model, which are explored in subsequent sections.

Table 4. Components of JD-R model.

Job demands	Job resources	Personal resources	Interactions between demands and resources
Physical, social, or organisational aspects of work that require employees to constantly put forth physical and psychological efforts and hence are associated with physiological and psychological costs	Those positive factors relating to the physical, social, and organisational aspects of work that support employees and increase their motivational and coping abilities.	Inherent attributes and traits that empower individuals to control and navigate the environment that creates strain on them.	High job demands can be detrimental to well-being, but high job/personal resources mitigate their impact of job demands to promote and sustain well-being.

Source: Demerouti and Bakker (2011).

2.2.1 Job demands and job resources

Demerouti et al. (2001) introduced the JD-R model to highlight that when job demands exceed available resources, the resulting imbalance can generate strain and stress. Within this model, work conditions are broadly classified into two general categories: job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). The interactions between job demands and resources account for two main potential developments: health impairment process, whereby excessive demands result in job strain and burnout, and the motivational process, whereby adequate job resources stimulate engagement and performance (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Job demands pertain to the physical, social, or organisational aspects of work (e.g., emotional/physical demands, poor work relationships) that require employees to put forth physical and psychological effort, which often result in physiological and psychological costs (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). These demands are associated with job strain, stress and burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Taris, 2013), and the symptoms may manifest physically (e.g., fatigue), emotionally (e.g., anxiety and irritability), and behaviourally (e.g., decreased job satisfaction). Studies across various occupations have repeatedly found that workload and emotional demands predict exhaustion, lower performance, absenteeism, and turnover intentions (Bakker et al., 2003, 2005; Crawford et al., 2010). Moreover, prolonged exposure to high demands is linked to health-related issues such as cardiovascular diseases, anxiety and depression (Kivimäki & Kawachi, 2015; Melchior et al., 2007).

Using the JD-R model, this research argues that bus drivers deal with numerous high-level job demands. These include physical demands (long hours of driving, health issues due to sedentary work, such as cardiovascular problems, obesity, and musculoskeletal disorders); emotional demands (dealing with difficult passengers, handling emergencies, maintaining a

calm demeanour under stress due to customers); mental demands (traffic congestion, constant alertness to ensure passenger safety); work environment demands (exposure to noise, air pollution, and potentially hazardous conditions such as inclement weather); and security demands (concerns about job stability and hours of work, especially during economic downturns, pandemic or changes in bus companies/owners and public transportation policies).

In contrast, job resources are motivational in nature and serve as buffers to the negative effects of job demands. They include physical, social, and organisational aspects of work (such as strong work relationships) that support performance, goal achievement, promote learning, and stimulate personal growth (Bakker et al., 2003; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Job resources fulfil psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn enhance engagement and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). For example, the effort-recovery model (Zijlstra et al., 2014) demonstrates that a work environment that provides adequate resources promotes a sense of motivation and commitment among employees. Conversely, inadequate resources increase strain and disengagement (González-Romá et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Hence, resources are pivotal in enabling employees to cope effectively with job demands, while maintaining performance and supporting well-being.

Workplace resources can be observed in various ways, and this study focuses specifically on POS and PSS, including peer support, within the JD-R model (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). While PSS and POS are related constructs used to measure employees' perceptions of organisational support, they differ in their focus and predictive power of individual and work-related outcomes (DeConinck, 2010; Eisenberger et al., 2002). Nonetheless, both concepts have been studied and used independently, as well as in combination, to predict various work-related outcomes, including individual well-being

(Eisenberger et al., 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). These concepts are therefore central to understanding the interplay of demands and resources in the bus driving occupation and are elaborated further in the following sections.

2.2.2 Perceived organisational support

Research on POS has garnered considerable attention from both academia and industry due to its recognised role in enhancing individual well-being and organisational outcomes (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Maertz et al., 2007). Extensive research has consistently shown that POS mitigates the negative effects of work-related demands and stress (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2009), while simultaneously promoting job satisfaction, engagement and commitment (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Overall, POS has a profound impact on employee work behaviour and attitudes (O'Driscoll & Randall, 1999). Organisations that value and support their employees foster feelings of emotional connection and gratitude (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Similarly, employees who perceive that their organisation cares about their contribution and well-being are more likely to exhibit higher affective commitment, characterised by a stronger emotional attachment toward the organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Additionally, POS has been shown to increase job engagement, which translates into high levels of enthusiasm, stability and dedication (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Chen & Eyou, 2021; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Essentially, POS encourages in workers a felt obligation to reciprocate the organisation's values and concerns with favourable treatment. This sense of reciprocity is manifest in various forms of positive work-related behaviours and discretionary effort (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Islam et al., 2019; Peelle & Henry, 2007). The implications extend to employers as well, since disengagement, absenteeism, and turnover impose substantial costs on organisations.

The pandemic further highlighted the salience of POS in protecting employees (Chatzittofis et al., 2021). The pandemic created unparalleled uncertainty and stress, encompassing physical, social and emotional distress arising from job losses, pay cuts, and changing work arrangements (Galanti et al., 2021). Although essential workers such as healthcare workers received more attention due to their high risk of exposure to the virus and evident public service, other occupations, like transport and grocery workers, were seen as having a lower exposure level and relatively overlooked despite continued public interaction and elevated risk (Northington et al., 2021). This disparity raises important questions about whether essential yet lower-profile occupations, such as bus drivers, received sufficient organisational support during the pandemic and how this influenced their well-being.

Studies in healthcare provide valuable insights, which highlight the positive effect of organisational support during the pandemic in mitigating stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety among healthcare workers (Labrague & Santos, 2020; Lee, 2020). Similarly, research has shown that employees seek guidance and reassurance from employers during times of fear and uncertainty, with insufficient support being associated with increased stress and disengagement (Ahmed et al., 2022; Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021). These findings collectively suggest that organisational support functions as a critical buffer against crisis-induced stressors. However, empirical evidence remains limited in the occupation of bus driving, despite their essential role during the pandemic. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how bus drivers perceived organisational support and how these perceptions influenced their stress, resilience, and commitment.

While POS highlights the employee-organisation relationship, PSS focuses on the direct and immediate impact of supervisors. In the context of bus drivers, supervisors serve as the primary

contact between the organisation and the drivers, making their support a critical factor in influencing drivers' daily experiences and perspective on the organisational commitment to their well-being, despite the remote supervisory relationship setting. The distinction between POS and PSS is further explored in the subsequent section.

2.2.3 Perceived supervisor support

Along with employees' overall perceptions of the organisational support, employees also develop specific perceptions of support from their immediate supervisor. Since supervisors are the most immediate and salient person in an individual's work context, their behaviour strongly shapes employee experiences. In fact, supervisors are often regarded as representatives of the organisation, and their actions are an indication of the organisation's favourable or unfavourable orientation toward them (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). The extent to which employees perceive supervisory support influences not only their well-being but also their perceptions of organisational justice, including perceived fairness of policies, procedures, and practices (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010). Employees who perceive their supervisor as supportive are more likely to perceive the organisation as fair and just, which is important in creating a culture of care and support.

Extensive research highlights the significance of supervisor support for employee well-being. Systematic reviews (e.g., Inceoglu et al., 2018; Skakon et al., 2010) and meta-analyses (e.g., Harms et al., 2016; Montano et al., 2017) consistently demonstrate that supportive leadership has a direct impact on employee psychological health, engagement and resilience. Research also demonstrates that supervisors play an essential role in recognising signs of stress in employees and affording resources to alleviate the stress (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019). In the same vein, Jimmieson et al. (2021) emphasise that supervisors are the first line of defence when

it comes to identifying stress in their team members. This is because they are in a position to observe alterations in behaviour, work habits, or job satisfaction that may serve as indicators of stress. However, managers encounter various challenges when it comes to effectively managing their employees' health. For example, supervisors may lack awareness of the varied and subjective nature of workplace stressors (Ladegaard et al., 2019). Inadequate knowledge in stress management or relational skills can also hinder their capacity to provide meaningful support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

At the core of PSS is the quality of the supervisor–employee relationship. Supportive supervisors cultivate trust, psychological safety, and open communication (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008; Holland et al., 2016). Such an environment encourages employees to voice concerns, seek assistance, and engage constructively in the workplace (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Edmondson, 1999; Irai & Lu, 2018). It also helps to prevent workplace conflicts, as employees view supervisors as approachable and invested in resolving misunderstandings, rather than as distant or threatening figures (Zhu et al., 2022). By contrast, poor supervisory relationships often inhibit employees from disclosing difficulties, thereby limiting the supervisor's capacity to provide appropriate support (Persson et al., 2018; Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008). This problem is further exacerbated when supervisors prioritise output over relationship-building, which reveals deficiencies in interpersonal competencies. This underscores leadership style and competence as crucial factors in shaping the supervisor–employee relationship. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, fairness, and respect foster inclusivity, belonging, and motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Conversely, deficiencies in these behaviours create unfavourable environments where employees feel undervalued and demotivated, with negative consequences for satisfaction, productivity, and well-being (Cummings et al., 2010). This highlights the dual potential of PSS, which can serve either as a vital resource that buffers stress

and enhances resilience or, in its absence, act as a driver of strain in the workplace relationship and disengagement.

The relevance of PSS becomes even more complex in occupations characterised by remote or distant supervision. In such settings, the absence of regular communication, immediate feedback and emotional support risks increasing vulnerability to stress and disengagement (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). This suggests that the role of supervisors may be particularly pivotal in shaping drivers' perceptions of organisational commitment, even when mediated through remote interactions. However, it remains to be seen how important the supervisory relationship is in a potentially stressful context of bus driving, where the supervisor is largely remote, as are work colleagues. Understanding how bus drivers interpret supervisory support in the absence of daily face-to-face contact and how this influences stress, well-being, and organisational attachment is crucial for extending the JD-R model to contexts of remote supervision. Furthermore, peer support offers a complementary perspective by focusing on informal, collegial relationships that often provide emotional and practical assistance in a demanding work environment, which is discussed next.

2.2.4 Peer support

Peer support in the workplace is an indispensable yet often undervalued aspect of organisational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). While much of the literature has focused on management and leadership, research increasingly recognises the crucial role of supportive collegial relationships in shaping employee well-being and work outcomes. Employees who feel supported by their colleagues are more likely to experience increased job satisfaction and perceive their work as meaningful and rewarding (Babin & Boles, 1996). Peer support also acts as a buffer against workplace stress and burnout, and enhances employees'

resilience to challenges and adversity at work through shared experiences (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Social support theory provides a useful lens to understand the role of peer support in the workplace (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). This theory suggests that individuals gain various forms of support, including emotional, physical and psychological, from their social relationships and networks, which help protect against the negative effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kossek et al., 2011). Within the workplace setting, social support is characterised by the exchange of psychological and material resources among co-workers. This support not only protects employees against strain but also promotes positive health outcomes and psychological well-being (Cohen & McKay, 2020; Kinman et al., 2011; Kossek et al., 2011). Beyond its protective function, social support has also been linked to numerous positive work-related outcomes. Research demonstrates that collegial relationship improves motivation, engagement and job satisfaction as well as in-role performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, and relationship quality (Bakker et al., 2007; Gkorezis, 2015; Maula-Bakhsh & Raziq, 2018; Schaufeli & Taris, 2013; Talebzadeh & Karatepe, 2019). For example, cross-national study of workers across eight European countries found that strong social support mitigated the negative impact of work demands and improved work engagement by fostering a sense of community at work (Taipale et al., 2011).

Peer support is indeed integral to team dynamics and organisational climate. Employees who feel supported by their colleagues are more likely to engage in collaborative work behaviours, feel included and commit to their organisation (Driskell et al., 2018; Hüffmeier & Hertel, 2011). Instrumental and emotional peer support has further been shown to strengthen intrinsic motivation among team members, reinforcing the value of a supportive workplace culture (Van

Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003). However, despite its significance, peer support remains overlooked, particularly in isolated or structurally detached work environments. Unlike traditional team-based contexts where employees interact regularly, bus drivers work independently for much of their day, limiting opportunities for peer contact. This raises important questions about how peer support is fostered in such occupations and whether informal networks can compensate for the absence of regular collegial interaction.

In addition to POS, PSS, and peer support, which serve as critical external resources within the broader framework of the JD-R model, it is equally imperative to consider personal resources within this framework. Personal resources play a complementary role by enabling individuals to navigate and cope with job demands. The subsequent section explores the personal resources in buffering stress and enhancing well-being.

2.2.5 Personal resources

The concept of personal resources as stress-buffering resources has gained significant attention in the fields of psychology, organisational behaviour, and stress management. These resources are critical not only for alleviating strain but also for enhancing health and work-related outcomes, such as job engagement and satisfaction (Mauno et al., 2006; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Conceptually, personal resources broadly refer to attributes and traits that enable individual to exert control over their environment and adapt to challenges (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Attributes refer to broader qualities or characteristics that define an individual, including skills, abilities, knowledge, and experience that an individual has learned or acquired. These qualities are adaptable and can be cultivated through training and development to strengthen engagement. For example, emotional intelligence has been shown to promote work engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Traits, on the other hand, are relatively stable, inherent personality characteristics that an individual develops throughout life, such as resilience, conscientiousness and emotional stability. These traits play a vital role in influencing how employees manage stress, sustain performance and engage meaningfully (Bakker et al., 2012; Barrick & Mount, 1991; Cable & Edwards, 2004; Grant et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2008). For example, extroverts are outgoing and energetic, and they thrive in social situations, which is positively related to job performance that requires significant interpersonal interaction, such as customer service roles. Similarly, emotional stability reduces susceptibility to burnout by fostering robust coping tactics (Judge et al., 2002; Kundi et al., 2021).

The relevance of personal traits is further understood through the conservation of resource theory, which emphasises self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism as core resources that enable an individual to cope with stress and adversity. High self-esteem fosters confidence in one's abilities and promotes a positive appraisal of challenges (Baumeister et al., 2003). Self-efficacy encourages proactive stress management and resilience by strengthening individuals' belief in their capacity to influence outcomes (Bandura et al., 1999; Schwarzer & Warner, 2012). Optimism supports recovery from setbacks and enhances adaptive coping strategies (Scheier & Carver, 1987; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Empirical studies have provided clear evidence of these effects. For example, teachers with low self-esteem perceived a high level of occupational stress compared to those with high self-esteem (Masoom, 2021). Similarly, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to feel in control of their lives and take proactive steps to manage stress, which demonstrates greater resilience than those with lower self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1999; Schwarzer & Warner, 2012). Self-efficacy has also been recognised as a crucial source of motivation and commitment (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Consistent

with self-efficacy, optimism has been shown to enhance resilience and reduce vulnerabilities to work-related stress (Scheier & Carver, 1987; Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

The concept of personal resources is closely aligned with PJ fit theory, which describes the degree of compatibility between employees and their jobs (Hecht & Allen, 2005; Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010). PJ fit is often conceptualised through two dimensions: 1) demands-abilities fit (DA fit), which examines the match between an employee's skills and job requirements, and 2) needs-supplies fit (NS fit), which considers the alignment between employee values, needs, and the job environment (Edwards, 1991). Attributes such as skills and experience are relevant to DA fit, whereas job resources like autonomy, work-life balance, recognition and compensation contribute to NS fit. High PJ fit is consistently associated with positive outcomes, including greater engagement, satisfaction and performance, alongside reduced stress. For example, a study of hotel managers found that a good PJ fit reduced occupational stress while increasing job motivation, satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Iplik et al., 2011; Kristof-Brown et al., 2002). In contrast, misfit generates frustration, disengagement, and strain (Edwards, 1991). In addition, organisational practices play a pivotal role in strengthening PJ fit through the provision of complementary resources. Training and development improve DA fit by upgrading skills, while recruitment and selection processes can identify candidates whose attributes and traits align with job requirements (Carless, 2005; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Similarly, adequate resources yield high NS fit. Such practices not only reduce the risk of misfit but also improve long-term retention and well-being.

Despite its relevance, PJ fit has yet to be systematically explored in the context of bus drivers. Evidence suggests that drivers enter the profession for reasons of expediency rather than as a

long-term career choice, with the sedentary and solitary nature of the role appealing to relatively few (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, recent research in India and China indicates that although personal attributes such as mindfulness, community orientation and a proactive personality or autonomy nature of driving, may link to more positive driver experiences and performance, this is eroded by adverse working conditions such as long or irregular hours and role overload (Chen et al., 2024; Jayakumar & Vinodkumar, 2023). This suggests that although PJ fit is central to resilience and well-being, its protective value may be diminished in structurally constrained occupations such as bus driving. Exploring the interaction between PJ fit and adverse working environments provides an important avenue for understanding how the JD-R framework operates in contexts where external supports are limited, and job demands remain persistently high.

2.3 Psychological contract

This section reviews employment relations through the lens of the psychological contract theory as a complementary perspective to the JD-R model. While the JD-R model explains the structural balance between job demands and resources, it does not fully account for employees' subjective interpretations of fairness, support and relational obligations in the workplace. The psychological contract theory, defined as the implicit expectations employees have about their employer's obligations (Rousseau, 1989), adds an interpretive lens that helps explain how unmet expectations for support, fair treatment, or recognition are experienced not merely as resource deficits, but as breaches of perceived relational obligations (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Theoretically, this is significant because it bridges the stress model with a relational framework that facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of how employees evaluate organisational responses to their expectations through the lens of perceived reciprocity. These expectations form the foundation of the psychological contract and influence how employment

relationships are experienced (Rousseau, 1989). This framework is particularly relevant to the context of bus drivers, whose structural constraints and work isolations often limit both interpersonal support and organisational resources accessibility.

Moreover, the NZ bus sector must be understood within the context of industrial disputes and the pandemic. The pandemic significantly transformed working conditions and reshaped employees' psychological contracts by introducing additional stressors, including health risks and increased workloads (Kniffin et al., 2021). These changes were compounded by safety measures, altered work schedules and hours, and even decreased pay (Foxcroft, 2020). Beyond the pandemic challenges, historical labour disputes over pay and working conditions highlight long-standing breaches of psychological contracts, particularly in relation to perceived inequity in compensation and recognition (George, 2019; Hancock, 2023). Notably, a fulfilled psychological contract may act as a job resource within the JD-R model. This not only meets employees' implicit expectations but also fosters trust and commitment, which are central to employees' well-being and employment relations (Rousseau, 1995). This perspective underscores the importance of integrating structural demand with relational evaluations of fairness and support to gain a comprehensive insight of drivers' work experiences. Hence, the psychological contract theory provides a critical interpretive lens for understanding how bus drivers assess their working conditions.

The following sections begin with a theoretical overview of the psychological contract concept, then examine it as a potential job resource in the workplace. Subsequently, the analysis explores its transactional and relational dimensions, and the last section examines employee engagement as a central construct linking psychological contracts and HR practice.

2.3.1 Theoretical overview of psychological contract

The psychological contract concept was initially introduced by Argyris (1960) to describe implicit, unwritten agreements between employees and organisations, which emphasise mutual expectations in the working relationships. The concept was later expanded by Levinson (1962) to include perceptions of obligations shaped by the interactions between the individuals and organisations. In the 1980s and 1990s, Rousseau (1989) reconceptualised the concept as an individual's subjective beliefs regarding mutual responsibilities between employees and employers, shaped by organisational strategies, HR practices and broader socio-economic conditions. Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni (1994) further asserted that these mutual responsibilities are idiosyncratic and influenced by personal experiences and organisational communication. Thus, though employment relationships may be partly defined by objective terms such as pay, they are also lubricated by tacit and informal understandings (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004; Guest & Conway, 2002).

As work has evolved, the psychological contract has expanded to include a broader array of non-material factors such as well-being, work-life balance, career development, recognition, and a supportive work environment, elements not explicitly stated in formal written contracts but are nonetheless crucial in employee's motivation, engagement, and commitment (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Guest, 2004; Schalk & Roe, 2007; Seeck & Parzefall, 2008). Within this expanded view, well-being has emerged as a central dimension of the psychological contract. For example, Conway and Briner (2006) emphasised the significance of aligning organisational support with individual well-being. Bal et al. (2013) have also demonstrated that fulfilment of psychological contracts is associated with employee engagement and satisfaction. More recently, scholars have argued that neglecting this dimension may contribute to perceptions of

contract breach, which in turn undermines employment relationships (Cassar & Buttigieg, 2015).

Although the psychological contract is often framed as individual-level construct in the psychology literature, it also has a collective dimension. Argyris's (1960) early work revealed its relevance to team norms and labour unions have historically influenced both explicit and implicit contracts by advocating for better wages, job security and working conditions and employee rights through collective negotiations (Guest, 2004; Katz, 1993). In many industries, unions' efforts have also played a pivotal role in the formulation and implementation of labour laws and regulations that establish baseline employment standards (Freeman, 1985). Furthermore, unions' roles as mediators in employment conflicts contribute to the maintenance of positive psychological contracts in an increasingly flexible and competitive work environment (Stone, 2000).

The constant change in the economic climate and work environment, culminating in the pandemic, has a profound influence on the psychological contracts between employees and employers. For example, the pandemic shifted employees' expectations towards remote work options, workplace safety, and stronger support for work-life balance (Muller et al., 2020). Rousseau (1995) contended that employers need to be aware of employees' evolving expectations, which extend beyond the confines of formal contracts, and be willing to adjust to accommodate these expectations. Guest and Conway (2002) similarly asserted that responsiveness to shifting employees' needs and expectations is essential for attracting, engaging, and retaining talent. Failure to adapt to these shifting expectations risks dissatisfaction and turnover. This underscores the importance of organisational and supervisor support as critical job resources in influencing psychological contracts, which is explored next.

2.3.2 The psychological contract and job resources

Within the JD-R model, positive (fulfilled) psychological contracts can be viewed as essential job resources. The fulfilled psychological contracts provide employees with a sense of security, fairness and reciprocity, which reinforces the perception that the organisation and its representatives can be relied upon for support. As explained, organisational and supervisory support form a critical part of this resource that contributes to employee well-being and employment relationships. In contrast, perceived breaches of psychological contracts may lead to employees experiencing reduced trust and a sense of unfairness, which undermines their well-being and strains their employment relationship (Conway & Briner, 2005). Within the JD-R model, such breaches can be conceptualised as additional job demands, as they create psychological strain and require employees to expend extra emotional and cognitive resources to cope with feelings of violation.

The concept of the psychological contract is rooted in organisational support and social exchange theories. When organisations provide valued resources or opportunities, employees are inclined to feel an implicit expectation to reciprocate with commitment and better performance (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Gouldner, 1960; Perugini & Gallucci, 2001). Employee expectations are, therefore, shaped by the extent to which they perceive that their organisation values their contributions and cares for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This perspective contributes to the understanding of how perceptions of fairness and reciprocity underpin the formation and maintenance of psychological contracts in the contemporary workplace, a dynamic this study explores in the NZ bus sector.

A critical risk to the process of reciprocation is the psychological contract breach, defined as employees' perceptions that the organisation has failed to fulfil promised obligations or

adequately reciprocate their contributions (Rousseau, 1989). Such breaches may occur even without an actual breach of contract (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). For example, when an employee assumes more duties without receiving additional compensation or recognition, they may perceive a breach of psychological contract, even if no explicit promise was made (Guest, 2004). These perceptions of breach can trigger feelings of dissatisfaction and a sense of injustice, which can undermine motivation and performance and increase turnover intentions. Numerous studies on the psychological contract have consistently shown that when employees fail to receive what they anticipated in return for their contributions, they experience a feeling of discrepancy, leading to discontent with their current circumstances and adverse work-related behaviours (Clinton & Guest, 2013; Robinson, 1996; Turnley & Feldman, 1998).

Supervisors play a crucial role in shaping employees' perceptions of workplace support and influencing their assessments of whether their psychological contracts are fulfilled (Shi & Gordon, 2019). PSS is strongly linked to employees' assessments of reciprocity and fairness, with supportive supervisors' behaviours, such as recognition, feedback, and advocacy, reinforcing perceptions of organisational support and the fulfilment of psychological contracts (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Shi & Gordon, 2019). Conversely, lack of such support is often interpreted as a breach of the psychological contract, which correlates with disengagement, reduced commitment, and heightened turnover intentions (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Zhao et al., 2007). As the immediate representative of the organisation, supervisors also clarify expectations, monitor performance delivery, and provide feedback to ensure employees' contributions align with organisational goals (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Their performance is particularly salient in low-paid occupations, where perceptions of economic fairness, recognition and opportunities are crucial for maintaining trust and commitment (Greenberg, 1990; Rousseau, 1995; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Beyond these responsibilities, supervisors'

daily interactions through encouragement and care have a profound influence on employees' sense of being valued. Guest (2004) emphasises that the quality of the supervisor-employee relationship is central to sustaining positive perceptions of support. This needs to be explored in terms of the relationship between supervisors and drivers, given the constraints on real-time interactions.

Trust is central to the psychological contract, as it influences how employees interpret fairness, reciprocity, and support, which are cultivated through interactions between supervisors and employees (Atkinson, 2007; Guest & Conway, 2002). Robinson (1996) defined trust as "one's expectations, assumptions, or beliefs about the likelihood that another's future actions will be beneficial, favourable, or at least not detrimental to one's interests" (p. 576). In job resource terms, trust acts as a socio-emotional resource that enhances the value of the psychological contract framework. Breaches of trust, however, weaken this resource, leading to dissatisfaction, reduced commitment, and in some cases, counterproductive behaviours (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Vogelgesang et al., 2020). This perspective highlights trust as a fundamental dimension of the psychological contract, which functions as a job resource when it is fulfilled through fairness, reciprocity and support, which in turn foster positive employment relations. Building on this discussion, the next section analyses the two distinct transactional and relational components of the psychological contract to offer further insight into how employees interpret organisational exchanges and perceive breaches. This is especially imperative in the context of bus drivers, where both material and emotional factors are significant, yet they are constrained.

2.3.3 Transactional and relational psychological contract perspectives

Within the broader framework of the psychological contract, transactional and relational contracts are examined (Chan, 2021; Herriot et al., 1997). Transactional psychological contract pertains to individuals' perceptions and expectations rather than the actual written agreements (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Rousseau, 2004). This contract differs from formal employment contracts in that it typically concerns employees' unspoken and personal beliefs regarding the economic and tangible aspects of the employment relationship, such as specific expectations about fair compensation, job security, and working conditions. Unlike transactional contracts, relational contracts involve non-economic exchanges formed through long-term relationships that encompass socio-emotional aspects, such as trust, loyalty, empathy and support (O'Donohue et al., 2014).

These dimensions of the psychological contract are interrelated rather than mutually exclusive, despite being often discussed separately. In many employment situations, both types of contracts coexist and influence each other. For example, an employee may anticipate a competitive salary (transactional) but also value supportive leadership (relational). The fulfilment of transactional obligations can reinforce relational trust and commitment, while relational support can, in turn, strengthen acceptance of transactional conditions. Conversely, violations in either dimension can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced engagement, and poor work-related behaviours (Rousseau, 2001). These two concepts may offer valuable insights into how bus drivers perceive and interpret their employment relationships, particularly in light of the industrial disputes and disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Working conditions for bus drivers, characterised by extended work hours, low pay, traffic congestion, and hostile passengers, accentuate the salience of transactional contracts.

Particularly, considering the persistent low pay in the bus driver profession, the high cost of living, and the risks associated with the job, transactional contracts hold significant importance because drivers may expect fair compensation for these risks (Bal et al., 2013). For example, during the pandemic, bus drivers may have transactional expectations of fair compensation or adequate support for their work in providing essential services, considering the heightened risks and challenges created by the pandemic. Drivers might perceive a violation of mutual expectations and obligations if the level of compensation and support does not align with the risk associated with the job (Bal et al., 2013; Bankins, 2015; Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 2001). Drivers may view the employment relationship as inequitable, leading to dissatisfaction and diminished engagement as they no longer sense the worth of investing effort in the job (Conway & Briner, 2006). Research with frontline healthcare workers has shown that inadequate compensation and safety support during the pandemic exacerbated stress and job dissatisfaction (Labrague & Santos, 2020).

Relational psychological contracts encourage discretionary work behaviours that extend beyond formal job descriptions, as employees feel obligated to reciprocate organisational care and recognition (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Shore et al., 2006). Guest (2004) asserted that high-demand jobs require adequate support and recognition to mitigate stress and sustain motivation. Existing studies further demonstrate that relational contracts create emotional attachments and commitment by framing the employment relationships as more than an economic exchange (Atkinson, 2007; O'Donohue et al., 2014). Thus, they may develop a sense of loyalty and commitment to the organisation based on shared values and mutual respect fostered through their positive exchanges (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006).

For bus drivers, relational expectations include recognition, emotional support, and advocacy. They often face challenging situations, such as dealing with violent passengers or coping with stress during extended shifts, which are physically and mentally fatiguing (Tse et al., 2006). The pandemic further compounded these existing demands, which underscored their increased dependence on their employers for care and reassurance (Zhou et al., 2021). However, when relational expectations are unmet, for example, due to a lack of organisational and supervisor support, drivers may feel stressed and undervalued, which undermines their morale and commitment (Chan, 2021; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). In contrast, fulfilment of relational contracts fosters job satisfaction, loyalty and reduced undesired work-related behaviours (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006; Rousseau, 1990).

Overall, transactional and relational contracts jointly shape how employees interpret their employment relationship. Transactional elements of the psychological contract set the foundation for economic fairness and job security, while relational elements build trust, commitment, and emotional engagement. Importantly, HR practices influence the balance between these two dimensions. Practices that emphasise transactional components risk framing the employment relationship as pure contractual, limiting engagement to task performance and financial rewards. Conversely, practices that also promote relational elements, such as recognition, supervisor support, and open communication, foster trust, loyalty, and a sense of partnership (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993). Thus, HR practices do not merely deliver organisational policies but also actively influence psychological contracts, by extension, engagement and performance. This underscores the importance of examining psychological contracts not only as individual perceptions but also as outcomes of broader HR systems and practices, which is explored further in the subsequent section.

2.3.4 HRM, psychological contract and employee engagement

The psychological contract has increasingly attracted attention from both academics and practitioners alike in the field of HRM (Guest, 2016; Kutaula et al., 2020). Although this concept originates outside the HRM discipline, it is now widely recognised as a valuable interpretive framework for understanding HR practices and employment relations (Guest & Conway, 2002). For example, Stephen's (2023) study on the mediating role of psychological contracts in the relationship between HR practices and employee retention found a strong correlation between HR practices and psychological contracts. Guest and Conway (2002) further highlighted the value of psychological contracts in providing a practical and theoretical foundation for understanding how HR practices, such as recruitment, performance, and reward systems, can influence employees' perceptions of equity, trust, and obligations. This posits that the psychological contract provides both theoretical and practical foundations for aligning HRM policies with employees' expectations. In light of this understanding, exploring the NZ bus drivers' experiences, which were shaped by industrial disputes and the pandemic, through the lenses of HR practices and psychological contract is, therefore, imperative.

Studies further indicate that psychological contract plays a pivotal role in facilitating the understanding of HRM practitioners and researchers of what employees value and expect from the organisations (Guest, 2016; Kutaula et al., 2020; Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). This perspective emphasises the existence of perceived mutual obligations between the organisation and employees (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Rousseau, 1990). In this reciprocal relationship, HR practices communicate the organisation's commitment to employee well-being, thereby influencing perceptions of fairness, trust, and reciprocity (Aggarwal & Bhargava, 2009; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). For example, HR practices such as recruitment and induction, training and

development, and health and safety initiatives are often considered "contract makers" as they convey the implicit and explicit promises (Conway & Briner, 2006; Rousseau, 1995).

In addition, equitable HR practices, such as fair compensation systems and supportive strategies, are particularly imperative in reinforcing perceptions of psychological contracts (Guest, 2004). As mentioned in the preceding section, drivers who often work under challenging conditions with relatively low pay, effective HR practices such as fair compensation are vital in maintaining the transactional dimension of the psychological contract, while grievance-handling and equitable treatment reinforce relational dimension (Aggarwal & Bhargava, 2009; Guest & Conway, 2002). These practices help strengthen perceptions of fairness and organisational support, which are closely tied to employee engagement (Shanock et al., 2019).

Work engagement, defined as employees' emotional, psychological, and physical connection with their work, is widely recognised as a driver of positive organisational outcomes (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010; Motyka, 2018; Perrin, 2003; Saks, 2019). Engagement has been established as critical, particularly in high-pressure occupations such as bus driving, where resilience, commitment, and discretionary effort are necessary (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). The unique circumstances of bus drivers necessitate a careful examination of how perceived psychological contract and HR practices might be tailored to address drivers' engagement. Moreover, the pandemic introduced significant challenges to safety and working conditions, making the psychological contract and HR practices even more critical for maintaining work engagement. Alfes et al. (2012) argue that HR practices that align with employees' needs not only yield positive psychological contract outcomes but also improve work engagement and overall well-being. This contention aligns with the argument of Rayton

and Yalabik (2014), which indicates that fulfilling psychological contracts is associated with increased employee engagement.

Engagement is influenced by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Extrinsic factors include tangible rewards, such as pay, incentives, perks, job security, and the work environment. These rewards are especially imperative since they address the basic needs and financial security (Gerhart & Fang, 2015). Self-Determination Theory, however, suggests that extrinsic factors create a baseline of satisfaction but may not be sufficient to sustain long-term engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This perspective suggests that extrinsic factors must be complemented with intrinsic factors to achieve long-term engagement. Intrinsic factors are intangible benefits related to job quality and PJ fit, such as skill variety, autonomy, and task significance (Edwards, 1991; Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Studies indicated that employees who find their work meaningful and aligned with their values report higher motivation and engagement (Chang et al., 2020; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

In addition, Thomas (2009) assert that internally satisfied and motivated workers are more inclined to invest effort and energy towards their work responsibilities even the job is challenging. For bus drivers, deriving pride from contributing to community mobility or enjoying autonomy can enhance engagement despite challenging nature of the job. Insufficient intrinsic incentives, however, may cause these employees to experience difficulties in meeting their basic needs, which may lead to heightened stress levels and reduced job satisfaction (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Maslach et al., 2001). Additionally, supportive leadership plays a crucial role in reinforcing the intrinsic rewards. For example, when employees sense that their efforts are being recognised and appreciated, it fulfils their psychological needs (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Similarly, employees who perceive that their managers recognise their work

contribution tend to have higher levels of motivation and engagement (Eisenberger et al., 2002). In isolated roles such as bus driving, supportive leadership can substitute for limited day-to-day interaction and serve as an intrinsic motivator.

The relationship between psychological contracts and HR practices is central to fostering employee engagement. HR practices that support the fulfilment of the psychological contract serve as a vital tool in fostering employee engagement, as meeting employees' expectations enhances their sense of value and promotes engagement in their roles. For example, HRM strategies that promote fairness, career development, and work-life balance are viewed as fulfilling psychological contracts, which in turn promote employee engagement (Rousseau, 2020). Likewise, training programs, performance appraisals, and reward systems that align with employee expectations strengthen the psychological contract. In contrast, HR practices that fail to meet these expectations risk breaching the psychological contract (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Hence, establishing a comprehensive understanding of HR practices may help inform organisational leadership in the NZ bus sector in managing psychological contracts to enhance employee engagement and employment relations.

2.4 Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature on the working conditions of bus drivers, and highlighted the compounded challenges posed by both the occupational demands and the pandemic. This occupation is consistently identified as stressful due to the inherent stressors of the role. Despite self-selection through PJ fit, whereby individual resources are presumed to align with job demands, these demands often exceed drivers' coping capacities. The pandemic further compounded these stressors through new and additional stressors that contributed to both physical and psychological strain (Demerouti et al., 2001; Tse et al., 2006). The isolated nature

of the job and limited opportunities for social interactions also exacerbate the feelings of alienation and reduce access to critical social resources, such as peer and supervisor support (Jolly et al., 2020). Insufficient compensation and limited organisational support compounded these challenges and exacerbated concerns about well-being (De Jonge et al., 2000; Eisenberger et al., 2002). These conditions collectively make bus driving a particularly demanding occupation, underscoring the need for exploring occupational stressors, which is addressed in research question one.

To explore these challenges, the study employs the JD-R model, which offers a holistic framework for examining the interactions between job demands and job resources. Job resources, such as organisational support, supervisor support, and peer support, are central to this model in buffering job stressors and enhancing engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). It also offers an extensive perspective on the implications of POS, in which adequate resources signal organisational support that fosters positive employment relationships. The integration of the psychological contract enriches this analysis by emphasising the relational aspects of employment, such as trust, perceived fairness, and the fulfilment of mutual expectations. This framework highlights how unmet expectations, such as a lack of recognition, inadequate support, or compensation, can amplify demands and undermine trust and relationships. In contrast, fulfilled expectations function as valuable resources that strengthen engagement and commitment, which are foundational to HR practices (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Robinson, 1996). This rationale underpins research question two, which examines the organisational response to job stressors among bus drivers.

Given the complexity of the work context for bus drivers, a qualitative approach is well-suited to this study. It allows for an in-depth analysis of the drivers' lived experiences, perceptions

and relationships within the workplace (Silverman, 2013). This method captures nuances in how demands and resources are perceived and interpreted, while also providing insights into the relational dynamics of the psychological contract, where issues of trust, fairness and expectations require rich, descriptive data. Moreover, this qualitative inquiry can uncover the subtle interplay between individuals, organisational and external factors influencing well-being and engagement that might be overlooked in quantitative studies. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by outlining the research design and methodology used in the study to address the research questions arising from the knowledge gap identified in the literature review. It first presents the justification for the selected methodological approach and research design, including research philosophy and design. It then details the recruitment process and details the three phases of data collection. The subsequent section explains the data analysis method, followed by the discussion of the ethical considerations, and the challenges encountered during the research. Finally, it concludes with a summary.

3.1 Justification for the methodological approach

3.1.1 Research philosophy

This study is grounded in the research tradition of critical realism (CR), which provides the ontological and epistemological foundation for the investigation of bus drivers' working conditions during the pandemic. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and what can be known about it, therefore, it presents the starting point of philosophical inquiry (Crotty, 2003). Epistemology, by contrast, is the “study of knowledge” and is focused on how knowledge is acquired, constructed, and assessed for its applicability (Moon & Blackman, 2014). In adopting a CR stance, I recognise that, ontologically, objective realities, such as working conditions, leadership, and industrial disputes, exist independently of individual perceptions, yet they exert a causal influence on bus drivers’ experience of stress. Epistemologically, I acknowledge that although these objective structures exist independently, individual bus drivers interpret and respond to them differently, depending on their personality, context, and lived experiences. For example, the presence of stressors may be familiar, but the

meanings attributed to them are diverse and situated. As Fletcher (2017) emphasises, CR accommodates both ontological and epistemological perspectives by recognising that social structures have causal effects, yet these effects are filtered through individual interpretations and actions. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research approach to facilitate an in-depth exploration of how drivers interpret and respond to the objective structures that shape their work experiences. The detailed research design and procedures for this qualitative inquiry are outlined in the subsequent section.

3.1.2 Research design

Initially, this research envisaged a mixed-method design, consistent with the principles of CR, which advocates the use of both qualitative and quantitative data to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena investigated (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The original plan was to conduct interviews with bus drivers, supervisors, managers, and trade union representatives and complement this with a survey targeting bus drivers. However, following pilot testing of both the survey and interviews, it became evident that meaningful quantitative data would be impossible to obtain due to practical challenges related to the participants and environment. Bus drivers encountered difficulties comprehending the questionnaire, largely due to language barriers, and limited familiarity with the self-administered survey instruments. This led to confusion, frustration, and, in some cases, withdrawal from participation. Even a simplified version of the instrument required extensive facilitation, which undermined the goal of independent data collection and raised concerns about the validity of the response.

In addition, demanding working conditions, such as long working hours, tight schedules, and fatigue, made a self-administered survey not practical for many bus drivers. As noted by several scholars, the quality of data acquired through self-report questionnaires is highly contingent

upon respondents' motivation, comprehension, and cognitive capacity to provide reliable answers (Krosnick, 1999; Krosnick et al., 2002; Oppenheimer et al., 2009). In this case, the risk of response bias and poor data quality was considerable. The pandemic further complicated the logistics. Restrictions on movement hindered the distribution of paper-based surveys, which would have been more appropriate, given that many bus drivers had limited digital literacy and access to complete an online survey version. These constraints led to the conclusion that the resources and effort required to administer a survey would outweigh its potential benefits. Therefore, it was considered that time and effort would be better invested in a qualitative approach as long as the social distancing mandated by the pandemic guidelines were met. The qualitative design, through the semi-structured interview technique was therefore adopted as the primary data collection method. This method proved better suited to the participants' circumstances and challenging pandemic context (Johns, 2006). It also allowed for flexibility, depth and sensitivity to the participants' circumstances while remaining consistent with the epistemological orientation of CR, which values the exploration of lived experiences, and critical examination of findings through the medium of existing theory (Edwards, 2005; Fletcher, 2017).

Given the prevalence of stress in the bus driving profession both internationally and within NZ, the qualitative design was framed as an exploratory investigation, aimed at deepening our understanding of occupational stress among bus drivers in the unique context of the pandemic. Specifically, this study examined how POS, PSS, peer support and PJ fit contributed to or mitigated stress. This design was particularly suitable given the distinctive nature of bus driving, which is highly structured yet performed largely autonomously and without direct personal oversight. The exploration of these dynamics provided valuable insights into how different forms of support mechanisms and fit function under the conditions of heightened job demand

and pandemic environment. Finally, the findings from the qualitative design inform the utility of the JD-R model and psychological contract theory in understanding occupational stress from a resources, demands and expectations perspective in what is often a largely pressured and isolated job.

3.2 Recruitment strategy

Two data collection routes were employed simultaneously in the study: organisation recruitment and direct recruitment, referred to as Plan A and Plan B, respectively. Organisation recruitment involved gaining approval from bus companies to access their employees. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, it was anticipated that organisational approval may not be readily forthcoming. Hence, having a backup plan or alternative approach in such circumstances was necessary. Direct recruitment involved the recruitment of participants without the organisational gatekeepers. This strategy also included recruitment facilitated by trade unions, which provided an alternative channel for participants' engagement. The snowball sampling technique proved advantageous in this context, as it offered a cost-effective and time-efficient means of reaching participants compared to alternatives predicated on gatekeeper assent (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The dual recruitment strategy reflects the CR orientation of the study. CR acknowledges the constraining role of structural factors, in this case, organisational gatekeeping, while also recognising the agency of individuals to share their experiences independently of these structures. The combination of this strategy accounted for both the influence of institutional barriers and the importance of capturing the lived experiences of drivers in their own terms. Table 5 presents the summary of the recruitment strategies and participants that are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 5. Summary of recruitment strategies and participants.

Recruitment route	Method	Participant groups recruited	Organisation involvement	Key outcomes
Organisation Recruitment	Gained approval from a major NZ bus company Internal promotion via flyers and internal communication	Bus drivers, managers, supervisors	One participating bus company	Nearly half of all drivers and all supervisors/managers came from this single bus company
Direct Recruitment	Facilitated through trade unions Directly approached drivers at bus stops and layover points	Trade union representatives and unionised bus drivers from various companies	Two trade unions participated. No formal endorsement from bus companies	Union representatives, unionised bus drivers and non-unionised bus drivers interviewed Broadened sample diversity; captured perspectives from drivers outside the participating bus companies.
Sampling Technique	Snowball sampling from both routes	All participant categories	All organisational help distributed the flyers to the participants	Cost-effective and useful in reaching additional drivers. Some participants recruited through colleagues.

3.2.1 Organisation recruitment

In an effort to secure the approval and engage the interest of NZ bus companies, six urban companies were initially identified and approached as potential sites for recruitment. Urban

bus companies were prioritised over rural ones because urban drivers are usually exposed to greater stressors (e.g., heavy and congested traffic, the pressure of strict schedules, etc.) and more competition for drivers than those in rural locations. Hamilton, a mid-sized city in the Waikato region located an hour's drive from Auckland, was included to provide comparative insights between large and smaller urban environments.

The contact details of managers from bus companies in Auckland and Hamilton were obtained online through the company websites and LinkedIn. Initial invitations were sent via email with the follow-up telephone calls. The purpose, scope and desired outcomes of the research were outlined in the “Participant Information Sheet” (*see* Appendix B), and managers were invited to discuss their potential involvement in the study. Of the six bus companies contacted, two expressed interest, three made no reply, and one explicitly declined participation. Subsequent follow-up meetings (face-to-face and virtual) were held with the two interested companies, where further details were provided, and questions were addressed. One of the companies, however, withdrew, leaving a single company that formally agreed to participate. To preserve anonymity, the company is referred to as the “participating company”.

The participating company is one of NZ's leading transportation providers, offering bus and coach charter services to schools, businesses, and the general public nationwide. It has over 1800 staff, making it one of the major employers in the country's transport sector. Nearly fifty per cent of the bus drivers' participants, as well as all supervisors and managers interviewed, were recruited from this company. This company facilitated access for all its employees to participate in the study at all its depots in Auckland and helped display flyers (*see* Appendix A) on their noticeboards, as well as circulated information through its internal communications. Managers also encouraged employees to participate in the study. Interested participants

contacted the researcher directly and were provided with information about the purpose, scope, and expected outcomes of the study. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were also reminded to ask questions during the interview if they required further clarity. Participants recruited through this route fell into three defined categories as presented in Table 6.

It is worth mentioning here that the participating company did not have a formal HR department. Instead, HR responsibilities were embedded within the roles of operational managers and supervisors. This organisational characteristic provided a unique lens through which to examine how POS and PSS were experienced in practice in the absence of dedicated HR structures. Such a context provided valuable insight into how HR-related responsibilities are interpreted and implemented at the frontline level, and how these practices influenced drivers' perceptions of support and employment relations. In the following section (3.2.2), further details are provided regarding the number of participants in each category, demographic details, interview procedures and the measures taken to ensure data credibility.

Table 6. Participants category.

Participants category	Description
Bus Drivers	Drivers delivering urban bus services across Auckland and Hamilton.
Managers and Supervisors	This includes supervisors, depot managers, operations managers, and health & safety managers, responsible for operational oversight, staff well-being, and informal HR functions.
Trade Union and New Zealand Bus and Coach Association (NZBCA) Representatives	They provide sector-wide and policy-level perspectives.

3.2.2 Direct recruitment of participants

Under the direct recruitment route, two methods were deployed: i) recruitment facilitated through the aid of the trade unions and ii) recruitment at bus stops and layover points, particularly for drivers. Details of participants recruited via each method are discussed in Section 3.2.3. Two trade union organisations were identified and contacted through their secretaries and representatives via email and phone, and the purpose, scope and desired outcome of the research were explained to them. Both agreed to participate and promote the research to their members, as well as permit their own representatives to be interviewed. The unions also provided contact details of some union members and representatives, and they were contacted directly by the researcher. These participants were provided with the same study information, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. The unions also helped circulate the flyers to their members and representatives.

The second method involved recruiting drivers directly at bus stations and the layover (rest) points. This was made without any formal assistance or endorsement from the bus companies or the unions. In this approach, the researcher personally approached drivers to give them flyers, introduced the research, and explained its objectives. The researcher also addressed any specific questions on site and invited the drivers to participate in interviews. This approach extended the benefit of gaining more diverse insights from drivers from a broad range of bus companies, including those who were not union members or part of the participating company. This helped capture varied experiences and perspectives across different employment conditions, which offered more comprehensive insights into the workforce.

Participants recruited through both methods were also asked to share the details of the study with their colleagues. To acknowledge their contribution, participants were offered a \$30 koha

(gift) in the form of a gift card as a token of appreciation. Grady (2001) notes that monetary or material incentives, when used appropriately, can encourage participation without exerting coercion. The funds used for koha were not only used to express gratitude for participants' time and insights but also offered practical assistance, particularly given the low-paid nature of the occupation. The details of the interview are discussed in the interview process section of this chapter.

3.2.3 Participants

The final sample comprised 62 participants (N=62), including managers, supervisors, drivers, trade union officials and representatives, and an employee from the NZ Bus and Coach Association (NZBCA). Among these participants were thirty-three bus drivers (7 females, 26 males), nine managers (4 females, 5 males), ten supervisors (1 female, 9 males), nine trade union officials and representatives (4 females, 5 males) and one representative from NZBCA (1 male). Codes were assigned to each category of participants as follows: drivers (D), supervisors (S), managers (M) and trade unions (U). These codes are used throughout Chapter 4 to label verbatim extracts from the interviews.

Bus driver participants were recruited from six bus companies in Auckland and Hamilton. At the time of data collection, Auckland has eight bus companies, and Hamilton has five. Some of these companies operate across both urban and rural routes, and others provide regional services. To preserve anonymity of both companies and participants, given the small number of bus companies in each city, which could make them easily identifiable, pseudonyms were used to describe these bus companies: Bus Company 1, Bus Company 2, Bus Company 3, Bus Company 4, Bus Company 5, and the participating company. Five of these companies were Auckland-based, and one was Hamilton-based. These companies operate extensive networks,

primarily in metropolitan areas like Auckland and Wellington, with additional services extending to smaller towns and rural areas, as well as school transport, charter operations and tours.

Of the thirty-three drivers, thirteen were from the participating company (Auckland-based). Six of these drivers were recruited through referrals from managers and supervisors and were interviewed within the depot facilities, while seven of them were recruited through referrals from colleagues and were interviewed at bus stops, layover points, or cafeterias. Four drivers (out of 33) were from the Hamilton-based company, and sixteen were from other Auckland-based companies. These drivers were recruited through the direct recruitment method, including referrals from trade unions and the researcher approaching them at bus stops and layover points. Some drivers also initiated contact via phone using details provided on the recruitment flyers. Others were referred by colleagues or approached directly by the researcher at bus stops, and layover points. The demographic details of the drivers are presented in Table 7.

To ensure the adequate depth and breadth of the dataset, data saturation was monitored throughout the collection process. In this study, saturation is defined as the point at which no new themes and insights emerged during interviews (Guest et al., 2005; Saunders et al., 2018). This was monitored through ongoing analysis during data collection, which confirmed that saturation was reached after 62 interviews, as subsequent interviews yielded repetitive accounts without generating new insights. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, which emphasise data depth and richness over numerical sample size (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Table 7. Demographic details of drivers.

Gender	Ethnicity	Number of participants
Male	Māori	4
Female	Māori	1
Male	NZ European	2
Female	NZ European	1
Male	Indians	7
Female	Indians	1
Male	Asians	6
Female	Asians	3
Male	Pacific Islanders	6
Female	Pacific Islanders	1
Male	Other (e.g., middle Eastern, Pakistanis)	2

Age range	Number of drivers	Job tenure (years)
30-40	6	1-5
41-50	12	6-9
51-65	13	10-20

All supervisors (N=10) and managers (N=9) were recruited from the participating company. All supervisors had been promoted internally to the supervisory position from the driver rank, with many possessing more than five years of industry experience. Their roles include assigning buses, routes, and schedules to drivers, monitoring punctuality, adherence to schedules and safety practices, including assessing drivers' performance, behaviour and customer service. They were also responsible for offering feedback and ensuring operational discipline. Among the nine managers, four were line managers, four were operations managers, and one was a health and safety manager. The operations managers oversaw depot management, resource allocation, and the overall operational efficiency of the services. Line managers were more involved in the direct management of employees, making sure that daily activities ran smoothly. Health and safety manager was responsible for ensuring compliance with workplace health and safety regulations, including ensuring that employees were protected. Six of the nine managers had progressed through the ranks from driver and

supervisory roles, bringing over a decade of sectoral experience in their current positions. Their career trajectories reflect the company’s reliance on internal promotions, which shaped their perspectives on both operational management and workforce challenges. Demographic details of the supervisors and managers are presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8. Demographic of the supervisors and managers.

Role	Gender	Number of participants	Ethnicity	Job tenure (years)
Supervisor	Male	9	Indians/Asians/Pacific Islanders	>3
	Female	1		>3
Line Managers	Male	2	Māori/Europeans	>4
	Female	2	Māori/Europeans	>5
Operation Managers	Male	2	Europeans	>7
	Female	2	Europeans	>7
Health & Safety Manager	Male	1	Māori	>3

Table 9. Education and experience.

Current role	Code	Prior role	Education and experience
Supervisor	S01	Driver and different capacity	Degree /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S02	Driver and different capacity	Degree /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S03	Driver	Diploma/Supervisory training
Supervisor	S04	Driver/supervisor	Diploma /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S05	Driver	Degree/Supervisory training
Supervisor	S06	Driver and different capacity	Degree /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S07	Driver	Diploma /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S08	Driver/supervisor	Diploma /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S09	Driver and different capacity	Degree /Supervisory training
Supervisor	S10	Driver and different capacity	Degree /Supervisory training

Current role		Prior roles /experience	Education and experience
Line manager	M01	Driver/Supervisor/Manager	Degree
Line manager	M02	Supervisor	Diploma
Line manager	M03	Supervisor/Manager	Degree
Line manager	M04	Supervisor/Manager	Degree
Operation manager	M05	Driver/Supervisor/Manager	Degree
Operation manager	M06	Supervisor/Manager	Degree
Operation manager	M07	Driver/Supervisor/Manager	Degree
Operation manager	M08	Manager	Degree
Health and safety manager	M09	Supervisor/Manager	Degree/OHS qualification

The trade unions (N=9) were recruited from two unions, which were also assigned pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of their identities: Union 1 and Union 2. Union 1 is one of the largest private sector unions in NZ that represents a diverse range of workers, such as logistics, retail, finance and transport. Union 2 has a long-standing history of representing public transport workers in NZ, with a primary focus on protecting their rights to better working conditions. Within the bus sector, both unions have been active in advocating for fair pay and improved working conditions, particularly in response to systematic issues associated with the introduction of the PTOM. Their efforts include campaigning against low pay and poor

working conditions, highlighting the need for safer work environments and drawing attention to the broader challenges faced by bus drivers.

From the nine union participants, six were from Union 1 and three were from Union 2. Four participants were union officials working within union offices, while five were workplace union representatives who were also employed as bus drivers across different bus companies. This combination of perspectives provided insight into advocacy undertaken by unions at the strategic level and the everyday realities of worker representation at the depot and driver level. The demographic details of these participants are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Demographics of the union participants.

Role	Gender	Union	Job tenure (years)
Union official	Female	Union 1	>5
Union official	Female	Union 1	>3
Union official	Male	Union 1	>5
Union official	Male	Union 2	>5
Union representatives	Female	Union 1	>5
Union representatives	Female	Union 1	>5
Union representatives	Male	Union 1	>5
Union representatives	Male	Union 2	>5
Union representatives	Male	Union 2	>5

A manager from the NZBCA was recruited and interviewed to provide insights into the bus sector and its significance within the NZ transport industry. NZBCA is an important institution in New Zealand’s transport sector that represents bus and coach companies nationwide. It advocates for the interests of the sector by promoting safety, efficiency and sustainability, and offers a cohesive voice on legislative matters, regulatory compliance and best operational practices. Additionally, the NZBCA supports its members through professional development initiatives, networking opportunities, and collaboration with government institutions and stakeholders to improve public transport services across the nation.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Consistent with the research focus and design outlined above, semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate technique for data collection. This interview method is both versatile and flexible, which encourages participants to comfortably share their views, stories, and experiences through interactive conversation (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Galletta & Cross, 2013). This approach helps encourage openness, build trust between the researcher and participants, and enable unanticipated themes to emerge, which enhance the credibility and richness of the data collected (Batlle & Carr, 2021; Dempsey et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews are also particularly suitable for vulnerable or marginalised groups such as migrant bus drivers, many of whom viewed this method as an opportunity to voice concerns about challenging working conditions and limited organisational support (Hiller & Diluzio, 2004). Their participation was also driven by the hope that their voices would be anonymously conveyed to the management in a way that could contribute to meaningful improvements in their working conditions.

Research using semi-structured interviews is guided by a thematic framework that allows for adaptation to the respondent's input regarding both topics and sequence (Saunders et al., 2018). While having some structure for an interview is important to ensure guidance and consistency (King & Horrocks, 2011), the interview schedule, informed by literature, was developed to ensure that participants had sufficient understanding of topic areas, which enabled the generation of relevant information through appropriate questions, and maintained appropriate interview duration (Sampson, 2004). Topics can often be more effective than specific, rigidly structured questions because they allow for more flexibility and provide researchers with a platform for active listening and engagement (Mason, 2002).

Prior to the formal data collection, pilot interviews were conducted with two supervisors, two managers and two drivers to test the suitability of the interview schedule. As Bates (2004) stated, a small sample size for pilot interviews is acceptable for fine-tuning, gathering feedback and revealing any participants' resistance. No significant changes were made to the interview schedule following the pilot interviews, apart from some minor rewording. All interviews were conducted in accordance with Covid-19 protocols and covered working conditions in general, as well as specific experiences during the pandemic, including perceived efforts of the organisation in addressing them and with what consequences (see interview schedule in Appendix D).

3.3.2 Data collection phase

The first phase involved semi-structured interviews with managers from the participating company and union representatives to gain an overall view of the organisation of work and the impact on employees' well-being and employee relations. Numerous studies have demonstrated that managerial strategies and practices impact employee well-being and employment relations outcomes (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Geare et al., 2006; Judge & Watanabe, 1993). Complementing their perspectives, interviews with trade unions were included on the basis that they are well-placed to be aware of drivers' concerns, occupational health and well-being challenges, as well as to hold a counterview to management priorities in many cases. This phase provided insights into the employment relations matters, including disputes between bus companies and unions. Given the authority and professional status of these participants, this phase was assessed as low risk and therefore covered under a low-risk ethics application (Application#: 4000023637).

The second phase was approved under a full ethics application (Application#: 4000023619) and consisted of semi-structured interviews with supervisors and drivers from the participating company, as well as drivers from other bus companies. The objective of interviewing supervisors was to understand their relationships with the drivers and their role in providing support, acknowledging that their role in the bus setting is largely remote and constrained. Previous studies (e.g., Elias & Mittal, 2011; Rathi & Lee, 2017) have attested to the importance of the supervisor role in employee engagement, motivation, and retention, even in settings where workers operate largely independently and are physically remote, as in the postal services (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013). Since the supervisors were the first point of contact for drivers, these interviews also provided an avenue to better understand the drivers' concerns. The interview with the drivers provided insights into how the pandemic, managerial practices (i.e., support from managers and supervisors), and interactions with the working environment affected their well-being. These perspectives provided a complete understanding of the role of supervisory support in mitigating drivers' stress issues.

The third phase of semi-structured interviews consisted of touch-base interviews, which were follow-up interviews conducted with four bus drivers, two supervisors, and a trade union representative. The purpose of this phase was to clarify and verify emerging themes from the initial data, gather feedback on preliminary interpretations and explore any possible new insights that might arise. For example, a bus driver elaborated on the perceived lack of organisational advocacy for drivers to be prioritised for the Covid-19 vaccination. Although the company's stance shifted, the initial delay had a negative impact on drivers' perceptions of organisational support. This highlighted how organisational responses during the pandemic shaped employees' perceptions of organisational commitment to their well-being. These follow-up interviews, though brief, enriched the findings by confirming earlier interpretations

and revealing new insights. Member-checking, which implies touch-base interviews, not only establishes the credibility of the qualitative research but also allows the participants to evaluate and enhance the researcher's interpretation of the research data (Birt et al., 2016; Morse et al., 2002). These interviews were not audio-recorded; instead, contemporaneous notes were taken. This approach proved particularly useful in capturing nuanced perspectives.

3.3.3 The interview process

The interview process was carefully structured to guarantee thorough data collection while prioritising health and safety during the pandemic. Notwithstanding the challenges presented by the pandemic, fifty-eight participants were interviewed face-to-face, which cultivated rapport and enabled nuanced, in-depth discussions. The majority of the interviews took place during periods when NZ was under varying levels of lockdown restrictions. The NZ government first implemented a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 under Alert Level 4, which gradually eased to Level 1 in June 2020, which allowed a return to normal activities but with strict border controls in place. However, several subsequent outbreaks in the community prompted renewed lockdowns across the country, with Auckland returning to Level 3 in August 2020 and February 2021. The discovery of the Delta variant led to a major nationwide lockdown under Level 4 in August 2021. To ensure participants' safety, interviews for the study were conducted during phases of eased restrictions, in compliance with public health guidelines.

The interviews with drivers were organised following initial contact with the researcher, either through flyers distributed directly to them or via company managers, noticeboard or the union. The interview time and venue were adjusted to accommodate the participants' convenience, and all sessions were audio recorded. The interview process was adapted to accommodate the

preferences and technological familiarity of the different participant groups, which included both face-to-face and Zoom interviews, with the majority of the interviews being conducted face-to-face. The interviews with participants across groups lasted between 20 and 60 minutes (See Table 11 for a summary). The insights from the pilot exercise indicated that this duration was sufficient to capture employee perceptions and experiences, provided the questions were focused and a few. Longer timeframes would incur diminishing returns, especially for the drivers, who were often interviewed on their breaks or had finished a work shift.

Additionally, face-to-face interviews proved beneficial as they encouraged interaction and relational engagement. As Opdenakker (2006) indicates, this interview format not only allows the researcher to observe nonverbal cues and build rapport, which creates a conducive environment for participants to openly share their experiences, but also facilitates an in-depth understanding of the context and participants' accounts. This approach aligns with the premise of qualitative inquiry, which emphasises the importance of collecting rich, in-depth data through trust and mutual understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Table 11. Interview summary.

Participant group	Number of participants	Interview length (range)	Mean interview time	Interview format	Location
Bus Drivers	33	20–60 minutes	40 minutes	Face-to-Face	Depot meeting rooms/Bus stops/Cafeterias
Supervisors	10	20–45 minutes	33 minutes	Face-to-Face	Depot meeting rooms
Managers	10	40–60 minutes	45 minutes	Face-to-Face/zoom	Depot meeting rooms/Zoom
Trade Unions	9	30–60 minutes	45 minutes	Face-to-Face/Zoom	Union headquarters/Zoom

Scripted interview questions were used in this study and with participants' permission, interviews were recorded for subsequent thematic analysis. The interview schedule was designed to explore key aspects of well-being and support, focusing on: (i) drivers' role and experiences, (ii) the impact of Covid, (iii) supervisor role and support and (iv) industrial disputes. Prior to the scheduled interviews, the "Participant Information Sheet" and "Consent Form" (*see* Appendix C) were distributed to participants with access to emails. The participating company also assisted in sharing this information with the employees through its internal communication. Before each interview commenced, participants were asked to sign the informed consent form and give their permission to audio-record the interview. In some cases, participants signed and returned the consent form electronically in advance; in others, they provided the signed form during the interview.

For participants from the non-participating companies, the researcher provided the "Participant Information Sheet" during the meeting and offered an explanation to clarify the research purpose. The consent form was also presented and signed before the interview proceeded. At this stage, the researcher reiterated the participants' rights, including the right to pause or terminate the recording/interview at any time, the assurance of anonymity, and the right to withdraw their data without consequences. Interview commenced once the participants confirmed their understanding and consent. At the end of each session, participants were invited to ask questions or provide additional comments. They were also informed that they could request a copy of the study findings through the contact details listed on the "Participants Information Sheet" if they wished to. Additionally, participants were asked to share information about the study with other potential participants who might be interested in participating. Finally, the researcher thanked the participants for their insights and contributions to the study.

3.4 Data analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were organised and analysed thematically in two phases according to the research questions. The first phase focused on identifying potential risk factors – job stressors. This involved examining recurring patterns in participants' accounts of stress-inducing conditions in order to align the findings with the JD-R model. The second phase focused on job and personal resources that can aid in mitigating stress and improving the well-being of employees, while also contributing to positive organisational outcomes such as improved engagement and commitment. Particular attention was given to organisational support, supervisory support, peer support, and individual resources, as well as their potential to buffer stress and foster resilience. Through the analysis, key themes were identified that highlighted the interplay between job demands (e.g., long working hours, split shifts, passengers' hostility) and available resources (e.g., supervisory and peer support) and employee outcomes (e.g., stress, relationship strains, turnover). This informed the development of frameworks that integrate both the JD-R model and psychological contract theory, which provides the foundation for the discussion of targeted interventions presented in Chapter Five.

3.4.1 Data analysis approach

All interviews were transcribed using Otto, an auto-transcription software. However, the accuracy of some transcripts was compromised due to background noise in the environment, such as in the cafeteria, where some interviews were conducted, as well as the participants' varying levels of English fluency. To address this, the researcher carefully reviewed and corrected the transcripts by repeatedly listening to the interview recordings. This process also facilitated immersion in the interview results. Importantly, the transcripts were not rephrased or paraphrased. Instead, clarifying notes were taken to complement and confirm those unclear

sections in transcripts. The member-checking process was also employed to validate and correct ambiguous transcripts (Birt et al., 2016).

Abductive data analysis approach was considered suitable and valuable for this study. This analysis approach is also effective for exploring phenomena where existing theoretical frameworks do not fully capture observed realities. It bridges the gap between knowledge and new insights by generating plausible explanations for observed patterns (Sandoval-Hernández & Rutkowski, 2024; Van Hulst & Visser, 2024). Unlike the deductive approach, which tests predefined hypotheses using the quantitative approach to data analysis, or inductive reasoning, which generates generalisation directly from the qualitative data, abductive reasoning seeks to identify surprising or unexpected findings and explores the 'best-fit' explanation of these emerging patterns (Thompson, 2022; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

In the context of bus drivers, the abductive approach enabled analysis to extend beyond mere descriptive analysis of drivers' challenges to develop explanatory frameworks that integrate both structural and individual perspectives. For instance, surprising discrepancies were observed in the workplace support systems. The privatisation of the bus sector has reduced investment in employees' well-being, which has been further compounded by strained organisational resources resulting from the pandemic. These observations required explanations that extend beyond the scope of existing frameworks.

Furthermore, the abductive analysis facilitates the discovery of how privatised management structures may influence supervisors' capacity to provide sufficient support, as well as how pandemic-related challenges may exacerbate existing structural inequities. This provides a robust basis for advancing understanding of how organisational dynamics, supervisory

practices, and employee perceptions interconnect. Moreover, the abductive approach was complemented by inductive insights, which are grounded in the analysis of patterns and themes derived from the data and aligning those themes with existing knowledge and expanding theoretical understanding through a deductive approach to account for new insights introduced by the phenomena (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This integrated approach offered a comprehensive understanding of how systemic barriers, organisational policies, and supervisory behaviours interact to shape drivers' lived experiences, therefore, enabling the study to make a meaningful contribution to both academic theory and practical workplace solutions.

3.4.2 Coding process

A *code* refers to a short phrase that symbolically represents the summative and salient attributes of a part of data (Saldana, 2014). Coding in qualitative research provides a systematic means of organising and interpreting data, allowing the researcher to identify and refine themes that bridge empirical observations with theoretical constructs. In an abductive approach, coding is an iterative process that categorises and analyses data to generate explanations that account for surprising or emergent themes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This ensures that resulting themes remain both grounded in participants' lived experiences and informed by theoretical perspectives. Accordingly, a thematic coding technique was used in analysing the interview data.

The thematic analysis used in this study was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: data familiarisation, data coding, theme development, and theme review and refinement. Data familiarisation occurred during the transcribing of interviews, when the researcher read and re-read the transcripts while annotating initial ideas and highlighting

meaningful quotes (Bowen, 2008). Coding then entailed assigning concise labels to segments of text that captured their meaning. These codes were subsequently clustered into broader categories and refined into themes that aligned with the research objectives. Analytical coding ensured that the final themes were coherent, accurate, and representative of the dataset.

Methods of coding qualitative data fall into two categories: automated and manual coding. The former utilises the aid of data analysis software, such as NVivo, a popular and user-friendly tool that facilitates coding, linking, and retrieving transcribed data (Allsop et al., 2022). While this software is useful, critiques highlight its steep learning curve (Paulus et al., 2015), potential over-reliance (Gibbs, 2018), and risks of distancing researchers from the richness of data interpretation. Given these concerns, this study selected manual coding for three reasons: i) The sample size and the length of the interviews are of sufficient size to be managed directly and without the need for software. ii) An open iterative approach was necessary to reconcile the perspectives of diverse occupational groups. iii) The informality of language in the transcripts is best dealt with manually, including listening back to the original recordings.

The transcripts were coded and collated manually to identify initial codes and cluster them into themes. Emerging codes were colour-highlighted in transcripts to facilitate visual organisation and recognition of patterns. Groups of similar and repeated codes were collated into relevant themes within the JD-R model. For example, codes, such as "*long working hours*", "*traffic congestion*", and "*split shifts*" were grouped under the overarching theme of job demands. In contrast, codes such as "*we watch out for each other*", "*our relationship is better*", "*we sort of freer to speak about our problems*" and "*there was a great camaraderie amongst the colleagues*" were categorised under peer support and classified within the broader theme of job resources. Similarly, codes like "*I have the desire for driving*" and "*I've been able to manage*

the things you listed as challenges, broken shifts, long hours" reflected PJ fit and were grouped under personal resources.

Alongside the JD-R model, the psychological contract provided an interpretative lens for relational and implicit expectations in employment relationships. Within this framework, codes such as *"unmet expectation of organisational care and support"* and *"perceived inequity in compensation and value recognition"* were identified as indicators of perceived breach of the psychological contract. Analysing these relational codes alongside job demands and resources offered a richer account of how organisational support and supervisory actions, in terms of support, fairness, and value recognition, were interpreted by bus drivers. The final set of themes was systematically organised into the coding table (*see* Table 12: Coding Process), which documented the coding process progress from initial codes to refined thematic categories. This manual coding allowed me to connect closely with the data and ensured that the themes were grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

Table 12. Coding process.

Code	Category	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long working hours • Passenger hostility • Traffic congestion 	Job demand	Challenges of the bus driving profession (job stressors)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited interactions with supervisors • Unrealistic expectations • Lack of advocacy 	Job demand	Lack of perceived supervisory support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate compensation • Poor working conditions (e.g., unrealistic workload, inadequate rest breaks, insufficient staffing) 	Job demand	Lack of perceive organisational support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared challenges • Camaraderie (supportive) • Open communications 	Job resources	Peer (co-worker) support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love for driving • Impact on community • Resilience and perseverance 	Personal resources	Person-job fit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and development • Health and well-being initiatives • Supportive leadership 	Job resources	Organisational support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmet expectations of organisational care and support • Breakdown in mutual respect and communication channels • Erosion of trust in supervisory leadership • Perceived inequity in compensation and value recognition 	Relational	Perceived psychological contract breach

Following the coding and categorisation of the drivers' experiences, the next step involved situating the findings within the existing literature relevant to the research objectives, questions, and topic. The literature review provided valuable contextual insights that enriched the

interpretation of the job stressors and resources reported by bus drivers. For instance, the studies on work-related stress and supervisor support (e.g., Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021; Hon et al., 2013) provided a useful contextual lens through which to understand themes such as the "*challenges of bus driving profession*" and "*supervisor support constraint*". The correlation between job demands and job resources was further elucidated through the comparison of the coded data with established theories and findings. The JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a central framework, explaining how the balance between work-related stressors and available resources critically determines employees' well-being and organisational outcomes. This framework not only facilitated the interpretation of drivers' experience of stress, but also underscored potential interventions, such as strengthening supervisory support or improving work scheduling practices, that could mitigate stress and enhance overall well-being. Hence, integrating the literature with empirical findings facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and issues faced by the bus drivers.

3.5 Ethical considerations

This research received full ethical approval from the Massey Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) prior to the commencement of data collection, as required by school policy (*see* Appendix E for the approval letter). In the first phase of the data collection, low-risk ethical approval was granted for the participation of trade union officials and managers. Their involvement in the research was classified as low risk because they represented professional groups with a higher degree of autonomy and informed consent. Moreover, the interviews in this phase did not involve sensitive personal data or subject matter likely to cause distress.

The second data collection phase for bus drivers and supervisors, however, required full ethics approval due to the more sensitive nature of their participation. Drivers were directly involved

in the daily operations of the bus services, and their involvement was more likely to be influenced by stressors, such as passengers' hostility, long working hours, or demanding job conditions. Additionally, many drivers were migrant workers, which added another layer of vulnerability through additional barriers such as job insecurity, language barriers, and risk of social isolation and discrimination. These factors created the potential for fear of employer reprisal, especially if sensitive information about the management practices was disclosed. For supervisors, although positioned in the middle management, ethical considerations were equally important. They often navigate competing pressures between demands from the management and the welfare of their teams. This dual responsibility can create stress and anxiety about their participation in the research. Their vulnerability was further compounded during the pandemic, as they were exposed to increased health risks, lack of support, or, in some cases, even job uncertainty.

Given these vulnerabilities, the potential risk of psychological distress from sharing personal experiences was carefully considered. To address these concerns, the study adhered to the strict guidelines around informed consent. This ensured that all participants were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, as outlined in the "Participant Information Sheet" and "Consent Form", thereby upholding the integrity and credibility of the study. The ethical considerations of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity were also emphasised, and personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts and data. Transparency was maintained through clear communication about the purpose of the study and how the data would be used and destroyed. Finally, participants were reassured that the MUHEC had reviewed and approved this research and confirmed that participation would not expose them to any significant harm.

3.6 Reflection on challenges during the research journey

This is a personal section where I reflect on the challenges encountered along my research journey. I have organised this reflection into two parts. The first part presents the family-related challenges I faced, which highlighted the impact of balancing personal responsibilities and the demands of being away from loved ones, as well as some unexpected turn of events. The second part presents research-specific challenges, especially those related to the difficulties in data collection and navigating unforeseen obstacles in the research process.

3.6.1 Family-related challenges

In 2016, my family and I relocated from Papua New Guinea (PNG) to Taiwan after I was awarded a scholarship to do my Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. A year later, my wife was fortunate to secure an English teaching job, which provided much-needed stability for our family. Since then, Taiwan has become our home and two of our children were born there. I completed my Master's in 2018, and in 2019, I applied for the Doctoral program at Massey University, along with its associated scholarship. I was delighted to be accepted into the program and later awarded the scholarship in the same year.

In February 2020, I moved to NZ to commence my doctoral studies. Before moving to NZ, I relocated my mother from home (PNG) to Taiwan to help babysit my first daughter (then aged 4) for a few months while my wife continued working. The plan was for me to settle into my studies and work on the necessary visa and living arrangements for my family to join me in June of the same year, once my wife's work contract ended. However, shortly after I arrived in NZ, the situation took an unexpected turn when Covid-19 was declared a global health crisis, and unfortunately, the NZ border, including Taiwan, closed in March. This abrupt closure disrupted our plans. Since we had planned to relocate to NZ when my wife's work contract

ended, it had not been renewed, and she was soon out of work. As a foreigner in Taiwan, she was also ineligible for financial assistance, including the Covid-related assistance. As days transitioned into months and subsequently into years, the border restrictions kept us apart for over two years. During that first year of separation, my wife struggled to secure a steady job, and our savings, that was initially set aside for moving to NZ, quickly ran out. This separation caused us significant financial hardship as well as emotional distress.

In February 2020, before I departed for NZ, my wife and I were preparing to welcome our second child. In August of the same year, she gave birth to our baby on her own. I could only see my newborn via FaceTime. Following the birth, my wife faced the immense challenge of raising our two children and caring for my mother, whose physical and mental health had significantly declined, all while living in a small apartment in a foreign country without a job. The weight of these responsibilities fell heavily on my wife and me. I had no choice but to take on part-time work during my studies to support them to cover their basics, like rent and bills. A little over a year later, my wife found a new job, which brought much-needed stability to our situation. It allowed me to quit my job and fully dedicate my focus to my studies.

Though borders still remained closed, progress towards reopening them began in 2022. Taiwan had reopened its borders to the spouses of expatriates working there. Seizing the opportunity, I wasted no time and immediately applied for a Taiwan visa, which was granted. After discussing my situation with my supervisors and the Graduate Research School, I arranged a three-month study break to reconnect with my family. After two years of separation, this much-needed break allowed me to reunite with my wife, children and mother.

My mother, a widow and my only immediate family member apart from my wife and children, has been living with us in Taiwan on a visitor visa. This visa requires renewal every six months, which requires her to exit Taiwan and re-enter. Since my wife is the only person working and providing for us, her commitment does not allow her to accompany my mother on these trips to renew her visa, which means I have taken these responsibilities every year since she joined us. However, her most recent visa application (September 2024) was unexpectedly denied by the Taiwan Embassy in PNG, which prevented her from returning to Taiwan. I had written to the Taiwan Embassy and the Consular Affairs in Taiwan explaining our situation, but the outcome was not what we expected. As a result of this situation, our family has been profoundly impacted due to a lack of childcare support for our third child, who was born in September 2023. I had to balance my studies and care responsibilities.

The ordeal of my mother being unable to return to Taiwan has been as difficult for her as it has been for me. As a widow, I am her only surviving child, and she has relied on me for support and companionship. Without the option to return to us, she has had to live with extended family members in PNG, where she feels uncomfortable and unsettled. Previously, my cousin looked after her during her stay in PNG, but he was tragically murdered in an act of violence. These situations have placed immense logistical and emotional burdens on us. Despite all these, I am glad I managed to submit my thesis.

3.6.2 Research-related challenges

After receiving approval for the ethics applications, NZ entered into a nationwide lockdown due to the surge of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus. Although it lasted only a few months, it had a significant impact on my data collection fieldwork. The two biggest challenges that emerged during this period were: 1) gaining approval from the bus companies proved to

be exceptionally difficult due to the sensitive nature of my research, which resulted in only one out of the six bus companies being invited to participate in the research accepting the invitation, while five of them declined, citing concerns over the subject matter. 2) The imposed pandemic restrictions created additional barriers, which limited access to potential participants and complicated the logistics of conducting interviews and collecting data. This predicament has forced me to adapt my approach and manage delays in my research timeline.

Despite the lockdown challenges and the risk of contracting the virus, I proceeded with data collection by contacting the participating bus company. Since bus service was an essential service during the lockdown, I was fortunate to be given access to their bus depots to conduct interviews with their employees. This access provided a crucial opportunity to gather insights from the participants under restrictive circumstances. However, participation was entirely voluntary, and several factors influenced employee's decision to participate. The fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus prevented some employees from participating in the research, and others refused to participate for personal reasons, such as fear of being reprimanded or losing their job, despite assurances and approval from the employer that such outcomes would not occur.

In addition, the already stressful nature of the bus driver profession, such as long working hours and fatigue, meant that many drivers simply had no time to participate. However, those who took the time to participate elaborated that being a driver was stressful, and they had many unresolved issues that affected their health and well-being. They believed that taking part in this research provided them the opportunity to voice their unspoken concerns anonymously, bring attention to the difficulties confronting them and the industry, and perhaps compel the organisation and other direct stakeholders to take meaningful actions on these problems.

Hence, a good number of participants were engaged in the research, with interviews conducted under various Alert Level restrictions.

Finally, I must acknowledge the tremendous risk I took when conducting my fieldwork during the peak of the pandemic. The constant anxiety of potentially contracting the virus was overwhelming throughout the process but thankfully, I did not contract the virus during my fieldwork.

3.7 Summary

This chapter presents a detailed account of the research design and methodological techniques employed in the study. The methodology demonstrates a rigorous and contextually sensitive approach to examining the employees' experiences and complexities of the NZ bus sector in light of the industrial disputes and the pandemic. Grounded in the CR paradigm, the qualitative approach enabled an exploration of the structural and systematic factors that shaped the experiences of bus drivers and supervisors. The use of semi-interviews provided rich accounts of drivers' feelings of being neglected, particularly in relation to communication and support during incidents of abuse and attack, which was further exacerbated by the solitary nature of the job. The data from these accounts revealed the structural consequences of privatisation, including cost-cutting measures, shortages of drivers, and longer shifts, which collectively contributed to heightened stress and poor well-being, as well as adverse organisational outcomes, such as recruitment and retention issues in the sector. The two recruiting strategies employed facilitated a broad and diverse dataset that captured multiple perspectives across the sector.

The coding process, rooted in the abductive approach, offered a structured yet flexible means of synthesising the qualitative data. Manual coding and analysis of the transcripts facilitated close engagement with the data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the participants' narratives and experiences, while linking these to broader organisational and structural dynamics. For example, the recurring theme of inadequate support highlighted how drivers perceived a lack of commitment to their well-being, while supervisors shared the challenge of juggling operational demands with relational responsibilities toward drivers. The abductive approach bridged data-driven insights with existing theoretical frameworks, enabling the generation of new insights, such as the protective role of peer support in mitigating the impact of workplace stress and alienation. This reflects the value of camaraderie as a buffer against systemic shortcomings.

Finally, ethical considerations were pivotal in safeguarding the well-being of the participants and encouraged them to share their personal experiences openly and honestly. This was particularly critical given the pressures from the pandemic and privatisation, where job precarity could otherwise deter honest participation. Hence, adhering to the strict ethical approval procedures ensured the research remained transparent and confidential, which fostered trust among the participants and helped strengthen the credibility and impact of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: WORKING CONDITIONS, PANDEMIC CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study from the semi-structured interviews with drivers, supervisors, managers, and trade union representatives. The thematic analysis generated a set of categories which are organised into tables and supported by descriptive narratives and illustrative quotations. Many of the reported themes are interrelated, and therefore, there is some (albeit limited) repetition of content across chapter subsections. However, the systematic presentation is designed to enable access to any specific topic of interest. The findings highlight how adverse working conditions, such as long working hours, traffic congestion, passenger hostility and inadequate compensation contribute to increased occupational stress among drivers. This was further exacerbated by the lack of workplace support, which in turn influences wider organisational outcomes, such as turnover, recruitment, and retention issues.

The chapter begins with an overview of the participants' backgrounds to provide context for their lived experiences. The subsequent sections present the themes that emerged from the analysis, detailing drivers' accounts of their working conditions, the stress intensified during the pandemic and the forms of organisational and supervisor support available, including personal resources. Each theme, accompanied by verbatim extracts from participants, is labelled as follows: driver (D), supervisor (S), manager (M), and union (U), followed by the participant number. For example, participant 4, a driver, would be labelled as D04 and supervisor 3 as S03.

4.2 Overview of the participants background and experience

The interpretation of the study results requires an understanding of participants' demographic and occupational contexts, as these shaped their perspectives and lived experiences. The background information, including demographic details and educational and work history, was obtained prior to the interviews. The majority of the participants were full-time employees, with four part-time drivers. All supervisors and several managers had previously worked as drivers before being promoted, which means they have a direct understanding of the working conditions of drivers and the challenges and issues inherent in the driving role. Approximately eighty per cent of drivers possessed qualifications in other fields (e.g., law, teaching, management) and had held professional roles prior to bus driving. Most described transitioning into driving as a result of limited job opportunities and age-related restrictions that hinder access to alternative careers in other sectors. The workforce was predominantly composed of migrant workers, who represented approximately eighty per cent of drivers and supervisors. Forty per cent of these drivers reported financially supporting family members overseas, including spouses, children, and parents.

Each participant's experience of the pandemic was unique and influenced by factors such as workplace relationships and support, as well as individual personality. Nevertheless, all participants acknowledged the arduous nature of bus driving, characterised by persistent work-related challenges and a sense of vulnerability. Many reported being subjected to a plethora of adverse outcomes that affected both their personal well-being and professional lives. Not unexpectedly, pandemic-related risks were particularly pronounced for drivers operating transportation services, given their increased exposure to the pandemic. These risks were exacerbated by perceived inadequate organisational support and recognition.

Working conditions encompass both the work environment and aspects of an employee's terms and conditions of employment that influence employees' experience, as well as individual and organisational outcomes. Participants identified some elements of these conditions as detrimental to well-being. Notably, the failure of organisations to adequately address these conditions, despite repeated demands from drivers and their representatives, led not only to bus drivers' strikes but also to persistent challenges in recruitment and retention of drivers across the sector.

4.3. Perception of working conditions

The first section of the interview schedule focused on aspects of working conditions. Participants were asked about the challenging aspects of the job and those related to the bus drivers' strike. In line with the nature of the job, the most dominant themes that emerged were related to work hours and schedules, work environment, pay and privatisation of the bus sector (see Table 13). Interestingly, the privatisation of the public transport sector introduced by PTOM was reported to have a deteriorating effect on drivers' working conditions and public perception of the sector.

Table 13. Perception of working conditions.

Major themes	Subthemes
Work hours and schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep and meal routine disruption. • Lack of recovery time. • Work-life balance and social life. • Tight schedules impeded urgency of using the toilet.
Work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate rest/nap space at the depot. • Limited public toilet facilities on bus routes. • Congested traffic conditions.
Pay dispute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low pay and high cost of living.
Privatisation of the bus sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implications of privatisation.

4.3.1 Work hours and schedules

The theme *working hours and split shift schedules* surfaced as the most dominant concern among participants. The majority of participants reported starting work as early as 5:00 AM and running until midnight, finding it long and exhausting, particularly under split-shift arrangements. As one driver explained, “*Long hours of work is the main challenge for bus drivers. Most of us work more than ten hours. If I add 2-4 hours of unpaid break, it is actually between 12-16 hours*” (D12). Although regulations stipulated a minimum ten-hour rest period between shifts, several participants indicated that this requirement was not consistently observed. Many also noted that each shift could extend beyond ten hours, excluding the additional 1-4 hours of unpaid breaks between split shifts. A supervisor elaborated, “*I think the hours are not so great because it is a split shift. It is not like an eight-to-five job. You start very early in the morning, and some duties you finish late at night*” (S02). Consistent with this claim, a manager acknowledged the negative implications of rostering practices, “*I'd also like to see rosters more accommodating. The split shift is not very helpful and healthy... There's nothing you can do in those shift breaks. So yeah, that's not ideal*” (M10). It was also noted that the split shift made the working hours longer when regular breaks were included.

More than half of the drivers reported erratic shift patterns to interfere with *sleep quality and meal routine*, making it difficult to maintain regular sleep and meal routines difficult. A driver stated, “*The long hours and change in the shifts are affecting my health, especially my sleep. I always have fewer hours of sleep and go to bed at different times because sometimes I work till midnight. My sleep pattern is really affected, and my colleagues told me the same thing. I'm always tired because I don't sleep well*” (D13). However, some drivers suggested that having a fixed roster or shift pattern for individual drivers could help minimise the negative impact of

these irregularities. This means the fixed roster or shift pattern system would allow them to plan a better routine for both work and non-work-related activities.

“The roster system is worse. My sign-in and sign-off time varies because our shift keeps changing. This is affecting my sleep and meal routine. I don't even get that much time to finish my lunch. I'll take 10 to 15 minutes to finish my lunch, which is so quick. That's why I am putting on weight” (D03).

“The split shift and the unstable shift pattern are the main challenges for the drivers because they affect the drivers mentally and physically. I believe that if they do away with split shift and introduce straight shift and fix roster, it will minimise some of these issues” (U01).

Maintaining a regular sleep pattern was not the only challenge reported; some drivers unequivocally refer to the *lack of recovery time*. They explicitly stated that excessive work hours interfered with their sleep duration and recovery time. Adults generally require between 7 and 9 hours of quality sleep every night. However, some drivers indicated that achieving this sleep quota was impossible in the lives of bus drivers. A few drivers reported sleeping fewer than six hours each night. A driver reported, “*It was a fair assumption that many drivers do not reach the recommended quota of good sleep*” (D02). Several drivers also pointed out that the lack of recovery time affected their productivity. They mentioned that sleep hours lost due to late night and early morning during the work week, combined with weekend schedules, left them with a large sleep deficit.

“Five days and working eight hours a day or eight-hour shift is okay. But more than eight hours, like ten or eleven hours, for me this is not good. If I work eight hours a day, I will feel fresh, good and smart, and I can work nicely and deliver a good job. But

when I work more than 10 hours and come back to work the next day, I feel tired to work and sleepy on the bus, and this happens many times. This is because I cannot sleep properly. My sleeping cycle was disturbed. I finish work by six, seven or eight o'clock and then start again early morning at six o'clock" (D04).

"I've been upset with the schedules; this is my second time doing it, 14 hours a day. It's a long day. Some days have been good. Some days have been long and tiring. I couldn't get enough sleep sometimes" (D11).

Similarly, several participants acknowledged the inference of excessive work hours and erratic schedules on their *work-life balance and social life*. With shifts often extending into weekends, drivers reported difficulties in planning personal or family activities, with many describing the task of balancing work and social life as almost impossible. In addition, several participants reported that companies routinely asked if they wanted to work additional hours to help cover for driver shortages. A supervisor explained, "*Driver shortage is a big problem in the industry, and it is stretching the industry... We do ask drivers if they could help us cover shifts or work for a few extra hours...*" (S04). Thus, these persistent driver shortages, long hours, and irregular work schedules were perceived as key factors undermining the social and family life of drivers.

"It puts a strain on the relationship and families because you are never home on time or very late. So, I suppose the challenge would be balancing your life at home with work. It's very hard when you're a bus driver. My relationship just ended because I'm constantly at work" (D05).

"Another thing is work-life balance. This is very important, but when you have long work hours and schedules that keep changing every week depending on the need of the

operation, it affects your personal time because you can be called into work anytime. We can decline if we have to, but it is impossible to do that, given the need to cover shifts. It is very difficult” (D01).

Additionally, it was noted that the *tight schedules* gave drivers inadequate time for bathroom breaks. The location of toilet amenities was another factor indicated as a problem. Several drivers reported that certain facilities were located far from the bus stops or roadways, making it difficult to use the restroom and return to the bus within a few minutes. It was also noted that passengers would become furious and abusive when drivers took a few minutes to use the restroom, as it caused delays. The lack of public toilet amenities and tight schedules restricts drivers from accessing toilets when needed.

“Drivers often don't have enough time for the breaks because the schedules are too tight, and there's no leeway if they run late because of traffic. They might get a chance to go during layovers between routes, but those can sometimes be five minutes or less” (U01).

“There are not many toilet facilities along the bus routes. Some of them are not close to the bus routes and it takes a few minutes to use the toilets. This is a big problem...” (D04).

“We want to use the toilet when we feel like it, but then we have issues like, not enough toilets on bus routes, we have a tight schedule, and some passengers are inconsiderate who get mad when the trip is delayed by a few minutes” (D11).

4.3.2 Work environment

The *work environment* of drivers emerged as a prominent theme that contributes to both exhaustion and fatigue. In particular, sleep deprivation was exacerbated by inadequate rest

areas at the depot. Several drivers reported that the depot rest areas were insufficient for proper recovery during breaks, while others noted that attempting to rest on the bus was ineffective due to constant surrounding noise, making it impossible to get adequate sleep.

“...it is difficult to get good rest during the break for the next shift. Our rest area is small and always full. We also do not have enough space or proper beds to lie down and get some sleep. Many of us sleep on the bus, but it's uncomfortable, and with all the noises around us, you can never get a good sleep. That's why you will see the tiredness on the face of drivers; it is obvious” (D12).

In addition, it was difficult to compensate for the lost sleep time during breaks between shifts. To cope with fatigue, some drivers indicated increasing their coffee intake to stay awake. Unfortunately, they also revealed that this reliance on caffeine disrupted their sleep after work, creating a vicious cycle of poor sleep quality and persistent exhaustion.

“I always feel tired and sleepy, and I take coffee to keep me awake, but it is not healthy to drink too much coffee, but I can't help it” (D08).

“Our depot does not have enough space for all the drivers to rest during shift break. And sometimes, our first shift finishes away from the depot, and we park at layer-over points where we get our break. We use the bus to sleep, but you cannot get a good sleep because of the noise and hot or cold, and it's difficult” (D18).

The *lack of public toilet facilities* on bus routes was another concern reported. More than half of the drivers mentioned that there are limited clean toilet facilities on bus routes and that some amenities were not near the bus stops or roads.

“... when you want to go to the toilet, but then there are limited facilities out there, and you know, you are on a bus, and you cannot park your bus anywhere in town; there are a lot of yellow lines. So, it is really hard when you want to go to the toilets” (D08).

More so, the lack of toilet facilities and tight schedules were challenging for women drivers as it made it more difficult for those on their monthly menstruation cycle. It was noted that the inadequate access to clean and private toilet facilities made it difficult for women drivers to manage their menstrual hygiene.

“I wish they would accommodate more toilets because I feel for the lady that's got that monthly thing. Three to four hours' drive that's the longest drive for us, and we will have to use the toilet” (D17).

Furthermore, some drivers reported *dehydration* due to inadequate fluid intake, which could also be attributed to excessive coffee consumption. They described the heat, humidity, and physical effort put into driving as dehydrating them. However, the limited availability of toilet facilities and time constraints made it difficult for them to increase their water intake. “*I am thirsty, but I have to minimise my fluid intake because going to the toilet is difficult*” (D22). Several drivers also reported that a lack of fluid to hydrate caused them to feel tired and sleepy.

"You're hot and thirsty, but you know you have to minimise your water intake because you don't want to go to the toilet, and just stress of traffic and people is a huge problem. And yeah, the lack of fluid, I can't drink too much water because it is difficult to use the toilet" (D19).

“... when I don't have enough water, I always feel tired and sleepy. I want to drink more water, but the problem is there are not many toilet facilities on the route, and the timing is very tight” (D09).

Sadly, a driver reported a urinary tract infection related to having to wait too long to use the bathroom.

“I have a habit of going for the urination every one and half hours. But I don't get the time in the city where I drop the passengers to go to the toilets and coming back takes nearly 15 to 20 minutes. Every time I reach the city, I'm like 8 to 10 minutes late, and I cannot go to the toilet, and I repeat this for about a week, you know, I'm building that pressure, and I have urinary tract infection... It's so hectic. For me, timing is the problem; they should consider the timing. It's not so feasible. Timing is not sufficient” (D04).

The challenge of *traffic conditions* was frequently described as both mentally and physically demanding. More than half of the participants repeatedly said that the drivers had to remain focused and alert to navigate through narrow roads and heavy traffic while keeping their vehicles moving at the right speed and direction, which requires constant attention to their surroundings. Some drivers stated that the high demand for concentration and awareness is mentally exhausting. As explained by a driver, “*This job is more mentally stressful than physical because I have to constantly be thinking about what is going to happen on the road*” (D09).

“Driving is quite a meditative role because you have to be so focused; one mistake can be catastrophic... There are too many cars on the road here. That's one of the biggest

problems we have as drivers is, is the use of bus lanes by cyclists and not enough places where there are bus loads, and the sheer number of cars. And by the way, during the lockdown that has got worse, people have used their cars more and buses less. And I think that was something that Auckland Transport could have approached very differently, but they didn't" (D01).

4.3.3. Low pay

Low pay emerged as the most significant theme across the interviews. Participants consistently reported that wages in the bus industry were inadequate. Most participants agreed that the pay levels were insufficient and less desirable, and alluded to it as a primary factor leading to many other issues in the sector, including driver shortages and strikes. The perceived inability of wages to keep pace with living expenses was widely regarded as a pressing concern undermining both recruitment and retention.

"You know, when I joined this company, at that time, the countdown bread was \$1, and now it's \$3 plus, and my pay is still the same. There are also no overtime, bonus, or incentives to increase our income" (D07).

"The cost of living in NZ has gone up in the last few years, but the pay rate of drivers hasn't increased much to meet the cost of living. This has been the main concern for us drivers, and that's why you see many strikes in the industry over the years. We feel we did not get the pay we deserve" (D23).

Perceived pay inequity was another prominent concern reported. Some participants explicitly emphasised that driving is a skilled job, especially manoeuvring large buses with many lives at stake through congested traffic, while ensuring the safety of passengers. However, they

indicated that drivers were not adequately recognised and rewarded for their skills. A manager explained, “...there's also a perception that bus driving is low paid compared to anyone because it's low skills, but I don't think it's low skilled; it's actually incredibly high skilled” (M07). They further mentioned the risks associated with the job, such as passenger abuse and accidents, which they argued were common for bus drivers, but they were poorly compensated for the risks they faced on the job. In addition, several drivers compared their pay with that of bus drivers in Australia, where they had previously worked, as well as with truck drivers in NZ, indicating that they were comparatively inadequately paid. Additionally, several drivers expressed a sense of not being appreciated or valued. They felt disrespected for what they were rewarded against what they offered, particularly their skills and knowledge, which they asserted were often underrated.

“We need to feel like we matter, but we don't feel this here...If the management put time and energy into appreciating the employees, they could save themselves from problems of any kind” (D05).

“There's a lot of problems, you know. Most of the time, the drivers are not getting respect. They're not getting the respect that is due to them. They are not paid enough for the effort, the number of hours and the risk factor involved in this job. This is not an easy job. It deals with hundreds of people of different walks of life using the buses” (U05).

“So, I feel like we were not paid for what we do. Look, I was also a truck driver for ten years before becoming a bus driver. And I can say that we are responsible for all these people on the bus. I mean, imagine how easy it is to have an accident. And so, you know, only our skills can prevent this from happening. Our knowledge and skills should be better paid” (D12).

In addition, many participants believed that the current pay rates were insufficient to *attract and retain drivers*. Some participants acknowledged that low pay made the profession less appealing to the younger generation, who may consider this occupation as a potential career. A manager argued, “*We can't attract young people into the industry because the pay scale isn't there...*” (M01). It also noted that drivers moved to truck driving for better pay, which causes huge driver shortages in the sector. “*The pay is not good that's why many drivers went to drive trucks because they pay better...*” (D04). Moreover, some drivers reported that the lack of incentives made the job unappealing and demotivating.

“And the pay rate is only \$** an hour, it is really low, because we work like average, like 9 to 10 hours a day plus break which we don't get paid for it. It is really stressful. A lot of the drivers left. In fact, we just lost a few drivers to truck driving. And the main reason they left when we asked them was pay; the hourly rate is too low” (D21).

“... We've just gone to a living wage, which is \$** an hour, and you compare this to the trucking industry, that's up around \$** an hour. So why would you drive, for example, an urban bus through all the traffic back and forth every day and have to deal with people who can be nasty? So, you're dealing with all of that and infrastructure on the roads, which is not great. You could stack shelves at PakNsave for pretty much the same amount and not have to deal with anything” (M01).

4.3.4. Privatisation of the bus sector

At the end of the interview, participants were asked what their thoughts were about the privatisation of the bus sector in NZ. Not surprisingly, more than half of the drivers reported that *privatisation* had deteriorated their working conditions as well as the overall perception of the sector. Several participants explicitly described that the industry has become more profit-

oriented since becoming privatised, with increased work hours, the removal of overtime, and a punitive approach to cost savings Drivers reported being fined for minor mistakes, such as arriving late to start a trip or failing to stop at a bus stop to pick up a disgruntled passenger. The fines are often passed down from the contractor to the client and eventually to the driver.

“... the private companies compete for contracts with Auckland Transport, and they have to make a profit, and the only way they can make their profits is by tightening the working conditions for the drivers. So, this has gotten worse and worse, and now it is terrible, and it is a real problem. So formerly, we used to have a lot of overtime available. And now, because that costs the company too much money to pay overtime rates, we do not have overtime anymore....” (D07).

Additionally, it was explicitly mentioned that the supervisors' role has shifted from supporting drivers to preventing financial losses, in that supervisors were required to monitor where Auckland Transport would issue fines to the company in order to avoid these fines.

“I feel sorry for them (supervisors) because I know them. And they are now doing a job that cannot be done. They have too many people and have to tick boxes for the head office. But I knew them when they were operating as supervisors in the literal meaning of the service, is somebody who oversees what was going on. And it's another name for managing people, really. Now it has become very, very technical. It's, it's probably much more extreme. We don't have time, and worse than you can imagine how this has deteriorated, and it has deteriorated because of the cost-cutting. So, all of the problems come not from the quality of the people necessarily. But by cutting costs, the ability for people to operate has been reduced.” (D01).

Furthermore, more than half of the participants indicated a preference to return to the previous management system, where there were no private companies, and the NZ Councils ran the buses.

“It would be good if privatisation is removed, and all bus companies come under one roof like before. And look, I mean, they can see what is going on in the industry, the driver shortage. Why? Because nobody wants to be a bus driver” (D11).

“Because a lot of the work we undertake is based on contracts that are governed by a tendering process. And that's widely acknowledged to drive down driver pay rates. Because if a company adds an extra dollar or two to the driver pay rates in the tendering process, they just won't get the work. Another company will hit us with lower wage rates, and they will get the work. And, you know, that's quite a serious issue as well. And I know that there's work going on at various levels to improve that situation and get government funding to allow us to pay drivers more. But driver pay rates are an issue. Perhaps removing privatisation and returning the sector back to the NZ councils might resolve some of these issues “ (M09).

4.4 Perception of pandemic challenges

In response to the disruptions the pandemic brought, bus drivers faced significant challenges, as their work involved close contact with the public in the confined work environment, which exposed them to a higher risk of infection. The second section of the interview schedule examined how the pandemic impacted bus drivers and what initiatives were introduced to protect them. Five major themes emerged during the analysis of the interview response (*see* Table 14).

Table 14. Employee stressors from the pandemic.

Major themes	Subthemes
Anxiety of Covid infection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual vulnerability (e.g., age and underlying health condition) increased fear. • Fear of bringing Covid home and infecting family. • Work environments hazard increased fear of Covid infection.
Threats from passengers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belligerent and misbehaving passengers. • Lack of support in situation of abuse/attack. • Lack of enforcement of Covid guidelines. • Running empty buses introduced feelings of fear, loneliness, and boredom.
Work disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced schedule and inadequate subsidies • Financial strain. • Job insecurity.
Family separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns over family safety abroad.
Support amid pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health protection for vulnerable worker • Empathic leadership

4.4.1. The anxiety of Covid

Not surprisingly, anxiety about Covid infection emerged as the most dominant theme during the pandemic. Within this theme, *individual vulnerability* was a significant concern, as many participants attested that the NZ bus sector has an ageing workforce (those beyond the age of fifty) and that many drivers may have pre-existing medical conditions. In fact, a few drivers hinted that they had underlying health issues and were concerned about their health. *“I had a stroke before and was told not to work, but I came off it, and I’m working again. ... the Covid pandemic was stressful because of my medical condition” (D12)*. Surprisingly, a few drivers mentioned that they did not disclose their health issues and continued working due to financial pressure.

“I have a breathing problem, and the mask is making my breathing difficult. So, the main problem for me is always wearing a mask, which affects my breathing. My doctor told me that I must be careful not to be infected because of my health condition. He also told me that wearing a mask for long hours is not good for me, but I can't go anywhere or work without a mask. I did not tell the company because I would not be allowed to work if I told them. I don't want to stay home and receive subsidies because I know the subsidies are not enough to pay my rent and bills” (D08).

The anxiety of *bringing Covid home to families* was also a notable theme that surfaced. Several drivers mentioned that they had children, while others stated that they had elderly or vulnerable relatives. They also revealed that some of their family members were not vaccinated because of personal choice. It was noted that they constantly think about their family's well-being when working. Evidently, the anxiety of catching the Covid-19 virus due to these predicaments increased the drivers' safety concerns.

“I live with my parents, and I have to think about their health and safety. I am always afraid of bringing Covid home and infecting them because they are old, and their health is not great” (D13).

“I have been vaccinated because of my job, but some of my families have not been vaccinated. I asked them to get vaccinated, but they didn't want to be vaccinated. So, this worries me” (D08).

“So, drivers are scared because of Covid that they will get it, and they'll pass it on to their family, and they've got nothing to protect themselves” (U04).

Work environment hazard was another notable theme that emerged in which participants reported specific risks in the immediate work environment that exposed drivers to Covid contagion. Participants reported that, to avoid close contact, the organisations introduced the use of the middle door to control passengers boarding and exiting the bus, including the use of bus cards to tag on or off instead of cash. However, more than half of the drivers stated that they could still be infected due to the confined space of the bus, coupled with malfunctioning air conditioning (in some buses), which produced low ventilation, and increased the likelihood of inhaling exhaled aerosols from an infected person.

“Some buses' air conditions are not working properly, so, there is no good ventilation, and everyone can potentially be infected if an infected person is on the bus” (D12).

“It is so easy to catch the virus on the bus because of the confined space, and there is not enough ventilation because most buses do not have windows that can be opened. And you have the air conditioner circulating the air around in the bus... I use the bus to nap during my break, and it is unsafe” (D09).

Additionally, worries over the *hygiene of the buses* were reported. Although it was reassuring that companies were required to adopt stricter cleaning protocols with anti-viral chemicals, some drivers expressed concern about how well the buses were cleaned. Several drivers mentioned that some buses were not properly cleaned, and they had to clean them themselves before or at the end of their shifts. In doing so, they picked up stuff like used tissues, which added to their paranoia of infection.

“I don't know if the buses are properly cleaned, but I don't think so because I have seen buses that were not cleaned. I checked my bus every trip to make sure it was properly

cleaned. If I see that it was not properly cleaned, I ask the supervisor to change the bus” (D13).

4.4.2. Threats from passengers

Threats from passengers were one of the major themes that emerged during the analysis. Most participants explicitly stated that the interaction between drivers and passengers, particularly the unreasonable and rude passengers, was distressing for drivers. Although the confrontation with these passengers was not a new dilemma, more than half of the participants reported that the hostility of passengers worsened during the pandemic. They described the kind of passenger drivers encountered, including drunkards, the homeless, anti-Covid mandate group and even those passengers who perhaps had a bad day. The most vulnerable and affected groups were women and ethnic minorities. The participants pointed out that when all these passengers get onto the bus, this group becomes their potential target, and they are abused and attacked. It was also noted that the isolated nature of the job further placed them in a highly vulnerable position.

“So, the challenge for us is dealing with unreasonable, sometimes aggressive, violent passengers. This has become worse during the pandemic” (D04).

“The number of assaults and confrontations have gone up from passengers. Yeah, like we've had drivers spit on. We've had drivers pushed and shoved. And you've also got people who are desperate. So, the drivers have been robbed” (M01).

“For us (women), it can be very frightening when we are approached by hostile and violent passengers. I received assault but nothing much I can do. I just carry on my job... I don't think the company cares about protecting us in such situation...” (D27).

“If the passengers swear and argue with me, I do not respond in the same manner because then it gets into a fight, and I can be physically attacked. Drivers don't always have immediate support in such a situation because we're isolated, and the police response is always late” (D16).

Additionally, drivers were asked about the support they received from their supervisors in situations involving abuse and attack. More than half of the responses indicated a *lack of support*, which emerged as another dominant theme. Some drivers indicated that supervisor support was lacking, suggesting *unemphatic characteristics*. A driver responded to the question about the supervisor support, “*No, not much. You know, they don't care that much. They don't care. That's it. They don't care, yeah.*” (D03). Several drivers also mentioned that they were advised to call the police for assistance in the event of an attack. However, they indicated that the difficulty getting through to the police or slow response times from the police further compounded the problem and left them vulnerable. A driver said, “*We have very little support. And this we call the police ourselves; we can never get through to the police. It used to be much better, it's gotten worse and worse*” (D01).

“You know, when we are on the road, we are on our own, and sometimes it is very frightening when we are attacked because we have no protection whatsoever. I was attacked once and abused several times, but I received no help. I know some of my colleagues who were also attacked and abused. The management has done nothing about it. All they said was for us to call the police, but the police are too busy attending to other issues, and they are not helpful, and this has gotten worse during the pandemic” (D15).

Several drivers also added that the instruction to call the police is inappropriate and impractical, as doing so while driving and handling an abusive passenger simultaneously poses a significant risk to their safety and the safety of others on the road.

“... lately, if the driver has a problem and if he says, please call the police because they have an abusive person, they'll turn around and tell the driver you have to call the police. Because the driver needs your assistance, you should be able to assist him; it's part of the operation's duty, and they should be doing it. Because I'm already on the road, I got so much responsibility, and I got an abusive passenger. How am I supposed to continue driving and deal with the person? I think some supervisors do not belong to that position because they can't support the drivers... when I was in operations, I had similar encounters, and I used my phone to call the police myself because I knew the situation of the driver. You know, he's already stressed out that this person on the bus would attack him. So most probably, he will not be able to speak properly to the police. So, I took it for myself and phoned the police” (D10).

Despite the lack of immediate support from the bus companies or the police, it was noted that drivers received *de-escalation training* to help them defuse and curb the contentious situation. As reported by a driver, “*Okay, so we were given training not only in terms of professional driving but also on safety, such as de-escalation training...*” (D03).

“Sometimes, drivers have been attacked, sometimes not because the person escalated the situation. So there needs to be education. We've got a thing called de-escalation training, which is a training package. We're also looking at new technology in terms of providing de-escalation training because it's not just in our company, it's across all business, all bus companies” (S09).

“All our drivers are given different trainings including des-escalation training to help them manage confrontations with passengers. This is an important training because our drivers have been abused and verbally attacked...” (M03).

The *uncooperative behaviour of passengers towards Covid-19 guidelines* was also a notable theme that surfaced. A manager explained, *“Some passengers, for whatever reason, do not comply with the Covid rules and drivers have been complaining about the risks it poses to them”* (M08). Some drivers expressed that even in the peak of Covid, the number of passengers wearing masks on the bus decreased, which put them in an uncomfortable position. Several participants attested to this claim and reported that passengers were hostile about Covid rules and felt it was their right not to wear masks or practice social distancing on the bus. Some passengers took advantage of the rules, such as a medical exemption, and decided not to wear a mask. Drivers, however, said verifying that they were medically exempt was impossible, citing that it was not their job to enforce such exemptions. They also stated that it was difficult to push the boundaries to enforce Covid rules to avoid confrontation.

“Sometimes passengers walked into the bus without the mask, and when I reminded them to wear it, they would say they could not wear a mask because of their health condition. I cannot ask them to show the proof of their medical exemption because this is not my duty” (D11).

“Well, Covid has been quite a challenge. I mean, the thing is, you can't enforce the rules of covid upon anyone. If somebody walks onto the bus and you say to them, you know, you need to have a mask; it is compulsory on the bus, and then a person turns on and tells you, yeah, but I don't feel like wearing the mask, or I don't have a mask. So, what

do you do? You can't police that you can't; you can't insist they wear a mask. You can't because you'll end up in an argument” (D06).

Some drivers reported verbally reminding passengers to wear masks. This was necessary to be fair to those compliant passengers and to protect themselves. However, they also said that some passengers would get upset when reminded to wear masks. One driver said, “*It is impossible to enforce Covid rules because passengers can be very hostile about it*” (D04).

“Some passengers walked into the bus without the mask, and when I reminded them to wear it, they would get upset” (D11).

“We have asked the drivers to remind those unmasked passengers about the rules but told them not to enforce them because it can lead to an argument, and we have had these experiences in the past. That's why we only tell them to remind the passengers but not to enforce the rules” (M08).

Another notable theme that emerged relates to the enforcement of Covid guidelines, which indicated a *lack of enforcement* as a noticeable concern. More than half of the drivers said that the enforcement of these guidelines on public transport was ineffective. It was also acknowledged by over half of the participants that drivers were not required to enforce the Covid rules.

“Masks and social distancing are compulsory on buses, as the Covid guidelines say, but the number of passengers who do not comply with these mandates is increasing, and there are no police or transport officers to enforce those rules. Drivers, we were asked not to enforce those rules...” (D22).

“I mean, if somebody gets on a bus with no mask on, even in the height of the Covid, the bus driver was not allowed to refuse entry. They had to have them on the bus, regardless” (D01).

Along with concerns about passengers' misbehaviour, some participants reported an increase in the number of older people and homeless passengers using buses during the lockdown. Although the fear of Covid infection and lockdown had limited people's movement and prevented them from using public transport, it was reported that the homeless had become frequent users of the buses, with no regard for the Covid guidelines. This was not the only threat they presented; they did not pay the fare and took more extended trips to keep warm due to the cold, and there was no way for contact tracing. Because of their mental health conditions, the drivers said it was impossible to refuse their entry or ask them to leave the bus to avoid confrontation.

“During the lockdown, all of the homeless people started using buses to go on long trips to keep warm. That was very worrying for drivers because they never wear masks and use cards, and there was no way of contact tracing” (D02).

“Government is keeping the buses running to transport essential workers, but we hardly pick one essential worker on any day. I think the government should stop running the buses because, during the lockdown, the homeless, drug addicts and older people catch the buses to go here and there, like the supermarket etc. These people, for me, are dangerous people because I do not know if they are already infected because some of them do not wear masks” (D14).

Running empty buses during the pandemic was reported to have introduced *feelings of fear, loneliness, and boredom* among some bus drivers. They mentioned the pandemic disrupted their daily routine and interactions with people. Operating practically empty buses was a significant change for bus drivers who are used to interacting with passengers regularly. Several drivers stated that the lack of passenger interaction made the job lonely and monotonous. It was also noted that having only a few passengers, such as homeless people, created feelings of unease or even danger for them.

“There are no passengers, and I do not feel good. I am driving a fifty-seater plus bus, and I take only two passengers, and no one says hello, hi or bye. It doesn't feel good driving alone because you have no one to communicate with. It's lonely” (D07).

“I think the government should operate Uber or something similar to Uber to transport essential workers during Covid because it is more convenient and safer for everyone. I'm driving an empty bus for 11-13 hours shift with no passengers or a few sometimes... Sometimes it's scary because of homeless and drug addicts using the buses....” (D14).

4.4.3 Work disruption

Within the broader theme of *work disruptions* caused by the Covid pandemic, *reduced schedules and financial strain* emerged as a key theme. Many drivers reported working on reduced rosters, which affected their wages and raised concerns about financial security. Although the government provided subsidies to support workers during the pandemic, some drivers said these subsidies were insufficient to cover their living expenses. This was compounded by the increased cost of living in NZ, which put an additional financial strain on them.

“Our hours are reduced, and the subsidies from the government are not enough. We are running on limited services, and there are not enough services for all the drivers, so we shared the work. This is really affecting my income and stressing me out” (D02).

“All our drivers were working on a reduced timetable during the pandemic. Some drivers want to work more hours, but unfortunately, we cannot give them because we have to share hours between all our available drivers. The government provided some subsidies, but we understand it was not enough for everyone, but there is really nothing much we could do; we just have to hang in there and hope that everything improves soon” (S03).

Similarly, *job insecurity* was also a significant theme that surfaced. Some drivers reported that they feared losing their job. *“I don't really know if I am going to still have my job”* (D08). Part-time workers may be vulnerable to job loss, as their jobs may be more easily cut or not renewed. A few part-time drivers said they felt most at risk of losing their jobs and that it was almost definite or highly likely that their temporary jobs would finish before it was due to end. *“I am a part-time driver, and I am afraid I might lose my job...”* (D24). Moreover, several drivers with families reported anxiety about how they would provide for them if they lost their jobs.

“Some drivers have left the job, and we are not sure whether it is because of the fear of the pandemic, or the company laid them off.... But yeah, job security was a big concern for many drivers” (D22).

“I came here to work as a bus driver, and whatever I earn, I support myself and my family in my country. I am worried about losing my job or being infected and not able to work and provide for my family” (D19).

Moreover, some drivers expressed that, despite the sick leave and subsidies provided by the government, they were not sufficient. Some drivers who were infected and required more days to recover were not assisted beyond the sick leave.

“I used my sick leave when I was infected, and after that, the company didn't provide any support...” (D06).

“We are working during the pandemic, and some drivers were infected, and they took sick leave, but the problem is sick leave and subsidies from the government are not enough...” (D14).

4.4.4 Family separation

Another significant theme that emerged was *family separation*. Some participants reported the difficulties faced by a few drivers, mainly migrant drivers, during the pandemic. Several drivers narrated not seeing their families for extended periods. They indicated that they had plans to visit, but the border closure made it difficult for them. Others mentioned they could not visit their families without losing their job and being unable to return to NZ. They also mentioned the challenges non-citizens and temporary residents face in obtaining border exemptions, even for strong humanitarian reasons. A driver said, “*I applied for border exemption, but my application was not successful...*” (D09). A few managers said that some employees had approached them wanting to visit their families but were told that returning to NZ would be difficult due to the country's strict immigration policies.

“For the last nine years, I have not returned to my country to visit my parents, and I have planned to return to see them now, but I could not do that because of the pandemic. My grandmother passed away, and it is my culture to be there for the funeral to pay my last respect, but I cannot do this because of the pandemic” (D08).

“I miss my family, and they miss me. I want to visit them as I used to, but I cannot do that again. It is easy to go and visit them, but I might not return because I am not a citizen or permanent resident. I am here in NZ to provide for them, so I have to continue to be here regardless” (D24).

“Some of our employees have not seen their families in a long time and have plans to visit them, but the pandemic has thrown their plans into jeopardy. They approached us and asked if we could help, but we told them they could go, but it would be hard to help them return to NZ soon with the border closure, plus we do not know what the future will look like” (M05).

4.4.5 Support amid pandemic

Despite pandemic concerns, support from the organisations was noted through the analysis, in which *protection of vulnerable workers* emerged as a significant theme. Given the health-related risks associated with the ageing driving population, the government and companies took steps to mitigate the risk of infection by not allowing those workers deemed high-risk to work during the pandemic. A manager shed light on their working population, “*We have an ageing workforce, and some have underlying health issues which make them vulnerable. We understand that, and we have asked them not to work... The government has issued similar instructions to every employer*” (M07). A driver also echoed a similar account, “*... But for those of us with health issues, our company told us not to come to work...*” (D12). Additionally, personal protective equipment like face masks and sanitisers, as well as help in the form of knowledge, advice and information about self-care, were provided to employees. However, sanitisers and masks were reported to be in short supply to stock the buses. Some drivers mentioned they had to source these items themselves, as reported by a driver, “*Some buses do not have sanitisers and masks, and I have to provide for myself*” (D22). Moreso, it was reported

that vaccination teams were brought to the depots to run vaccination clinics for all the employees.

“During the Covid period, we look to provide as much information as we can to our staff. We have health and safety notice boards, and we use them to provide information on safety measures” (M10).

“We've asked the vaccination teams to come into depots actually to do a vaccination clinic. Like everyone else, we did a risk assessment on whether to vaccinate or not. And that came up not to vaccinate all those right on the line, to be fair, but we're 97% vaccinated across the country” (M04).

In addition, *empathic leadership* emerged as another central theme, as reported by a few drivers, who said some supervisors and managers actively listened to their concerns and offered assistance. This was reflected in the comments of some supervisors and managers, who consistently expressed an understanding of the anxiety and stress their drivers faced and reassured them that they were there to support them. This report aligns with the remarks from a few drivers, who stated that their supervisors and managers were in touch with them to ensure they were doing well during the pandemic. It also noted that individuals were taking steps to protect their own health.

“Pandemic is something new, and everyone we do not know what to do. I was stressed out about my job, my health and my family. This is also something new for the management, but some bosses are very caring, and they try their best to make sure we are okay” (D08).

“We understand what some of our drivers are going through, and we do our best to be there to give them the best we can, and this includes emotional, physical and financial support. We listen to their concerns and try to help them. If we see that our employee needs counselling, we direct them to a counselling service to see a counsellor. Our health and safety manager has also done a fantastic job providing well-being resources and connecting our employees to professional resources both within and outside our business” (M01).

“The company is doing its best to help us, but it is also up to us to be responsible for taking care of ourselves... Regardless, the chances of being infected are still very high because we come into contact with people every day” (D02).

4.5. Supervisor role and relations

The third section of the interview schedule explored the supervisory relationship and support. The supervisory role and relationship are atypical in the bus setting because they are distant and disconnected in real-time, and supervisors and drivers may not have many opportunities to interact with each other. As such, the study focused on examining the supervisory relationships and support mechanisms (*Note that an extension of supervisor support is discussed in section 4.6*). The most commonly reported results pertained to challenges in supervisory relationships, supervisor performance, obstacles to effective leadership by supervisors, and individual attributes. The most dominant themes that emerged are presented in Table 15.

Table 15. Workplace support and interactions between supervisor and drivers.

Major themes	Subthemes
Supervisor-drivers exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distant and minimal. • Lack of communication from the management. • Relationship reactive than proactive. • Drivers lack trust and confidence in the supervisor. and management. • Supervisor bias.
Supervisor performance style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisor role. • Performance-oriented. • Punitive leadership style.
Obstacles to effective supervisor leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence. • Unstaffed supervisors and increased workload. • Personality traits (for supervisors). • Individual differences (for drivers).

4.5.1 Supervisor-drivers exchanges

Regarding the overall supervisor-driver exchanges, the most significant theme that emerged was the *distant and minimal interactions*. Most drivers reported a sense of disconnection in terms of communication with their supervisors, characterised by limited interactions, typically at the front desk or over the radio. Interestingly, some drivers reported having no personal encounters with supervisors and were clueless about some of them. A similar narrative was also attributed to their interactions with the senior management team.

“Our interaction is minimal, and it's normally over the radio or phone. They use the radio to communicate or phone us, so that's about it really” (D01).

“The biggest challenge is the communication between drivers, dispatch, and management, being able to communicate with them and go to them when you've got problems. Communicating isn't really there” (U03).

In addition, some drivers described that the *lack of communication from management* left them feeling undervalued and disconnected from their organisation. They specifically indicated that they were not informed about significant changes within the organisation, such as the change of ownership of the bus company.

“...so, the things you've listed, in fact, they're not for me the challenges, the difficulties actually have come with the management structure, and the buying and selling of bus companies, which happens. It's happened now twice in my six years here in Auckland. And that's a huge problem... we were not informed of the change of owners...” (D01).

“The company changes, but nobody bothered to tell us about all those changes. We were just expected to go along with it without any explanation. It makes we feel unimportant” (D11).

Moreover, several drivers mentioned that their relationships appeared to be predominantly *reactive*. They stated that supervisors and managers barely speak to them and only engage with them when there is an issue or something catches their attention. Similarly, a supervisor's response aligns with that of the driver.

“In my company, both supervisors and the managers are sitting there, but I couldn't see them... We only see supervisors when there is a problem or a complaint that reaches them. There is no connection between supervisors and drivers” (D03).

“...so, when they've got issues. It's our job to interact with them, but when they've got issues, it depends on when they've got issues, and we interact with them” (S05).

“... as a supervisor, I think our relationship with the drivers is not bad, but it's not really good either because I think the driver needs to know what's the supervisor does. Before,

I was a driver, and now I'm part of the supervisor's team, so I know the driver's difficulties and the supervisors' difficulties too. But the problem is almost all drivers don't know what supervisors are doing at the office. They think, oh, you just sitting in the office; it's really easy, but they don't know how many tasks supervisors do in the office, so I think they need more communication" (S04).

The bus drivers' *lack of trust and confidence* in their supervisors and managers also surfaced as a key theme. Some drivers perceived supervisors and managers as less trustworthy compared to their own supportive environment with their peers. They reported being unwilling to communicate work-related or personal problems with management, citing fear of being reprimanded or losing their duties. Despite an open-door policy declared by management, it was noted that they did not feel comfortable voicing their issues with them. The reluctance to speak up was attributed to management's style and a perceived lack of safety in the workplace.

"Our relationship is better. We sort of freer to speak about our problems. This is not the same with management; we try to be mindful of the bosses, but between each other, we'll let it all out because management wouldn't understand what it feels like to be on the road. And we're often, I suppose, just look after each other" (D04).

"We are less likely to share our problems with the supervisor or manager because then we are judged...people have lost that human... It's hard to speak with them and to make them see people who are low-income earners and understand them. I'm not good at describing things, but it's really difficult to get in touch with the management to discuss my personal problems" (D05).

Supervisor bias was also another central theme that emerged in the findings. Some drivers recognised supervisor bias in supervisor-employee relationships, mainly as the presence of workplace favouritism. A driver described, “... *I don't know why, but I saw some drivers get the best treatment than some of us...*” (D08). This was alluded to supervisors who were either ethnically related to or had a good relationship with the driver, who tended to receive more favourable treatment, including immediate resolution of pay issues and grievances, as well as better trip schedules and vehicle conditions, compared to those drivers who did not have such a relationship with the supervisors. Unfortunately, it was also noted that favouritism prompted some drivers to leave their current bus operator and join another operator.

“I saw our supervisors sort of build the team himself that he trusts. I'm one of these inside ones, and I notice the guys on the outside don't get a lot of support. The moment they don't feel like they're not welcome, they leave, you know, and we're losing bus drivers” (D12).

“...I see that some drivers who have close relationships with supervisors or are ethnically related to him always get the good buses and shifts, but I don't complain, but I saw some drivers not happy about it” (D14).

4.5.2 Supervisor performance style

Participants were asked to get an understanding of the role of supervisors. The response indicated that, generally, supervisors are responsible for scheduling and allocating buses to drivers, managing transportation and maintenance, monitoring drivers and routes, advising them of any roadworks and detours, assisting if drivers are unwell or being attacked, documenting drivers' performance, and ensuring that they adhere to safety standards.

“... I’m the operation manager here for the last few years. So, my role is to employ the drivers, making the rosters and the duties, there's all the way to like, everything's in the production. That's my job” (S06).

“...they take care of the rostering system, ensuring the buses, that the drivers are doing the pre-check correctly. Damages are reported, things like that, and then interactions over the radio and telephone” (D05).

“The role of the supervisor is to make sure the bus drivers got everything they need, the equipment, mainly, most importantly, just making sure the bus drivers safe, to driver slow. They do all the safety checks every morning is mainly just to keep the passengers and drivers safe” (S03).

When drivers were asked about supervisor support, the theme of *performance-oriented* surfaced. Several drivers described their supervisors as being more focused on performance, implying that getting the job done was more important than being empathetic or concerned about their health and well-being. One driver described, “*Supervisor job is really performance. When and what are you doing? Which area are you at? I've never heard them worry about health or well-being really*” (D03). Another driver echoed a similar statement, “*Its performance...and keeping within the process of the company's regulations...*” (D13).

“We used to have supervisors who were there to enforce regulations, guide us, support us as drivers, and reprimand us if necessary. All the support has disappeared, and none of these good supervisors is left. All their jobs have been cut. So, what we now have is, please use this word robotisation, turning bus drivers into robots. They are here is the list, that's what you do. And you do it mechanically. It is terrible” (D01).

Relatedly, *punitive leadership style* also surfaced as a significant theme. Some drivers described the supervisor's leadership style as disciplinary, as it relates to fines imposed for incidents such as lateness in starting trips, exceeding the speed limit, and passenger complaints. Rather than focusing on understanding, coaching, and supporting drivers to improve their performance, it was pointed out that the supervisor's approach was centred on punishing them for their mistakes. A driver said, “*Supervisors are all about saving money as it relates to fines, so it's mostly about disciplining drivers...*” (D22). This performance style was attributed to the privatisation of the sector, resulting from the PTOM, in which supervisors were required to be cost-saving-minded in their roles to avoid fines from Auckland Transport. Unfortunately, it was also noted that the punitive leadership approach incited the driver to exit the occupation.

“...I can tell you, what the role of supervisors now involves, I would say, is ticking boxes. And it's mainly about looking for where Auckland Transport might fine the company for late trips or customer complaints. So, their role is to prevent the loss of money. That's what it is” (D11).

“The supervisors are all about performance management, timekeeping and disciplining drivers who fail to meet the expectations, which is another reason why a lot of drivers left the industry because they have had enough” (U02).

“So, they used to be actively involved in the day-to-day life of every driver. And that is necessary if we want to add support. It's not like that now, so they maintain the company intent. They want to professionalise the service. So, they want to have automated operations and control. Because all of that saves money, but it also costs a great deal of human anxiety... There was no support now. It has gone. And the only thing that has remained is discipline as it relates to possibly fines from the company. This has developed total hostility from a driver's point of view. Not used to be like that

a few years ago... If you leave the Depot late, even a minute late, that will be a problem because it takes so many minutes to get from the Depo to the trip's starting point. And if the trip starts late, Auckland Transport must be informed why and if it's not a good reason, Auckland Transport fines the company hundreds of dollars.... So, it's all about money. And now the supervisors have to watch that. And it's mostly about discipline” (D01).

4.5.3 Obstacles to effective supervisor leadership

The *competence* of supervisors emerged as one of the most significant themes. It was noted that the majority of the supervisors were promoted from the rank of driver because of their experience as drivers and their knowledge of the company's operations and culture. Clearly, the organisation values supervisors' practical experience. However, some participants who have been in the sector long enough and have previous professional experience in managerial positions reported that supervisors are not adequately trained for such a high rank. It was noted that the company provides on-the-job training for supervisors that primarily focuses on system operations and support, hinting at a lack of managerial training for supervisors to manage drivers more effectively. They explicitly criticised the support provided by supervisors, implying a lack of leadership and management skills.

“Some of our supervisors have not been trained to communicate with drivers. They haven't been trained properly on how to manage people. And the reason I'm saying that is because I was a manager. So, they haven't been properly trained to communicate with the drivers. They keep too many things secret and don't explain things enough. It's just like you get memos, and bang, it's there. There you go. And I do understand that some of it is confidential clauses and all that. But I'll give you an example. A worker disappeared for an hour into dispatch, and I went, how's he? What happened? Is he

finished? Or is he sick in the hospital? That's not your business. That was my answer, none of your business. And it's like, I'm only asking to know how he is doing. I'm not asking for medical records; I'm not asking for anything. I just want to know” (D24).

“And I've been in situations where I've needed to manage people. There's so much going on, which means there are many opportunities to show management skills, support and leadership, but it's completely missing” (D01).

In addition, *understaffing and increased workload* surfaced as another important theme. The majority of participants stated that supervisory positions were reduced due to the privatisation of the transport sector and the introduction of new technology. This change retained a small number of supervisors to oversee a larger number of drivers. Some supervisors reported that, depending on the number of supervisors available on a given day, one supervisor might be responsible for handling up to a hundred drivers. Additionally, several drivers acknowledged supervisor stress despite being satisfied with their support.

“It's very challenging because we are under stress the whole time. It's not one supervisor, one driver. It's like one supervisor to 50 or 100 drivers, depending on how many supervisors and drivers we've got on a particular day and all the problems and schools. I'm in charge of schools and Charters, so I got to manage that the school runs are covered, that comes first, and the charters are covered. And then the Northern Express and the local runs and stuff like that. Then we get quotes and phone calls from drivers and the public and sell bus tickets for the school runs. Yeah, it's a multitude of tasks” (S06).

“And they still, but there are just too few of them. So, if you used to have a team of 50 drivers, that was hard enough, but you can't do your job if you now have a team of 200.

So, they're not sustained. They're being paid to do a job that cannot be done because they used to be, for example, in a depo with 200 drivers, there were four duty supervisors, each with a team of 50 drivers. All of those supervisory positions have been kept. They no longer exist. There is now one depot supervisor, and there is none of the personal interaction that they used to be; many more terrible things have happened” (D01).

“It's such a busy place, and supervisors don't really have the time. And we see the stress on them when drivers phone them and are short-staffed. Some supervisory support is satisfactory, but they are always stressed” (D08).

Supervisors' *personality traits* were another notable theme that emerged. Some drivers reported it was difficult to approach supervisors or managers about their issues because their personalities are unapproachable. Some drivers stated that they fear being reprimanded or losing their jobs, attributing this to the absence of a safe and open space to share their concerns, as previously mentioned.

“I don't speak with the management often. Sometimes I want to speak to them about my issues, but I just don't feel comfortable; maybe it's just my personality, but I also know that they won't care too much” (D11).

“I don't think supervisors care, so talking to them about our personal problems is difficult. Some supervisors are good, but others have personalities you do not want to approach... I can tell you, many drivers have many personal issues, but I don't think the management knows about this...” (D13).

Relatedly, *individual differences* emerged as a significant theme. It was noted that some drivers were open about their issues to management, while others were not.

“Yes, depending on the personality and the different drivers. Some people are like very open books and walk in the door. And you can see on their face, okay, they've got a problem. Other drivers are closed books; they've got problems, but they just carry on and do their job” (S04).

“I don't mind telling them if I'm under stress. Yeah. Like, some of us will tell them that we are under stress, and a lot of drivers will hide it because they're too scared. And I'm being honest about that they're too scared, scared that they're going to lose their duties, too scared that they don't be put off” (D11).

“It's normally the attitude of the person they're talking to seem to force them out. Sometimes they can't seem to get along with management. And then they get a bit disgruntled and want to leave. Sometimes it's their work ethics” (U06).

4.6 Organisational and supervisor support

This section also reports on workplace support initiatives. The responses indicate organisational initiatives and policies that support and promote workplace health and well-being, in protecting drivers from the adverse effects of stress and improving work-related outcomes. The supervisor's role in stress management was also noted. However, the majority of the reports suggest a lack of supervisor support as reported in the previous section. The themes that emerged were related to the importance of preventing, recognising, and finding local and broader solutions to manage employee stress. In addition, an important theme related to HR practices and establishment was also noted in the interviews (*see* Table 16).

Table 16. Organisational, supervisor and peer support

Major themes	Subthemes
Support initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). • Training and education on healthy lifestyle.
Perceived supervisor support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived lack of support. • Felt unheard and unappreciated. • Limited advocacy for drivers' grievances. • Supervisor support in managing stress. • Employees to feel free and safe to express their concerns.
HR practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No visibility of HR. • Line managers and supervisors performing HR roles.
Camaraderie between drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt heard, comfortable, and supported among peers

4.6.1 Support initiatives

Within the support initiatives, *employee assistance program* emerged as a notable theme. Some participants mentioned that employees with personal or work-related problems requiring services such as counselling were referred to the EAP provider if the issues cannot be addressed at the organisational level.

“To offer services beyond our business, we allow people to consult a counsellor. Suppose they need to speak to a counsellor, which is totally confidential between them and the counsellor; we provide this option. Otherwise, we try to be visible in the business with an open-door policy, which is a good way for people to feel comfortable approaching us with their issues” (M08).

Similarly, it was noted that a *training package* offered to drivers covered a wide range of resources to help them in their job, including personal health and well-being. For example, training to implement and maintain a healthy lifestyle encompasses proper eating habits, sufficient sleep, regular exercise, and other key components. It was noted that drivers were

taught about stress management and to implement and maintain healthy lifestyle behaviour. This was made possible by bringing health professionals to the site to educate employees. A supervisor explained, “*So, we bring health professionals on-site and share information about healthy lifestyle behaviour*” (S10). Despite this initiative, some drivers reported that implementing a positive lifestyle was almost impossible for them due to the nature of their job. However, some drivers reported taking steps to look after themselves.

“Drivers go through a whole training manual, and that takes about six weeks to go through. And that covers everything about health and safety, fatigue management, diet, getting enough sleep, and proper sleeping patterns. It also contains what to do right if you have a crash on the road and how to deal with disgruntled passengers. This is the training package employees receive when they first come on board. And then the drivers are supposed to have regular training refreshes on all those stuffs as well... We provide more information in different languages, not just English. We're very multicultural. So, we've actually done some safety training, tips, videos, and we've actually converted it into eight different languages” (M06).

“Okay, so we were given training not only in terms of professional driving but also on health and safety, such as de-escalation training, proper eating habit, sufficient sleep, stress management and so on. But the thing is, it is impossible to achieve some of these things when you are a bus driver because of work hours and schedule” (D03).

“You know being a bus driver is very hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle because of stress of this job but because I choose this job, I cannot complain all the time. I am responsible for my own health, and I try to eat proper diet or get enough sleep after my shifts or in my off days. Sometimes, during my shift break, I would get out the bus or depot to get some walking time to allow my blood circulation to flow... It is very sad

to see that not many of my colleagues are doing this, and that's why you will see many drivers are overweight” (D05).

“So, in terms of the health issues, I mean, I can generally say from transport point of view that eating right and exercise can be a restriction, and that is just due to the nature of the job” (M09).

4.6.2 Perceived supervisor support

Drivers were asked about supervisor support and a notable theme related to *perceived lack of supervisor support* emerged in the findings. The majority of the participants described supervisor support as inadequate in various situations, including attack situations, advocacy, and general leadership. For example, drivers were asked about supervisor support in driver harassment situations, and the response indicated, “No, not much. You know, they don't care that much. They don't care. That's it. They don't care, yeah.” (D22).

“The role of supervisor involves assisting the driver in any situation. But lately if the drivers had a problem and if he says please call the police because they have an abusive person, or they'll turn around and tell the driver you have to call the police. That I don't think that's right. That's not the right outcome” (D04).

“...but the point I'm making is that the supervisor did not act on our behalf. They never act on our behalf” (D02).

Relatedly, the *feeling of being unheard* emerged as another notable theme. Several drivers expressed that their concerns and opinions were not valued or taken into consideration. They reported feeling somewhat ignored by the management, resulting in them feeling routinely unheard and unappreciated. A driver stated, “Another problem is when we express our opinion

to the company and management, they simply, I cannot say they are ignoring, but they are overlooking whatever our issues and simply don't want to comment on anything” (D03). Some drivers reported it was difficult to approach supervisors or managers about their issues, as supervisors and managers did not take the time to listen and understand their problems adequately, which reflects unempathetic leadership as reported in the previous section.

“They don’t listen to drivers properly. I’m on the road, and I know all the problems. Management is in the office, and they don’t know what is going on, and they should listen to me” (D16).

“... But there's no time for understanding the problems. I've worked many years as a teacher, so I understand about allowing the learner to learn but guiding. So, there you go. Now it's really shocking... It comes across as an emotional response, but the emotion is based on the experience of undergoing these changes” (D01).

Additionally, *limited advocacy* surfaced as another significant theme. This lack of advocacy in the workplace generated feelings of being ignored and undervalued among drivers, which, in turn, led to drivers having less respect for management.

“...but the point I'm making is that the supervisor did not act on our behalf. They never act on our behalf. They act on behalf of the company... We used to have supervisors who were there to enforce regulations and to guide us and support us as drivers and reprimand us if necessary. All of this support has disappeared...” (D07).

“There's so much advocacy that a supervisor or managers could be doing on behalf of drivers to Auckland Transport many years ago. There was a famous depo manager before my time. The crew planners on their computers would present him with all the

utilities. And before they went any further, he said no, I'm not giving that to my drivers. No, they can't do this. No. There's nothing like that. You see, when you do that sort of thing on behalf of drivers. If you have total respect from your drivers, then you have fewer problems of any kind because it's two-way respect. Because there is no two-way respect, people have little to no respect. The drivers have little to no respect for the company management” (D01).

Furthermore, the lack of support from supervisors in managing drivers' well-being was another notable concern observed in the findings. When drivers were asked about how supervisors monitor and support their health and well-being, more than half of the drivers reported that supervisors did not play any significant role in this aspect.

“Supervisors do not play a role in supporting and helping us in our health and well-being. Our health and safety officer takes care of this” (D11).

“Supervisor do not play a role in supporting and helping us in our health and well-being. The supervisor's role is only covering all trips, help broken down buses or some problems with the bus. When we feel unwell, I only talk to the control and notify them about that, and they advise to take sick leave...” (D18).

“I've never had them (supervisors) worry about health or well-being really just that we do our job I mean for us is the least we hear from them is I suppose we're doing our job good. But we don't get much really, I suppose and I'm an old girl say, I mean, had not been told much, really” (D04)

Despite reports from drivers indicating a limited role for supervisors in supporting their health and well-being, several supervisors discussed their role in managing drivers' stress. They

emphasised the importance of detecting stress and finding solutions to address and prevent it. In addition, when supervisors reflected on their stress management responsibilities, they also recognised the importance of assisting and empowering employees to find their own ways of dealing with stress.

“My role in managing drivers' stress is to try to prevent it. So, first, I have to identify the presence of stress. Once I identified it, I worked with the employee to try and find a practical solution... I talked with the management if that issue required the management's attention. If I can help the driver at my level, I resolve it, but if I cannot, then I always seek the assistance of management” (S04).

“It is my job to assist my drivers to help them adapt well to their working environment, not just cope with stress, but also be able to recognise when they are stressed. Also, I look at ways that they can self-monitor and then come up with personal solutions that can lessen their stress, whether it be going home a little early or, taking a day off or being able to look at what is actually causing them stress and how can they feel empowered to make decisions around that” (S01).

As reported in the section regarding drivers discussing personal concerns, several supervisors and managers discussed an open-door policy to encourage the sharing of personal concerns that affect them. A few drivers stated that some supervisors and managers took the time to listen to their concerns. A driver explained, “*My relationship with my supervisor at the moment is very good. So, whatever problem I tell the supervisor and he say that's fine. This is because I have listened to supervisor and the supervisor listened to me...*” (D07). Similarly, it was also noted that employees were being heard, felt respected and supported and that worries were not trivialised.

“Open channels of communication are essential for transparency. We have an open-door policy, and our employees are welcome and free to communicate with our managers and supervisors. For us, this is important to establish a culture where employees are encouraged to speak up and express their thoughts and ideas, without fear of reprisal” (M01).

“Our company has an open-door policy, but sometimes I think it just depends on the individual and what sort of issues they have. I can't speak for others, but whenever I have a concern, I bring it to my supervisor and even the manager, and they help me....” (D11).

4.6.3 HR practices

Surprisingly, a significant theme no visibility of HR professionals emerged, as some drivers described their interactions with HR staff as minimal, while others stated they had no idea who they were. Where HR practices were mentioned, the description of dysfunction surfaced, reflecting a perceived lack of presence and effectiveness in addressing employee concerns.

“There is no HR. People don't even know who he is. If you ask any driver, they don't even know they wouldn't be able to tell you even the name of one person in HR. It's a totally dysfunctional structure. It's not like a normal management system” (D01).

“We do not have contact with HR and not receive anything from them. Only union provides information to us. Whatever issues with have, we go to the unions to address” (D14).

“There are no HR support initiatives for covid and general employee well-being. We know HR exist, but they distant from us” (D23).

In addition, it was noted that some bus companies do not have a *dedicated HR team*. This means line managers and supervisors assume responsibility for HR functions. It was also pointed out that the majority of the supervisors and a few managers had been promoted from the rank of drivers who deliver HR responsibilities.

“And so, I now look after more of I suppose you could say that human resources side of things with contracts and bringing on drivers in when drivers exit. I look after payroll. Yeah, I still look after complaints and conflicts...” (M02).

“I’m the manager and I am responsible for recruitment, staff training and development, payroll and conflict management. So yeah, I do a lot of HR function although we don’t have a dedicated HR department, I do handle a lot of HR duties...” (M01).

“Okay, so I've been with the company for 16 years, in the role of depot manager. I have been in the industry for over 40 years. So, I started off by driving in Wellington and came to Auckland, ... and then gradually went through various roles supervising, etc. Now my role involves hiring, performance management, training of employees and so on...” (M05).

“...My role is also to ensure new drivers are properly trained. I also take their complaints and address them if can. Otherwise, I refer them to our managers to deal with them...” (S07).

4.6.4 Camaraderie among drivers

Contrary to the challenges reported in supervisor-driver exchanges, a strong sense of *camaraderie among drivers* emerged as a significant theme during the interviews. More than half of the drivers reported feeling more comfortable around their peers and being more

confident in voicing their opinions and sharing concerns. This strong sense of camaraderie provided a supportive atmosphere among themselves during the pandemic. As a driver described, *“The relationship between ourselves was very helpful and that was important during the pandemic. We always look out for each other and try to be supportive for one another”* (D06).

“... I know my colleagues are in the same situation, if I can help them, I will, if they can help me, they will” (D13).

“...But I always remembered what I enjoyed about it. And the most important thing was being part of a workforce where we all face the same challenges. So, we had to have command of our own vehicle, and our own timetables, and all of that, but everybody was in the same situation. So, there was great camaraderie amongst the colleagues. This was really important. In fact, that's where most of the positive input for achieving the job came from; it came from your colleagues... And just being amongst your colleagues was great knowing they were out on the road today” (D01).

4.7 Personal attributes

Although questions about personal attributes relative to the individual fit to the job were not included in the original interview schedules, the fit characteristics were noted during the interviews. The most dominant themes that emerged reflecting these attributes are presented in Table 17.

Table 17. Personal attributes.

Major themes	Subthemes
Demand-ability fit (DA fit) Need-supply fit (NS fit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DA fit through experience and resilience • NS fit discrepancies (mismatch of pay and skills)
Emotional intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional self-regulations • Self-awareness
Passion and task significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion as intrinsic motivator • Perceived task significance

4.7.1 Demand-ability fit and need-supply fit

Some drivers conveyed a strong alignment between their personal capabilities, like experience and driving skills, and the operational demands of the job, reflecting the theme of *demand-ability fit*. They reported that, despite challenges like long working hours, tight schedules, or navigating through city routes, these were manageable for them. However, several drivers have also expressed frustration that their skills and responsibilities were not adequately matched by fair compensation or recognition, a concern consistent with accounts of low pay reported in Section 4.3.3 (participants D12, D05, and U05), which reflect perceived discrepancy in *need-supply fit* theme.

“I’ve been able to manage the things you listed as challenges, broken shifts, long hours. So, for me, that was manageable” (D07).

“Honestly, in my 15 years as a bus driver, I was always on my own and always sorted out things myself. I hardly call the management because they can’t help me, and I know that. They even tell me, look, I can’t help you or do this or that. I know that, so I tried to help myself by not depending on them. I don’t need anybody” (D03).

“We help people in wheelchair to get onto the bus and with school children, you have to show them authority, otherwise they do what they want, and handling intoxicated

people. But with the years of experience, you can approach these problems... Yeah, so you judge what's going on inside and the outside bus. And then of course, the traffic is another big problem, but I've been in the job long enough so it's not really a problem for me..." (D18).

Similarly, a few supervisors reported that they had adapted to the changing job situation in the pandemic environment. They further indicated that they derived a sense of satisfaction from working in a challenging and dynamic context.

"... I mean, day-to-day operation, every day is different. Every second is different. It is a challenging job, and I took it because I like challenges. It makes my mind more active and helps me see what's behind me when I was driving and how the operations run daily. My previous bosses congratulated me on those aspects of the field I was dealing with. So yeah, in any problem, we'll just say yeah, bring it on" (S08).

"Covid has been a huge challenge for us, but our drivers are working, and we are required to work to make sure our drivers as well... Instead of panicking, I accepted the Covid and tried to adapt to the change and do the best I can" (S04).

4.7.2 Emotional intelligence

Another significant theme that emerged was *emotional self-regulation*, in which a few drivers demonstrated the capacity to remain calm and composed during emotionally charged encounters with hostile passengers. Instead of reacting impulsively to verbal provocation, they consciously chose to de-escalate situations, recognising that engaging would escalate the problem.

“For some passengers, I'm talking to them nicely, all of a sudden, and they start being abusive... But I always say to myself, you know what, step back and let it go because you're not going to achieve anything” (D10).

4.7.3 Passion for the job and task significance

The observation that some bus companies recruited individuals without a *passion for the job* was an interesting theme that surfaced during the interviews. Several participants described how the company's focus on meeting immediate staffing needs led to the recruitment of drivers who had no genuine interest in the position. They further stressed that this lack of desire or interest contributed to high turnover rates, as individuals left the industry once they realised it was not a good fit for them. On the other hand, several drivers indicated their passion for driving despite the unattractive monetary rewards and the challenging aspects of the job.

“I can tell you I don't like the company, but I love my job, and that's why I am still here” (D16).

“I think the company needs to know who they are employing. And the drivers need to have a desire to drive and a desire for public relations. If they don't, they shouldn't be employed because the company employs people who don't have that desire. I have the desire; I have had that desire for years, which is why I'm still here. But I have seen many who complained so much about the job that they really don't belong. So, I say that this is the company's fault and not the fault of the drivers” (D12).

Similar to passion, a few drivers expressed how much the bus driving job meant to them, reflecting the theme *task significance*. They described the satisfaction of feeling embedded into

the daily rhythm of the city, finding fulfilment in knowing their work contributes to its functioning and connectivity.

“And one source of satisfaction is that when you're driving a bus in the city, and you know where you're going, you are part of the fabric of the city. It's a great way to be part of the actual life of the city. And I enjoyed it so much that later when I became a tutor for other drivers, I could honestly say to them, this is the best job in the world” (D01).

4.8 Summary of key findings

The findings suggest an interplay of numerous stressors that impact drivers' health and well-being, including the organisational outcomes, such as recruitment and retention. The working conditions, particularly work hours and schedules, the work environment, and compensation, emerged as dominant themes. The work hours and schedule were identified as the leading cause of sleep deprivation, lack of recovery time, interruption of work-life balance and fatigue. Relative to sleep deprivation, inadequate rest areas at the bus depots were noted as a contributing factor. Regarding the work environment, traffic and toilet amenities on the bus routes were common causes of mental fatigue and concern for the urgency of using toilets, respectively. In addition to the need for toilet use, strict schedules were another impediment. Furthermore, inadequate compensation was a common cause of pay inequity, financial strain and employee perception of lack of recognition. Inadequate compensation was also noted as the leading cause of driver shortage in the industry, where the privatisation of the bus sector was reported to have deteriorated the working conditions and the industry.

Among the pandemic challenges, the fear of infection, threats from passengers and work disruption were cited as the dominant themes, including family separation. In terms of fear of

Covid-19 infection, individual vulnerability was cited as a dominant theme, followed by uncooperative behaviours of the travelling public towards the Covid guidelines and the lack of enforcement to mitigate the risk posed by this misbehaviour. Job insecurity and financial strain associated with reduced income were also significant themes that surfaced within the broader theme of work disruption caused by the pandemic.

Several themes related to the broader theme of supervisor support and leadership included supervisor-driver exchanges, supervisor performance style and obstacles to supervisor performance. The limited interaction between supervisors and drivers was notable, which signals inadequate support and a sense of disconnection between them. Their relationship was also described as reactive, which contributed to a lack of trust, confidence, and respect for supervisors. In contrast to the supervisor-driver exchange, positive camaraderie among drivers was observed as a source of support and motivation. In addition, supervisor leadership and performance were cited as task-oriented and punitive. This, coupled with issues such as supervisor competence and workload, also influenced their exchanges with drivers. Furthermore, lack of HR visibility and the absence of a dedicated HR team also emerged as notable factors contributing to employee perception of organisational support.

Contrary to the inadequate supervisor performance reported, several dominant themes related to supervisor and organisational support have also emerged as significant resources in managing stress. In terms of supervisor support, detecting stress and finding solutions to address and prevent it were identified as key approaches to supervisor support. It was also noted that connecting employees to well-being resources was another approach supervisors and managers used in addressing employee stress. Regarding organisational resources, well-being resources such as workplace health initiatives, training in stress management, and leadership

support were crucial in managing drivers' stress and promoting healthy lifestyle behaviour. Finally, recruitment and retention of drivers within the sector were noted as a significant challenge. This problem was attributed to a lack of resilience and passion for the job, including inadequate compensation and recognition. Figure 1 reports the summary of the results.

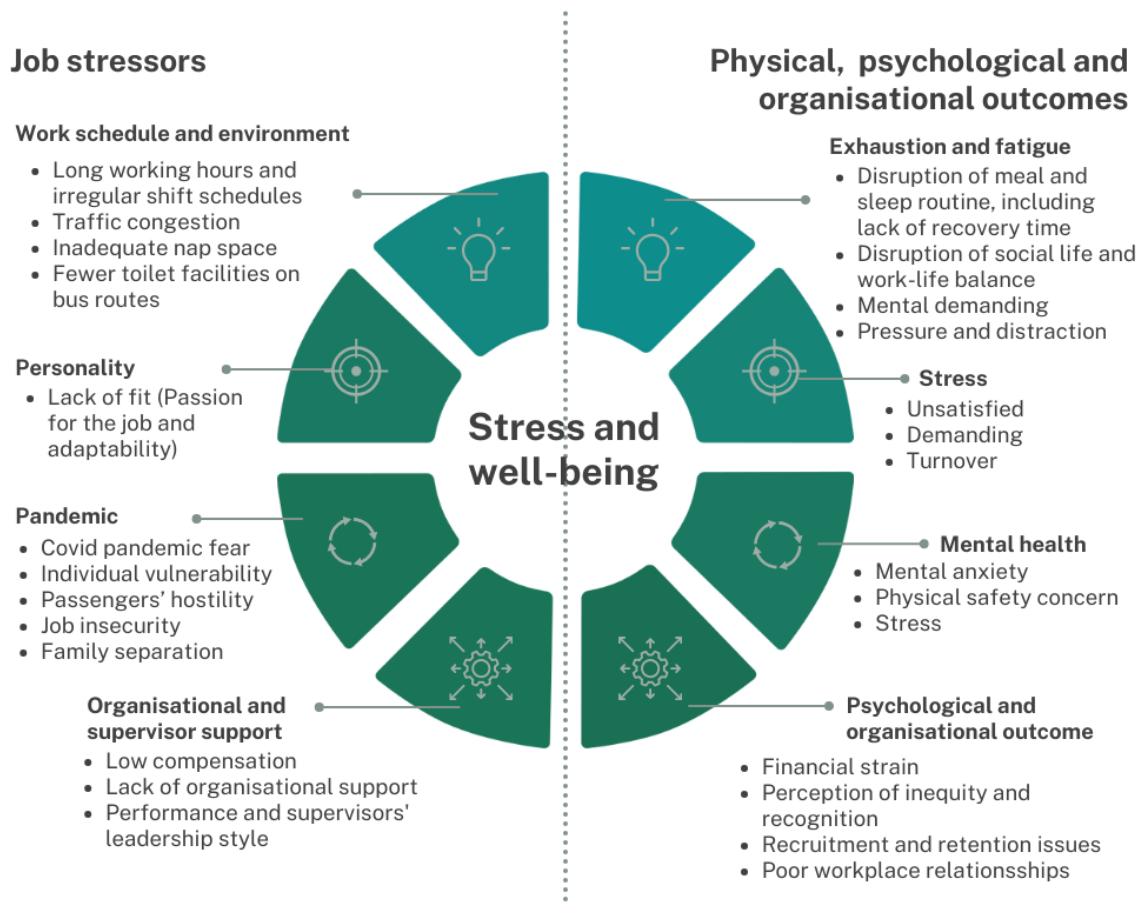


Figure 1. Summary of the results

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive analysis of the data. The data revealed several key findings that addressed the research questions, which indicated that working conditions, including working hours, schedules, interactions with difficult passengers, traffic conditions, ergonomic factors, and compensation, are significant factors in causing stress among bus drivers. These findings are consistent with previous studies on the stress of bus drivers

(Kompier & Di Martino, 1995; Peters et al., 2021; e.g., Tse et al., 2006). In addition, several other dominant themes linked to management practices and individual factors have also emerged as important factors contributing to driver stress and adverse organisational outcomes. For example, the findings indicate that supervisor constraints, notably the quality of the supervisor-drivers' interactions, performance styles and the obstacles supervisors encountered, play a pivotal role in influencing employee well-being.

External factors, such as government regulation and the economic climate, particularly privatisation and competition, were also identified as having an impact on management practices and employee well-being. For example, the findings indicate that the competitive tendering process resulting from the privatisation of the sector has exerted pressure on management to be cost-focused, which led companies to minimise expenses in certain areas, such as reduced incentives. This external influence disrupted the balance between job demands and resources. In addition, the findings suggest that certain aspects of personal resources (e.g., resilience, passion for the job) influence employees' stress. These findings underscore the need to pay attention not only to the physical aspects of employees' working conditions but also to the social, psychological, and organisational aspects, including individual factors.

This study integrates the psychological contract into the JD-R model to enhance understanding of job resources and the implications of perceived breaches of the psychological contract from a resource deficit perspective. The findings suggest that organisations facing competitive pressure may struggle to fulfil employees' expectations, such as equitable compensation or adequate support, which could result in violations of the psychological contract and diminish the efficacy of job resources (Rousseau, 1995). This addendum offers a more refined comprehension of the JD-R model by recognising that job resources are influenced not only by

internal organisational practices but also by external factors. Additionally, the psychological contract emphasises the imperative of meeting employees' emotional and relational needs (Rousseau, 1995), which the JD-R model pays less attention to. These needs are equally important to employees' perceptions, and failing to meet them may prompt a perception of a breach in the psychological contract, which can induce stress and other negative organisational outcomes (Conway & Briner, 2006). Insights gained from this analysis contribute to a broader understanding of organisational dynamics and employee well-being, which offers valuable implications for both theory and practice. The subsequent chapter discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: APPLYING JD-R MODEL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter discusses the findings of this study, which are interpreted through the theoretical lens of the JD-R model and psychological contract theory. The primary objective of the current study is to gain a deeper understanding of the working conditions, stress, and employment relations issues faced by bus drivers in the context of industrial disputes and a pandemic emergency. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the key findings in Section 5.2. Section 5.3 presents the role of the pandemic in the context of bus drivers to provide a preliminary discussion that sets the stage for Section 5.4, which discusses each stressor identified from the findings and explains how they have contributed to the stress of bus drivers (including supervisors) and employment relations issues. In doing so, it responds to research question one, “What job stressors (in the context of industrial actions and the Covid pandemic) impact the well-being of NZ bus drivers?”. The next section 5.5 presents job resources, i.e., organisational-derived forms of support, such as organisational, supervisor, and peer support, to explain how they have contributed to drivers' overall experiences as well as how they can be used effectively to mitigate risks and improve positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction and engagement and reduce turnover. Section 5.6 examines personal resources through the lens of the PJ fit concept to highlight how NZ bus companies can align individual attributes with job demands and integrate them with job resources to enhance both the bus drivers' and organisational performance.

The discussion of resources addresses the second research question, “What have bus companies (including the Auckland Transport) done to mitigate stress to safeguard their bus drivers' well-

being and improve the employment relations climate?”. This discussion highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach that integrates various forms of support into HR practices to mitigate stressors, protect, and enhance the well-being of bus drivers (including supervisors), as well as promote engagement and performance. Finally, Section 5.7 discusses employment relations challenges through the lens of the psychological contract, focusing on the implicit expectations and obligations between employees and employers. This perspective recognises how bus drivers' feelings of fairness, job security, and organisational support are essential in a demanding work environment. The final Section 5.8 presents the summary of the findings. Table 18 presents the structure of the discussion chapter.

Table 18. Structure of Chapter 5 – Discussion

Section	Key focus
5.2 Overview of key findings through the theoretical lens	Introduces the purpose and organisation of the discussion chapter. Explains how findings are analysed through the JD-R model and psychological contract framework.
5.3 The role of the pandemic	Analyses how the pandemic amplified existing job stressors (e.g., health risks, financial strain, social isolation) and shaped organisational responses.
5.4 The job demands component of the JD-R model	Discusses physical, psychological, emotional, and collective job demands (e.g., low pay, split shifts, passenger hostility, inadequate sanitation) and their contribution to stress.
5.5 The resource component of the JD-R model	Examines organisational and social resources including POS, PSS, peer support, and HRM responses; evaluates the adequacy and impact of support during the pandemic crisis.
5.6 Individual resources	Evaluates personal attributes such as emotional intelligence, and passion for work, through the lens of person–job fit as buffers against stress and enhancers of resilience and motivation.
5.7 Psychological contract perspective	Explores perceived breaches or fulfilments of psychological contracts through themes of pay equity, communication, trust, and relational exchange with supervisors.
5.8 Summary	Summarises key findings and their theoretical implications, laying the foundation for the final conclusion chapter.

5.2 Overview of key findings through the theoretical lens

This section provides an overview of the key findings analysed through the lens of the JD-R model and psychological contract theory. The findings reinforce the value of the JD-R model as a flexible and comprehensive framework for analysing occupational stress and well-being, particularly its ability to explain how various job demands and resources interact to influence individual stress and organisational outcomes, such as engagement and turnover. Nonetheless, the findings also underscore a key limitation of the model, particularly its individual-centric focus and emphasis on tangible demands and resources, which limits its scope to account for broader structural and systematic aspects of employment relations, including the impact of collective relationships, regulatory framework, and power dynamics that influence workers' experiences. Additionally, the JD-R model pays limited attention to intangible factors, such as trust, reciprocity and perceived obligations in the employment relationship. The integration of the psychological contract offers a complementary lens by highlighting how drivers' perceptions of unmet obligations and lack of organisational support contribute to stress and employment relationship issues. This holistic approach facilitates a more refined understanding of how both individual and structural elements influence job satisfaction, engagement, and conflict resolution of workplace tensions.

Furthermore, since this study uses the psychological contract theory to examine relational dynamics of employment, a qualitative method is well-suited. Although the quantitative approach facilitates a robust statistical analysis of the correlations among job demands, job resources, and critical outcomes such as burnout and job satisfaction, it falls short in capturing subjective and relational experiences, nor does it elucidate how institutional power structures also influence these interactions (Silverman, 2013). Therefore, a qualitative approach is employed to investigate these domains, including employees' perceptions of managerial

practices, the effects of privatisation on working conditions, and how frontline supervision is experienced daily from a relational perspective (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

The findings suggest a strong association between working conditions, in terms of job characteristics, institutional factors, and organizationally derived forms of support, with employment relations and stress problems. Working conditions encompass various factors that define the environment in which employees carry out their assigned tasks. These factors include physical work environment, as well as psychological and social dimensions, such as workload, job security, interpersonal connections, and organisational culture, which have a significant influence on employee productivity, satisfaction, and general psychological well-being. The relationship between working conditions, employment relations, and stress issues highlights that well-being outcomes are not only determined by individual vulnerabilities but also by institutional factors such as managerial practices, the privatisation of the bus sector, and management-worker relationships. The privatisation of the transport sector in NZ creates structural transformations that impact job characteristics, alter management-worker dynamics, and influence the provision and perception of organisational support. These findings correspond with the broader theoretical frameworks of employment relations and the JD-R model, which emphasises that workplace experience is the product of both individual and structural factors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Edwards, 2003; Kaufman, 2004).

5.3 The role of the pandemic

As discussed in the literature review, the pandemic exacerbated existing occupational challenges as new and unforeseen stresses were introduced. As essential frontline workers, bus drivers were required to work under heightened risk. The uncertainty and fear associated with the possible exposure and contraction of the Covid-19 virus, combined with changing working

conditions, contributed to increased psychological strain. The dynamic and evolving nature of the pandemic also created significant challenges for bus companies to respond promptly and adequately. A key concern has been linked to inadequate organisational support. The current findings demonstrate that bus drivers experience elevated emotional and physical demands, yet they are often without sufficient support. This imbalance reflects the core premise of the JD-R model, where strain intensifies in the absence of adequate support and resources to reduce the job demands. Despite efforts by the bus companies to support their employees, bus drivers reported feeling neglected and inadequately supported in terms of health, safety, and compensation.

The pandemic also disrupted vital relational mechanisms within the workplace, particularly by altering the interactions between supervisors and drivers. The findings demonstrate that supervisors, already tasked with operational responsibilities, faced heightened work demands during the pandemic, including implementing evolving health protocols, maintaining service continuity and addressing bus drivers' growing concerns. These increased demands strained their capacity to engage in consistent, supportive interactions with the drivers. This resulted in supervisors being perceived as more transactional and less relational. Additionally, the relational disconnect was particularly acute for migrant drivers, many of whom have families abroad and were not able to connect with them physically. The erosion of these relational dimensions impacted both drivers' perceptions of supervisors' support and psychological well-being.

This shift was further exacerbated by the structurally isolated nature of the bus-driving profession, where direct supervisory oversight is already limited. In such a context, the absence of visible and responsive leadership undermines drivers' perception of supervisor support and,

subsequently, perceived organisational support. These perceptions contributed to the increased relational tensions and emotional exhaustion among bus drivers, who felt organisationally and interpersonally unsupported. The disruptions of support constituted a perceived breach of the psychological contract, which is grounded in employees' expectations of care, reciprocity, and fairness in exchange for their effort and loyalty (Edwards, 2005; Fletcher, 2017). The subsequent sections delve into the impact of the pandemic on job demands and available resources within the JD-R model, as well as employees' expectations and interpretations within the psychological contract framework.

5.4 The job demands component of the JD-R model

As discussed in the literature review, job demands refer to health impairment processes such as poorly designed jobs, which result in adverse outcomes for employees and organisations by depleting individuals' psychological and physical resources (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). Bus drivers often encounter a range of job demands related to their working conditions. These stress factors are associated with their work-related well-being and safety concerns, including perception of their employer support. The findings indicate that the privatisation of public transportation deteriorates bus drivers' working conditions. For example, participant D07 explained that the privatisation of public transportation due to PTOM led to alterations in the working conditions, including longer working hours, more demanding schedules, reduced break times, and less favourable shift patterns.

The PTOM reform introduced a competitive tendering process in which bus companies bid for contracts. This contributed to cost-cutting measures, resulting in lower wages and reduced driver incentives, and increased pressure on bus drivers to meet strict schedules and maximise efficiency to reduce expenses. These pressures contribute to heightened psychological strain

and reduced job satisfaction, leading to negative outcomes, such as high turnover and acute shortage of drivers in the sector. This section of the chapter presents the main job demands (physical and psychological stressors) as identified from employees' perception of working conditions and the literature. The results suggest that the multiple job demands placed on individual employees are compounded by group features that reflect disadvantage based on gender, ethnicity, and age. Table 19 presents the key job demands identified from the findings, along with their associated consequences.

Table 19. Summary of job demands, findings, and consequences.

Job demand category	Key findings	Consequences
Physical and psychological demands: working schedules	Long hours, split shifts, and irregular rosters disrupted rest and social lives, contributing to chronic fatigue and stress.	Increased fatigue, reduced recovery, poor work-life balance, and long-term stress accumulation.
Psychological and emotional demands: traffic and passenger hostility	Exposure to traffic congestion and abusive passengers led to emotional exhaustion, worsened by lack of support.	Emotional exhaustion, increased anxiety, and reduced job satisfaction and engagement.
Sanitation-related physical and psychological demands	Inadequate toilet facilities and limited breaks raised health concerns and psychological stress, particularly for women.	Health risks, discomfort, increased stress, and perceived neglect of employee dignity.
Financial stress and low pay	Low pay failed to reflect job demands and responsibilities, contributing to financial insecurity and perceptions of unfairness.	Heightened financial strain, dissatisfaction, low morale, and increased turnover intention.
Collective challenges for female bus drivers	Female drivers reported isolation, safety issues, and lack of gender-sensitive provisions, leading to feelings of exclusion.	Feelings of marginalisation, reduced retention of female drivers, and lower engagement.
Challenges facing ethnic minority and migrant workers	Migrant and ethnic minority drivers faced cultural barriers, and limited workplace voice or representation.	Alienation, underutilisation of skills, communication breakdown, and lower morale.
Challenges for older Workers	Older drivers experienced physical strain, and lack of age-appropriate support.	Physical burnout, reduced performance, and early exit from workforce.

5.4.1 Physical and psychological demands: the working schedule

Throughout the interviews, this study identified *long working hours and irregular shifts* among the most significant themes associated with job demands, which negatively impact the physical

and psychological well-being of bus drivers. These demands disrupted the circadian rhythm (sleep-wake cycle), resulting in insufficient recovery time, which exceeded drivers' personal and job-related resources, leading to fatigue and a poor work-life balance. Chronic driver shortages in the industry further compounded these demands due to the extended shifts that some drivers are often asked to cover. For example, participants D12, S02, and D13 described the challenges drivers face as a result of this. This evidence aligns with existing research, which links bus drivers' work schedules to poor sleep quality, reduced recovery time, and fatigue (Chaiard et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020). Similarly, a study of London urban bus drivers indicated parallel results, with approximately thirty-six per cent of drivers experiencing sleepiness while driving at least 2–4 times per month, and twenty-one per cent of drivers struggling to remain awake at least 2–3 times a week (Miller et al., 2020).

The association of long working hours and irregular shifts is *fatigue*, which was a recurring theme in drivers' accounts. Fatigue has also been attributed to a lack of dedicated rest areas at the depot for drivers to take naps during their shift breaks, as well as traffic noise for those taking naps on the bus at layover points, making relaxation and falling asleep difficult. Physical demands include prolonged periods of sedentary posture and manoeuvring heavy buses through often congested traffic, which are intensified by a significant level of responsibility for passengers. These conditions compounded drivers' fatigue by producing physical exhaustion, thereby increasing the risk of errors and accidents. This evidence aligns with prior research, which has shown the relationship between driver fatigue, road accidents, and fatalities (Bioulac et al., 2017; Connor, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). Dorrian et al. (2011) found that fatigue impaired cognitive function that resulted in decreased reaction times, worse judgement, and an increased probability of accidents among bus drivers. Similar finding has been reported in other studies

(e.g., Kim et al., 2018; Maynard et al., 2020; Tse et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2010), which show correlations between fatigue, attention, and decision-making abilities and accidents.

The prolonged sedentary posture coupled with the physical demands of extended hours of driving also contributes to musculoskeletal disorders, notably lower back and neck pain. This is attributed to inadequate ergonomic design in driver cabins and limited opportunities for physical movement and exercise (Pradeepkumar et al., 2020; Rugbeer, 2016; Szeto & Lam, 2007). These physical demands, coupled with the chronic fatigue, were further aggravated by insufficient rest and recovery time. This evidence reinforces the assertion of the JD-R model that sustained high demands without adequate resources lead to adverse health outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These issues were especially pronounced among the older workforce, who experience slower rates of recovery and are more susceptible to injury when exposed to physically demanding situations (Da Costa & Vieira, 2009).

The findings also revealed that inconsistent shift schedules disrupted drivers' meal routines, which extensive literature shows is associated with binge eating and weight gain (Munsch et al., 2012; Wurtman & Wurtman, 1995). Several drivers reported being overweight as a result of inadequate meal breaks and irregular meal schedules. For example, D03 highlighted that inadequate break time often forces drivers to finish their lunch quickly before beginning another shift. Extended work hours and shift fluctuations also contributed to poor dietary habits, with drivers often skipping meals or relying on fast food. Di Milia et al. (2013) found that shift workers have a higher risk of obesity due to the combined impact of poor diets, insufficient physical exercise, and disrupted sleep patterns. Additionally, irregular eating patterns are associated with impaired cognitive functions, including concentration and decision-making, resulting from fluctuations in blood sugar levels that affect energy levels and alertness (Lisper

& Eriksson, 1980; Lowden et al., 2010). This is particularly critical in driving, which requires a high level of constant concentration. The cumulative effects of these stressors, combined with age-related physiological decline, raise the vulnerability of older bus drivers.

Furthermore, the irregular shifts and long working hours also contributed to the poor work-life balance of drivers. The findings establish that the isolated nature of the bus driver job, combined with long working hours, including non-standard shifts like early mornings, late nights, weekends, and holidays, hinders drivers' ability to maintain a consistent work-life balance. Drivers often struggle to spend time with family and friends or engage in social activities due to the physically and mentally demanding nature of the job, which often leaves them feeling fatigued for social interactions. Consequently, drivers may prioritise rest and recovery during their time off, further limiting their ability to establish social connections or engage in activities such as physical workouts or hobbies. According to the JD-R model, work intensification reduces drivers' ability to replenish energy by depleting personal and social resources (e.g., time for family, exercise, and recovery) to cope with demands, which increases strain and disengagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). For example, participants D05 and D01 reported the effect of long working hours and schedules on personal relationships. These findings extend prior research, such as Costa (2010), who asserted that shift work disrupts one's family and social life, especially when paired with extended work hours.

These findings contribute insights to the JD-R model by demonstrating how sleep disruption, poor diet, social isolation, and scheduling, including driver shortages, interact to form entrenched systems of job demands. These are conditions created and intensified by the commercial aspect of the PTOM in the NZ bus sector. The persistent deficit of job resources to alleviate these demands leads to fatigue among the drivers. Demerouti and Bakker (2011)

observed that excessive job demands are precursors of mental exhaustion and burnout, particularly when there are insufficient job resources to counterbalance them. As such, effective interventions should involve implementing more flexible work schedules or rotating shifts to provide drivers with adequate rest and personal time. This includes self-scheduling systems that give drivers more control over managing their shifts. The study suggests that greater autonomy in such shift-based jobs would promote better work-life balance and reduce stress and fatigue (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Additionally, encouraging sufficient recovery time between shifts by enforcing strict rest periods and minimising overtime would allow drivers to take adequate breaks during long shifts. This approach mitigates the effects of physical fatigue, reduces stress levels, and enhances overall job performance and well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001).

5.4.2 Psychological and emotional demands: traffic and passengers' hostility

Bus drivers encounter significant *psychological demands* in the form of cognitive and emotional exhaustion, which deplete their mental and emotional resources. This aligns with the premise of the JD-R model, which posits that when job demands outweigh available personal and job resources, employees are more likely to experience strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The psychological demands arise from environmental factors, particularly *traffic congestion* and the need for emotional regulation when dealing with potentially aggressive and dangerous passengers. Participants D09 and D01 cited traffic congestion as a major stressor due to the constant need for vigilance, quick decision-making, and judgment to manoeuvre through difficult spaces, which makes driving mentally demanding. During the early stages of the pandemic, especially during lockdown periods, there was a temporary relief from traffic congestion as remote work regulations and restrictions on movement reduced the number of

vehicles on the road (Teufel et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). However, this relief was short-lived. As restrictions eased, traffic volumes resurfaced, specifically due to continued concerns about public transportation, more people chose private vehicles (Das et al., 2021). These findings align with previous studies (Duffy & McGoldrick, 1990; Evans & Carrère, 1991; Taylor & Dorn, 2008), which noted a strong correlation between exposure to high levels of traffic congestion and psychophysiological stress. This strain is further exacerbated by the pressure to adhere to strict timetables.

Emotional demands intensified due to growing *hostility from passengers* during the pandemic, with drivers reporting abuse. This is due to cases where passengers refused to follow the Covid safety guidelines, including wearing masks and maintaining physical distance. It was also noted that even during the peak of the Covid pandemic, the number of passengers wearing masks on the bus decreased, which put drivers in an uncomfortable position. Many passengers were becoming increasingly hostile about Covid rules and felt it was their right not to wear masks or practice social distancing on the bus. Participants D04 and M01 explained the assaults and mistreatments drivers received as a result of passengers' refusal to comply with the Covid rules. These findings align with some studies (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2022; Taylor & Asmundson, 2021) conducted during the pandemic period, which underscore the emotional toll of frontline workers.

Consistent with bus drivers' encounters with difficult and aggressive passengers, Sommovigo et al. (2019) indicate that customer threats are a significant occupational health and safety risk commonly encountered by frontline employees in service-oriented jobs. This threat can range from intentionally uncivil, offensive, hostile, and even violent behaviours that cause psychological or physical harm. Several studies attest that behaviours such as verbal abuse,

physical threats, or disrespectful interactions in the workplace generate a highly stressful atmosphere that may result in emotional exhaustion, burnout, and potentially psychological distress (Baer et al., 2015; Ferguson et al., 2022; Tu et al., 2021). Constant exposure to such aggressive behaviour also raises the probability of adverse health consequences such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Davis et al., 2023; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012).

Additionally, research from Canada (Zhou et al., 2017) and Australia (Ferguson et al., 2022; Lincoln & Gregory, 2015) suggests that routine levels of passenger incivility and hostility are prevalent. Evidence also suggests that a significant number of aggressive occurrences are unreported (Douglas & Uzosike, 2017; Lincoln & Gregory, 2015), in part because of drivers' perceived vulnerability, including fear of negative appraisals from their supervisors and colleagues. The poorly resourced and predominantly isolated nature of the bus driving occupation may invite passenger misbehaviour and aggression, which, furthermore, may not sufficiently be mitigated by protection and security measures, including protective barriers. Ferguson et al. (2022) contend that despite passenger threats, the levels of control and support for bus drivers were often low. In line with this contention, the current findings suggest that a lack of immediate support exposes drivers to an elevated risk of harm. For example, participants D01 and D10 explained the difficulty in getting organisational and police support in situations of abuse and attack.

A novel insight from this study is how routine exposure to passengers' threats in a physically isolated job contributes to what can be understood as learned helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 1976). When drivers are repeatedly exposed to unavoidable and uncontrollable situations of passengers' hostility without organisational support, especially when there is an insufficient immediate supervisor or police support, as described by participants D16, D06, and D01, they

come to the view that they are helpless. When this unpleasant situation is tolerated because drivers have formed the opinion that they cannot change it, their self-efficacy is eroded, which is consistent with the tenets of learned helplessness theory (Maier & Seligman, 1976; Rizvi & Sikand, 2020). Over time, the accumulation of these experiences may gradually diminish their ability to manage stress, leading to disengagement, decreased work performance, and, in some cases, intention to quit.

According to the JD-R model, hostile social interactions are conceptualised as emotionally depleting job demands, which can lead to increased levels of stress, especially when there are no or inadequate job resources, such as organisational or supervisor support, to mitigate the stressors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Prolonged stress increases the likelihood of burnout, marked by emotional fatigue, depersonalisation, and reduced personal achievement (Demerouti et al., 2001). This has a detrimental effect on job satisfaction and engagement, as drivers may experience feelings of being overwhelmed and disengaged from their work. Over time, this can foster a strong tendency to quit work as drivers attempt to avoid the overwhelming demands that consistently undermine their well-being and motivation (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013).

5.4.3 Physical and psychological demands associated with inadequate sanitary facilities

Limited sanitary facilities were a distinct stress factor that emerged from the findings. This constraint illustrates how unmet basic physiological needs for using toilets when needed can lead to compounded physical and psychological demands. The findings suggest that the limited availability of toilet facilities on bus routes, often accompanied by tight schedules, results in physical discomfort. Interestingly, to avoid or minimise the need for bathroom breaks, drivers tend to limit fluid intake as a tactic. However, this increases dehydration, which is associated

with potential health issues, such as kidney stones, as demonstrated in the health literature (Jagtap et al., 2022; Kandola, 2019; Palmer et al., 2018; Trinchieri, 2008). This evidence aligns with the report of participant D4, who developed a urinary tract infection due to dehydration and a delay in using the toilet.

In addition, dehydration is associated with psychological strain and cognitive impairment, including reduced concentration and increased fatigue, which is a safety hazard in driving, as this task requires high concentration (Ganio et al., 2011). The constant worry about finding toilet access also acts as a source of distraction, with distraction recognised as a leading cause of road accidents (Beanland et al., 2013; Kashevnik et al., 2021). Given the high level of concentration required for driving, discomfort may lead to rushed or impulsive decisions that can compromise safety (Recarte & Nunes, 2003). This evidence suggests that limited toilet facilities are a common source of stress in driving occupations.

The issues of limited toilet facilities highlight an overlooked yet systematic deficiency in the bus driving environment. Although the provision of public toilet amenities along the bus routes may formally fall under the jurisdiction of local councils and transport authorities, bus operators cannot abdicate their responsibilities to advocate for this basic need and ensure that drivers have access to it. At the same time, ensuring that drivers have sufficient break times to access toilets is crucial not only for protecting drivers' physical health but also for reducing work-related stress that might result in accidents. According to the JD-R model, the absence of basic amenities, such as access to toilets, constitutes a job demand that contributes to physical and psychological strain when left unmitigated (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Also, addressing the basic need of sanitary facilities signals organisational support (Demerouti et al., 2001).

5.4.4 The psychological demands imposed by low pay

The findings suggest that low pay imposed a significant psychological burden on bus drivers through financial strain, which impacts their job satisfaction and work engagement. It was also noted that the absence of incentives, such as overtime and bonuses, further compounded their strain and highlighted growing discontent among them. Participants D23 and D07 described the inadequacy of pay to meet the rising cost of living. Reports have indicated that the cost of living for the average household (as measured by the household living-costs price indexes) in NZ increased, with higher interest payments, house rents, and grocery food being the largest contributors to the increase (Stats NZ, 2023). Despite this increase, drivers' pay has not increased correspondingly, leaving them struggling to keep pace. The bus drivers' strike is a case in point regarding the disparity between low pay and financial need due to the high cost of living, with low-income households being disproportionately affected (Niall, 2023; Todd, 2022). Industrial disputes emerged from enduring grievances regarding low pay, long working hours, and poor working conditions, which employers or industry regulators failed to address effectively (Niall, 2023).

Within the framework of the JD-R model, financial strain serves as a job demand that depletes drivers' cognitive and emotional resources and undermines their capacity to engage with work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). A central tenet of this model is that job engagement depends on having sufficient personal and job resources to meet demands, and the imbalance between them may result in disengagement and lack of motivation (Albrecht & Marty, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This also aligns with Hobfoll's (1998) conservation of resources theory, which posits that when individuals lack financial security, they are more likely to experience resource depletion, limiting their energy and focus on work (Jawahar et al., 2022; Kulikowski & Sedlak, 2017). Engagement requires not just the physical presence of

an employee but also their psychological and emotional commitment to their job (Albrecht & Marty, 2017; Christian et al., 2011). The persistent concern about meeting basic needs for themselves and their dependents may occupy a substantial amount of their mental and emotional resources, which can lead to a decline in overall engagement (Kim & Garman, 2003).

Financial strain is also associated with long-term consequences for physical and mental health. A review of the relevant literature recently concluded that financial hardship increased vulnerability to a range of mental health difficulties (Frankham et al., 2020). The inability to afford essential healthcare, maintain a healthy diet, or engage in stress-reducing activities exacerbates the already arduous physical and emotional strain caused by the demanding nature of the job. Similarly, evidence from this study suggests that insufficient income forces some drivers to cut back spending on both essentials and activities that promote quality of life, leading them to experience the feeling of being trapped in a cycle of financial insecurity, which can compound poor well-being outcomes (Falconier & Epstein, 2011; Kinnunen & Feldt, 2004). A 10-year review on well-being emphasised the impact of low income in reducing quality of life and general well-being (Sano et al., 2021).

Low pay is also a critical problem from the perspective of employment relations and HRM theory as well as work psychology. Its implications extend beyond the monetary compensation that bus drivers receive, encompassing broader issues of how drivers perceive their value recognition and within the workforce (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). Low pay in demanding roles can be viewed as an unfair wage-effort bargain, which aligns with the effort-reward imbalance theory (Siegrist et al., 2003). This theory posits that the misalignment between high effort and low rewards leads to adverse outcomes such as increased stress, reduced job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and higher turnover intentions (De Jonge et al., 2000; Siegrist

et al., 2003). In alignment with the current findings, drivers felt that their labour was less valued than that of workers in other sectors. Recognition is a crucial element affecting job satisfaction and motivation in the employment relations literature (Boxall & Macky, 2009). The Covid pandemic highlighted that bus drivers provide an essential public service, yet low pay and inadequate recognition promote a sense of injustice, both relative to other roles and in terms of their own job risks and demands. Drivers often asserted that their compensation fails to align with the job duties and demands, which include extended hours, irregular shifts, and dealing with problematic passengers, as reported by participant U05, who asserts that driving is a high-risk job and deserves fair compensation. Similarly, participants M07 and D12 expressed dissatisfaction that bus driving is a high-skilled occupation, but drivers are not compensated fairly for their skills and responsibilities.

From an organisational perspective, the findings suggest that low pay contributes to drivers' dissatisfaction and the acute shortage of drivers in the sector. This evidence aligns with existing research, which indicates that financial stress significantly predicts turnover intentions (Wynen & De Beeck, 2014; Üngüren et al., 2024). When drivers cannot meet their financial needs through their current employment, they are more likely to pursue better opportunities elsewhere, even if it means departing from a long-term career. Several studies also support this claim, which is common among low-paid workers (Staufenbiel & König, 2010; Tekleab et al., 2005). This may also incur substantial expenses for organisations regarding recruitment, training, and the attrition of experienced workers. Elevated turnover rates also result in workforce instability, which can diminish organisational effectiveness and undermine the morale of remaining employees. Nevertheless, the structural constraints of the PTOM-era sector somewhat limit what organisations do to lift drivers' pay. Hence, addressing the compensation problem requires broad reforms in contracting and employment relations

practices. A fair compensation and recognition system not only improves job satisfaction but also fosters trust and a positive employment relationship, which is critical for long-term organisational success.

5.4.5 Collective challenges: female drivers

One of the key criticisms of the JD-R model is that it is essentially individually focused (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). The findings of this study, however, highlighted collective stressors experienced among bus drivers, both as a group and within specific demographic components. Take women, for example, who reported unique and gendered challenges that extend beyond individual-level demands, which arise from their minority status in a typically male-dominated role. This has wider implications for women's entry and retention in this occupation. This is noted in the more general literature, with research indicating that women in male-dominated industries and occupations report elevated levels of pressure and emotional dissonance (Akanji et al., 2024; Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). In this regard, the study suggests that stressors may not only be influenced by individual factors but also shared working conditions and group-based vulnerabilities, which extend beyond the scope of the JD-R model's original focus. Accordingly, the study offers a novel contribution to the JD-R model by demonstrating how gender dynamics in structurally isolated roles amplify psychosocial demands and limit access to coping resources, factors that are insufficiently addressed in the existing JD-R literature. In addition, despite efforts to increase female representation, the low female talent pool and high turnover of women in male-dominated jobs persist (Catalyst, 2022; Halliday et al., 2022). This is apparent in the transport industry, where research indicates barriers such as lower earnings and unfavourable work conditions that fail to accommodate caring responsibilities (Murphy et al., 2023).

The findings demonstrate that female drivers face compounding stressors due to social isolation, given their minority status, which is also indicated in other research (Wright, 2015). The absence of social networks and support can heighten feelings of isolation and emotional strain, which may affect the process of women's integration into the workplace. Within the JD-R model, such isolation can be understood as both a job demand, requiring constant emotional regulation and a resource deficiency, where supportive social networks are lacking. In the absence of a feeling of inclusion or community, female bus drivers may encounter difficulties maintaining their motivation and involvement in their jobs. Additionally, the prevalent gendered expectations and stereotypes in the bus driving profession might foster an intimidating work environment for women. Female employees may encounter or feel exposed to gender-based discrimination or harassment, which not only contributes to psychological stress but also compromises job satisfaction and commitment (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Moreover, the expectation to prove their abilities in a predominantly male-dominated profession can result in heightened levels of stress and burnout, as women may feel compelled to exert more effort and extend their working hours in order to achieve the same level of recognition as their male counterparts (Heilman, 2012). This aligns with the concept of role congruity, which explains that women who hold responsible positions in male-dominated fields experience higher levels of stress due to gender biases and stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Hence, the persistent pressure to fulfil or exceed expectations can be burdensome and contribute to an increased degree of job demand for women.

The findings also indicate that poor working conditions, including sanitary facilities, working time arrangements, experiences of harassment and a lack of support in relation to passenger hostility and intimidation, were reported to affect women, as indicated by participants D27 and M01. This aligns with a report on “Making the transport sector fit for women to work in”,

which highlights the risk of violence that women face when working in operational transport roles (Helfferich & Franklin, 2020). Additionally, long working hours and irregular schedules were reported to impact women's ability to balance caring responsibilities, which emerged as another job demand, as indicated by participants D05 and D01. This was identified as one of the reasons for the low participation of women in the bus sector and urban transport more generally, as they continue to bear the majority of caring responsibilities within the household setting (Heilman, 2012; Helfferich & Franklin, 2020).

Caring responsibilities are often invisible to employers (Sundaresan, 2014), and any part-time schedules are usually offered at peak travel times, which conflict, for example, with school needs. In addition to such practical barriers, gender stereotyping of transport work as excessively demanding and challenging for women may reinforce their exclusion (Turnbull, 2013). These stereotypes may have an impact on women's career choices, directing them away from professions perceived to be masculine and perpetuating work-related barriers to entry and retention (Good et al., 2012; Heilman, 2012; Murphy et al., 2007). The under-representation and inferior working experiences of women mean that employers, regulators and other stakeholders need to address any entrenched male culture, promote equal treatment and work-life balance, and guarantee safe and healthy working conditions in workplaces (Coral & Isusi, 2007; Helfferich & Franklin, 2020).

Furthermore, the findings highlight low psychological safety for women in discussing their concerns with male supervisors. Several participants expressed discomfort discussing personal concerns with male supervisors, noting a general lack of empathy or action regarding their needs. This signals a deficiency in perceived supervisory support, a central resource that buffers demands and contributes to improved well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). In particular,

participants D11 and M01 reported that male-dominated leadership and the absence of effective grievance mechanisms undermined trust, voice, and psychological safety (Fouad et al., 2017; Jolly et al., 2021).

5.4.6 Collective challenges: the ethnic minority and migrant workforce

Another key component of the extension of the JD-R model that this study highlights is how the traditional individual stressors of this role interact with broader systematic disadvantages specific to migrant and ethnic minority workers. This workforce group is often positioned at the lower tier of the labour market, confronted with high workloads, precarious employment, inadequate compensation, and limited access to social protections, which are associated with heightened stress levels (Ahmed et al., 2022; Berchet et al., 2023; Pérez et al., 2012; Van Ginneken, 2013; Wadsworth et al., 2006). The current findings highlight that during the pandemic, migrant drivers were not only impacted by the core demands of the role, such as long hours and split shifts, but were also disproportionately exposed to elevated job insecurity, financial strain, and emotional distress due to the fear of job loss, reduced hours, and income uncertainty. These factors represent essential job resources, and the loss of these resources undermines the individual's capacity to meet their basic needs. Consistent with the conservation of resources theory, the loss of these economic and social resources intensifies perceived stress (Van Woerkom et al., 2015).

The Covid-19 pandemic measures implemented to curb virus transmission, such as lockdowns, social isolation, and movement restrictions, further exacerbated pre-existing inequalities already faced by the migrant workforce (Koh, 2020; Mukumbang, 2021; Tamin et al., 2021). In NZ, ethnic minority drivers who make up a large proportion of the workforce in the urban bus sector were severely affected by the pandemic-induced situation, such as job losses, wage

reductions, and heightened economic uncertainty (Debus et al., 2021). Additionally, the health hazards associated with their frontline roles, along with insufficient access to healthcare and paid sick leave, which serve as critical job resources, increased their susceptibility to both economic concerns and illness. These issues made migrant workers especially vulnerable, as they depended on continued employment, with minimal bargaining power to demand improved salaries or working conditions.

The Covid-19 pandemic-triggered stressors introduced anxiety among migrant drivers about their continued employment and financial stability (Almeida & Santos, 2020; Khanna, 2020). This fear further compounded their vulnerability due to their contingent visa status, which restricts them from accessing government support. Consistent with this claim, the current findings suggest that workers in the NZ bus sector saw reduced hours and even temporary layoffs for many drivers due to a fall in passenger services and restriction guidelines. Consequently, available shifts were shared among the drivers, resulting in a reduction in the overall work schedules of the bus drivers. This meant that drivers had fewer hours than they were used to, which affected their regular income. Participants D02 and S03 explained how reduced schedules and inadequate government subsidies on earnings impacted their capacity to meet basic needs. These findings align with the conservation of resources theory, which posits that the threat or loss of valued resources such as income and job security is a primary source of stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Van Woerkom et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the mandated restrictions on movement compounded the stressors for migrant workers, who often rely on informal social networks for emotional and economic support. These networks, encompassing friends, extended family, and community groups, provide essential coping mechanisms for addressing the pressures of employment, financial instability,

and the challenges of adapting to a new cultural and social environment (Ryan et al., 2008). The findings noted that family separation because of travel restrictions and lockdown measures also made it difficult for many drivers to visit or reunite with their families. For example, participants D08 and D24 explained the stress of missing family and not being able to reunite with them. Consistent with this evidence, the study by Freeman et al. (2021) on the implications of the pandemic in NZ and the Pacific indicates that the border closures heavily impacted Pacific Island families, causing separation among families as some were unable to return to their homes and reunite with their families. Similar findings were reported from the United States (Muruthi et al., 2023). Migrant workers also faced new financial difficulties in supporting their families remotely, which added to their emotional strain (Akombi-Inyang et al., 2024; Karim et al., 2020). Research has shown that the increased social isolation resulting from Covid-19 preventive measures intensified a mental health problem already linked to stressful employment and migration (Jeffers et al., 2022).

The interplay of social isolation and economic precarity imposed a “double burden” on migrant workers, affecting their overall well-being. For the migrant and ethnic minority workforce, stress is not solely the result of immediate job conditions but of an embedded system characterised by limited resources, inadequate legal and social protections, and constrained voice mechanism opportunities. These intersecting stressors suggest that their vulnerability is not merely individual but systemic. Therefore, a more inclusive organisational strategies that account for the unique challenges of migrant essential workers, particularly during crisis contexts, is critical to protecting their well-being.

5.4.7 Collective challenges: older workers

Building on the impact of the pandemic, the *vulnerabilities of older drivers due to age-related health risks* emerged as a significant theme that posed a heightened threat to this workforce group. For example, participants D08 and D12 disclosed their pre-existing health conditions that exposed them to the risk of severe illness, hospitalisation and even death. As reported in Chapter 4, the NZ bus sector has a disproportionate reliance on drivers over the age of 50. Ageing is associated with a myriad of comorbidities, including decreased immune response and slower recovery rates, which place individuals at greater risk of adverse health outcomes (Tejada-Vera & Kramarow, 2022). Prolonged exposure to core demands of working conditions (e.g., long working hours, traffic conditions, low pay), coupled with anxiety and stress of contracting the virus, can further compromise the resilience of their immune system, and make them more susceptible to illnesses (Banerjee, 2020; Lee, 2020). According to Rinsky-Halivni et al. (2022), the ageing workforce experienced mental declines during the pandemic due to prolonged social isolation and heightened fear of illness and highlighted the need for employers' intervention to protect them. Similarly, De Pue et al. (2021) asserted that the pandemic severely affected the mental health of older adults because of increased loneliness and the disruption of daily routines that are essential for psychological well-being. Lockdowns and movement restrictions, while necessary for public health, also had unintended consequences for the physical, mental, and social health of older frontline workers, especially those with pre-existing health conditions, who remained in close contact with the public (Rossi et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020).

Given the reliance of the NZ bus sector on an ageing workforce, implementing robust safety measures to protect them becomes imperative (Cummings et al., 2010). Although older workers possess valuable experience and skills that contribute to operational stability and efficiency,

the physically and mentally demanding nature of bus driving places them at heightened risk for health problems, including chronic fatigue and musculoskeletal issues, even before the pandemic. The effect of Covid increased job demands, as well as work and financial insecurity, which negatively impacted the well-being and engagement of older workers (aged 55+) in such already stressful jobs (Kayaalp et al., 2023). Thus, the pandemic exposed existing vulnerabilities among older drivers and underscored the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms (e.g., flexible scheduling and reduce work hours) that account for age-related risks.

Furthermore, despite the vulnerability risk, the findings also revealed that some drivers continued working due to financial pressure, even though they were eligible for leave. This reflects how financial strain, driven by the fear of income loss, may outweigh the need for health protection. Such behaviour highlights the trade-off employees often make between economic security and personal well-being. Additionally, some drivers, such as D13, D08, and U04, expressed anxiety not only for themselves but also about bringing the Covid-19 virus home to their vulnerable family members, particularly elderly people with a deteriorating health condition, as well as those unvaccinated. This persistent fear added emotional demand, further compounding their work-related stress. This highlights the need for promoting a supportive work environment where workers feel secure in prioritising their health without fear of economic insecurity.

5.5 The resource component of the JD-R model

The following sections of the chapter examine two key resource components of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007): job resources (Section 5.5) and personal resources (Section 5.6). Job resources encompass the physical, psychological, social, and organisational aspects of the

job that help to decrease employees' experience of job demands and foster growth, learning, and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the context of NZ bus drivers, the examination of the job resources deepens the understanding of how these resources, or their lack, shape psychological contracts and employment relationships, which is discussed in section 5.7. Job resources, such as POS and PSS, including peer support, are not only crucial in alleviating the negative impacts of high job demands, but the inadequacy of these resources is often perceived as a breach of the psychological contract. This perceived breach can manifest in dissatisfaction, disengagement, and turnover. This dynamic is especially pertinent in the privatised NZ bus sector, where cost-saving measures have constrained the provision of adequate job resources. Consequently, expectations of support and recognition are not met.

The examination of these job resources also sheds light on how systemic barriers affect not only individuals' well-being but also broader employment relationships. Systemic constraints, particularly cost-saving measures, limit job resources while exacerbating stress and dissatisfaction among bus drivers. The findings highlight the value of strategic investments in job resources to help re-establish a psychological contract balance, enhance retention, and improve labour relations, especially in this critical yet often underappreciated profession. The study's outcome offers practical insights for organisational and HR practices on the significance of resource allocation and support systems in improving drivers' retention and service sustainability in the sector. Moreover, it contributes to employment relations literature by demonstrating how structural and relational factors affect job satisfaction and organisational commitment in challenging and low-paid professions.

5.5.1 Employee perceptions of organisational support

The current findings demonstrate that POS is a crucial job resource in influencing bus drivers' coping abilities in response to demanding working conditions, which aligns with the premise of the JD-R model (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). However, drivers reported a deficit in this resource, including insufficient rest areas and a lack of support during incidents involving hostile passengers attacking drivers. For example, participants D12 and D18 highlighted the lack of rest space for drivers to take naps as a factor contributing to their fatigue between shifts. At the same time, M01 and D27 reported inadequate support in circumstances of passenger threats, which exposed them to a heightened risk of harm. In addition, the pandemic further underscores the vulnerability of drivers, as reported by participants D02 and D08, who expressed anxiety over reduced hours and potential job loss, which underscores the protective role of POS during crises.

POS includes proactive organisational measures to protect employees. Participants M06 and S10 reported the value of POS offered, including the training and education drivers received, as well as risk management, which encompasses dealing with disgruntled passengers, self-care, fatigue management, diet, and sleep. Employee assistance programs were also implemented as a proactive strategy to promote the psychological well-being of drivers, given the growing incidence of work-related stress and mental health issues. Due to drivers' unique stressors, including passengers' hostility, traffic, and time pressure as noted in the preceding section of this chapter, more targeted interventions tailored to the unique needs of the workforce, such as de-escalation training, would be effective in addressing disruptive passengers, as well as ergonomic improvements to reduce lower back pain and musculoskeletal issues (Tse et al., 2006). These interventions not only help drivers adapt to the work environment and limit exposure to stressors, but also improve their perceptions of the organisational commitment to

their well-being (Grawitch et al., 2006; LaMontagne et al., 2007; Nielsen & Noblet, 2018). Existing literature has emphasised POS as a critical resource in the perception of employees, and in such a structurally demanding service role where exposure to health and safety risks is routine, POS becomes even more important (Canboy et al., 2023; Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Stamper & Johlke, 2003).

Moreover, the findings suggest that some bus drivers (e.g., D05 and M09) are taking personal initiatives to protect their health (e.g., walking, eating right or getting sufficient sleep) despite the restrictions posed by the structurally demanding nature of their job. While these personal efforts are valuable in supporting health, such efforts would become more effective when aligned with organisational support strategies (e.g., gym access). A workplace culture that prioritises health and creates an environment where employees feel encouraged and supported in their health endeavours contributes to a more productive workforce (Payne et al., 2018). Grossmeier et al. (2020) emphasise that a well-designed wellness program with incentives, such as gym memberships or walking clubs, supported by organisational leadership, can substantially enhance employees' levels of physical activity, eating habits, and general health. These initiatives can lead to a reduction in sickness-related absenteeism and healthcare costs, while simultaneously boosting employee morale and productivity (Zhang et al., 2022). A study of the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion among frontline restaurant workers shows that employees' emotional exhaustion was lower when they perceived higher organisational support (Chen & Eyoun, 2021).

As discussed in the literature review, POS is rooted in social exchange theory (Blau, 2017) and is a crucial job resource, particularly in the demanding and isolating bus driving role. POS asserts that workplace relationships are governed by reciprocal exchanges, whereby employees

offer loyalty and effort in exchange for organisational support and resources (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The reciprocation of effort and support enhances employees' motivation and coping abilities in response to the job demands. Drivers who sense that organisations care about their contribution and well-being will feel compelled to reciprocate by engaging in positive work-related behaviours, and in doing so, they develop a strong attachment with the organisation (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). POS helps cultivate a sense of belonging and commitment, which also helps reduce stress and turnover intention (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

However, the findings demonstrate that drivers perceived low organisational support in some critical areas, reflected in poor compensation, lack of recognition, and inadequate response to risks associated with the role, which were reported to affect their job satisfaction. For example, participants D23 and U05 stated that drivers did not feel respected and valued because their salaries and working conditions failed to sufficiently compensate for the risks and demands of the job. These findings align with POS theory, which regards compensation and recognition as tangible indicators of an organisation valuing its employees' contributions (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), and with motivation theory, where pay functions as a hygiene factor critical to employee commitment (Mottaz, 1988). Consistent with this view, although interventions like EAPs and de-escalating training may improve POS, their effectiveness is fundamentally constrained if drivers perceive unfair compensation and a lack of recognition.

5.5.2 POS and HRM

Building on the significance of POS, HRM plays a supportive role in organisations, serving as a bridge between management and employees, where HR practices and policies serve as tangible representations of organisational support (Guest, 2011; Ulrich, 2010). Practices such

as training and development, work-life balance, equal employment opportunity, and compensation policies contribute to the organisational culture that signals to employees the values and priorities of the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Gavino et al., 2012). In this sense, HR practices play a fundamental role in shaping and fostering high levels of POS among employees. The current findings, however, indicate a contrasting reality within the NZ bus sector, where HR engagement with drivers is largely distant and inconsistent, as evidenced by the dominant theme of a *lack of visible HR engagement*, reflecting limited visibility and inadequate HR initiatives. For example, when participants (e.g., D01 and D23) were asked about HR well-being initiatives in addressing employees' stress and employment relations issues, they highlighted a notable absence of HR presence and support. The response also suggests that some companies have no dedicated HR professional or team. These findings demonstrate that drivers were reliant on operational managers or supervisors for support.

The absence of HR expertise suggests that HRM was either undervalued or not leveraged as a strategic resource to support and address the drivers' challenges and issues. This may reflect an organisation holding a traditional perspective of HR as an administrative function rather than a strategic business partner. In such cases, HR responsibilities are often redistributed or downsized as a cost-cutting measure. According to Kaufman (2004), organisations seeking cost efficiency may consider HR as dispensable in their quest for streamlined operations, which may result in an inadequate investment in HR initiatives or even outsourcing key HR tasks. Similarly, Boxall and Purcell (2022) indicate that organisations that prioritise resource conservation over investment usually adopt a reactive HR approach, limiting HR functions to administrative responsibilities such as payroll and compliance. This reinforces the belief that HR activities, including recruitment, training, and employee development, are viewed as costs rather than integral components of corporate strategy, which could be reflected in bus operators'

practices because of the implementation of the PTOM. Such an approach restricts the perceived worth of HRM, leading to insufficient investments in cultivating HR capabilities to drive organisational success (Lawler & Boudreau, 2020). Ulrich (2010) postulated that organisations that understand the strategic value of HR view employees as valuable assets and a source of achieving a competitive advantage, which underpins the rationale for investment in HR initiatives. However, without the support from the top management, HR practices remain marginal to the organisation's core strategy, which can limit their contribution to long-term organisational success (Guest, 2011; Ulrich et al., 1995).

This study found that the implications of PTOM forced bus companies to tighten their financial systems through the implementation of a battery of financial measures and targets. This has impacted the general working conditions of drivers, including compensation and the physical aspects of the job, which may also contribute to downplaying the value of HRM. For example, participant D01 explained the impact of privatisation and PTOM, which intensified work schedules and resulted in the cessation of overtime pay. This evidence aligns with several studies, which indicate that when organisations need to cut costs, they often look at investments in people first, such as wages and headcount, as well as resources available for employee support and development (Guest, 2011, 2017; Lawler & Boudreau, 2020). Scholars have argued that HR expertise is imperative to navigate the complexities of labour relations and foster positive employment relations (Storey, 2014; Turnbull et al., 1992). HR practitioners with specialised knowledge, such as employment relations and labour law, can effectively analyse the intricate legal framework that regulates the relationships between employers and employees, as well as their representatives (Guest, 1987; Storey, 2014). Such expertise helps ensure that organisational activities comply with legal obligations, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict (Guest, 1987). The current findings suggest that the absence of a

dedicated HR team indicates that supervisors and managers, who may not be qualified or sufficiently trained to perform HR-related functions, are nevertheless fulfilling these roles.

Furthermore, a qualified HR team plays a key role in recognising the importance of attracting, developing, and maintaining talent, especially in NZ's transportation sector, which is experiencing persistent labour shortages (Frank & Taylor, 2004; Whysall et al., 2019). The driver shortage is closely related to factors such as inadequate compensation and the perception of driving as a highly demanding occupation. The Covid pandemic further exacerbated recruitment and retention challenges, which highlight the need to prioritise HR processes, such as compensation and employee development (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Retention, in particular, represents a critical area where HR expertise is required. Armstrong and Taylor (2023) emphasised the importance of cultivating a positive employee experience through effective retention strategies, including competitive compensation, work-life balance, and opportunities for professional development. Failure to appreciate these functions risks perpetuating talent shortages, high labour turnover, and conflicts rooted in worker dissatisfaction. Moreover, HR expertise is pivotal in strengthening employment relations by addressing core worker concerns, such as pay equity and workplace relationships, to foster trust between employees and management (Guest, 2017; McCauley & Wakefield, 2006).

These findings are novel in that they uncover an often-overlooked structural gap in job resource provision, where the absence of effective HR initiatives and/or HRM diminishes organisational capacity to support employees within a highly demanding work context. The current study extends the JD-R model by illustrating how the non-existence or weak execution of HR practices constitutes a structural job demand in itself, particularly when workers rely on such

structures for coping and support. In a sector already strained by recruitment and retention issues, this absence of HR amplifies organisational vulnerability.

5.5.3 The devolvement of HR roles to frontline managers

In the absence of a dedicated HR team, the current findings reveal a critical gap in HR support, with HR responsibilities informally devolved to frontline managers, who may lack formal HR expertise. Notably, the devolvement of HR responsibilities to frontline managers emerged as a central theme, underscoring the operational burden placed on these managers. This arrangement appears to be driven by a resource-constrained environment, predominantly financial pressure and staffing constraints, rather than a strategic intent, unlike strategic HR devolution observed in large or well-resourced organisations where frontline managers are deliberately empowered to implement HR practice as part of broader organisational goals (Kulik & Perry, 2023; Maxwell & Watson, 2006). In the case of the NZ bus sector, however, this was less a case of strategic devolution and more of a default response to the organisational limitations. Studies indicate that the successful implementation of HR policies and practices is attributed to the active involvement of frontline managers in the implementation process, but with HR oversight (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Sikora & Ferris, 2014). The absence of a dedicated HR team means that this valuable partnership is not present in the sector, hindering the development and implementation of relevant HR initiatives.

Even with a systematic devolvement of HR responsibilities to frontline managers, this arrangement also comes with notable challenges, particularly whether frontline managers possess the necessary interest, time, and training to implement HR policies and practices in a consistent and coordinated manner (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2002). Many supervisors and line managers who have transitioned from driving roles have

assumed responsibilities for core HR functions, including, but not limited to, recruitment, training and development, and health and safety. As reported by participants M01, M02 and M05, these responsibilities are undertaken without sufficient training or HR oversight to ensure effective implementations. Participant D24, who draws from personal prior experience as a manager, indicated that supervisors were not adequately trained for such responsibilities. Purcell et al. (2009), who investigated the HR roles performed by frontline managers, concluded that line managers may find it difficult to perform some functions effectively due to a lack of specialised expertise. In the same vein, Renwick (2003) argued that for frontline managers to be effective, they needed to be provided with adequate organisational support or training to carry out assigned HR tasks. However, this foundational support for frontline managers may be constrained by financial constraints and operational pressures to prioritise service delivery.

Furthermore, the devolvement of HR duties to frontline managers adds to their existing responsibilities, increasing their workloads. This highlights a critical imbalance where heightened role demands are not met with corresponding resources, such as adequate training or institutional support, as participant S06 described, where supervisors' workloads and understaffing challenges already make it problematic for them to provide adequate support to the bus drivers. In effect, this devolvement of responsibilities without a parallel increase in organisational support creates a mismatch between expectations and capacity, which leaves supervisors stretched beyond their operational limits. These constraints influenced how drivers perceived HR and supervisory support, which contributes to a sense that such support was lacking (Bondarouk et al., 2009; Nehles et al., 2006). Over time, it eroded trust in the leadership capabilities of frontline managers and affected their working relationships.

This study contributes to the HRM and industrial relations literature by offering an invaluable perspective on HRM in resource-constrained sectors. The study highlights the implications of the absence of dedicated HR oversight, particularly in organisations where frontline managers, often without adequate training and resources, are required to assume core HR responsibilities, such as recruitment and selection, performance management, conflict resolution, and interpersonal relations and communication (Collings et al., 2018; Hinkin & Tracey, 2000; Luecke, 2006; Perry & Kulik, 2008; Teague & Roche, 2011). The absence of such expertise not only impacts supervisor performance but also drivers' job satisfaction and turnover rates. These findings align with the accounts of participants D01 and D22, who highlighted that a lack of transparency and commitment in managerial communication and support contributed to workplace problems and disputes. Hence, while frontline managers play a crucial role in the delivery of HR functions, they require organisational support through specialised training and development to enhance their management capacity (Lacerenza et al., 2017). However, this was not forthcoming in the current research context.

5.5.4 Supervisor competency and leadership style

Building on the preceding section, this section explores supervisor competence and leadership style, which emerged as a central theme regarding how supervisors perform operational and people-management roles. As discussed, the devolution of HR responsibilities placed significant expectations on frontline managers to act as a core source of support. Supervisors, although they are central to drivers' daily experience of support, the findings demonstrate that many lack the competencies required to fulfil this role effectively, as highlighted by several drivers (e.g., D07 and D01). A key issue was the promotion pathway of supervisors from driving roles on the basis of tenure rather than leadership capability. This career pathway did not guarantee the relational or managerial skills necessary for effective supervisory leadership,

leading to a mismatch between job requirements and leadership capacity (Day et al., 2014). Essential skills such as emotional intelligence, communication, conflict resolution, decision-making, and team management (Kotter, 2009; Mumford et al., 2007) were largely underdeveloped, with no evidence of systematic leadership training being provided.

The structural remoteness of the supervisor amplifies the importance of relational effort to maintain the drivers' perception of organisational support. However, unlike comparable isolated roles like New Zealand postal services (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013), no systematic strategies were evident to strengthen relational ties. Supervisors were described as largely task-oriented and compliance-driven, focusing on discipline, monitoring and achieving operational targets (Taberero et al., 2009). For example, several participants (e.g., D11 and D01) described the supervisor's role in punitive terms, such as focusing on preventing financial loss and disciplining drivers with fines for starting trips late or addressing customer complaints. Although a task-oriented approach of leadership may aid in creating an efficient and structured workplace (Grille & Kauffeld, 2015; Krause et al., 2017), excessive focus on achieving results might reduce supervisors' attention to employees' individual needs or concerns, as indicated by participants D22 and D13, who described supervisors as lacking care and empathy. This evidence aligns with a study on ethical leadership, which suggests that task-oriented leaders tend to devote less time to understanding individual employee issues and needs, as their focus is directed towards achieving operational targets (Yukl et al., 2011).

In a detached work setting, the visibility and accessibility of supervisors, even if symbolic, play a pivotal role in influencing drivers' perception of leadership and organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). However, the task and compliance approach undermined any sense of a more supportive and balanced leadership style. Additionally, the

absence of supervisor support observed was not limited to everyday situations, but also applied to acute situations, such as driver harassment, as reported by participants D22 and D04. Given the physically remote nature of supervisions, their direct reports should mean that extra effort is made not only in supporting drivers, but also in building and maintaining supervisory-employee relationships in the workplace. However, there was no evidence of this occurring systematically in the bus sector research beyond occasional individual efforts, which were constrained by supervisory workloads as described by participant S06. This undermines any sense of PSS (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Schaufeli & Taris, 2013).

Moreover, the leadership style of supervisors undermines drivers' willingness to communicate their concerns regarding safety issues, as reported by participants D13 and D11. This highlights what is referred to as psychological safety issues, which is conceptualised as the ability to speak up, take risks, and express oneself without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). As emphasised by Pearsall and Ellis (2011), a psychologically safe work environment encourages employees to communicate openly, voice their concerns, and seek collaborative problem-solving. However, this was lacking as reflected in drivers' silence and avoidance behaviours (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). This environment is also influenced by leadership, in which supervisors' leadership style plays a pivotal role in cultivating psychological safety through their behaviour and interpersonal relationships (Frazier & Tupper, 2016). Leadership competencies, such as empathy and active listening, are traits that align with relational-oriented leadership in constructing psychological safety. This is not only essential for enhancing mental well-being and enabling drivers to feel valued and safe, but also facilitating open communication and collaboration (Edmondson, 1999).

Furthermore, the findings indicate the presence of informal favouritism based on social and cultural relationships, which emerged as a theme of supervisor bias. Some drivers perceived supervisors as selective, particularly in resource distribution among the drivers, as illustrated in the account of participant D14, in which some supervisors allocated good buses and shift schedules to drivers with whom they had a close relationship or were ethnically related. Such differential treatment not only undermines the perception of fairness but also reflects a gap in supervisory competence, especially in managing both interpersonal relationships and cultural sensitivity in a diverse workforce. This is especially critical in the context of the NZ bus sector, where it is heavily reliant on migrant workers, and such practices can have a broader implication, including a feeling of exclusion and increased turnover. This finding aligns with prior studies that suggest that migrant workers are particularly sensitive to relational cues that affirm the organisation's commitment to their well-being, and the absence of this may lead to feelings of marginalisation, which can diminish their perception of supervisor and organisational support (Findler et al., 2007; Goswami & Goswami, 2018; Shen et al., 2009).

These findings highlight the critical yet under-recognised role of supervisor competency and relational leadership in shaping PSS as a vital job resource in the structurally isolated bus driving role. The novelty of the findings in this study lies in demonstrating that the buffering function of PSS is contingent on leadership competency and relational skills. Hence, this study suggests that leadership development should adopt a balanced approach in prioritising people-oriented capabilities to enhance supervisors' effectiveness rather than focusing solely on operational oversight.

5.5.5 Supervisor workload

However, enabling supervisors to better develop and apply relational skills may require not just training but releasing them from some of their task-focused and administrative workload (Arrowsmith & Parker, 2013). The *workload of supervisors* was another significant theme that emerged during the interviews. The findings suggest that supervisor workload has impeded them from being more intentional in their interaction with their drivers to establish better supervisor-subordinate relationships. As reported by S06 and D01, fewer supervisors are now managing multiple tasks, which significantly contributed to minimal interactions between supervisors and drivers. This is problematic in an occupation characterised by isolation and emotional demands, where even brief, consistent contact could serve as a valuable resource. However, this constraint undermines the quality and development of high leader-member exchange (Martin et al., 2015; Volmer et al., 2011). This finding reinforces Roczniewska et al.'s (2022) claim that an overwhelmed supervisor may have limited time and attention to devote to their workers.

The findings also suggest that supervisory stress limits their capacity to engage with the drivers, which aligns with Shanock and Eisenberger's (2006) assertion that occupational stress reduces supervisors' capacity to connect with their subordinates. Participants D11 and D13 reported that the lack of delivery of supervisory contact left drivers feeling neglected. This finding aligns with the study on unresponsive supervisor support, which found that a lack of supervisor response to employees' concerns reduces employees' psychological need satisfaction, negatively impacting how employees feel and behave (McIlroy et al., 2021). This, in turn, impacts drivers' morale and engagement. Nevertheless, supervisors who are supported and empowered are better equipped to engage with their teams, build trust, and foster a positive work environment (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). These findings highlight the importance of

organisational support in releasing supervisors from work overload and equipping them with the resources, such as training and autonomy, needed to perform their people-management roles effectively (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010).

Furthermore, several participants (e.g., D11 and U02) described that supervisors unintentionally transfer their stress and pressure onto them in the form of unrealistic expectations, impatience and frustration. This condition reflects the phenomenon of *emotional contagion*, where stress is unconsciously transmitted through social interactions and nonverbal cues (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021). Such spillover demonstrates how resource depletion at the supervisory level can compound the job demands at the subordinate level, an overlooked dynamic in the JD-R model. Bonnesen et al. (2022) found that the stress contagion between managers and their subordinates increases employees' stress, anxiety, tension, and job dissatisfaction, which they tend to absorb. This underscores the need to adequately support supervisors so that they may, in turn, support their team, a point consistently highlighted in the leadership literature as essential for employee and managerial performance (Avolio et al., 2009; Eisenberger et al., 1990).

These findings make an important contribution by highlighting how supervisor workload as a hidden constraint of supervisory support operates as a demand that undermines the availability and functionality of one of the few interpersonal resources available in this structurally isolated work environment. For supervisory support to function as a buffer to the benefit of drivers, attention must be extended not only to drivers' stressors but also to the resource conditions of supervisors themselves. As Breevaart et al. (2014) noted, supervisors who themselves lack adequate resources, such as time, autonomy, and organisational backing, are less able to offer effective support, which can diminish their buffering role.

5.5.6 Peer support

In contrast to supervisory support, *peer support* (or co-worker support) emerged as a dominant theme throughout the interviews. Unlike supervisory support, peer support was described as an important interpersonal resource, even during the pandemic. For example, drivers (e.g., participants D13 and D06) highlighted how peers offered practical help (e.g., shift advice, coping strategies) and emotional reassurance (e.g., empathy, encouragement). Rooted in shared experiences, these exchanges created a sense of camaraderie and belonging that offset the isolating nature of the bus driving. Drivers described “looking out for each other” and “sharing advice and encouragement” as critical behaviours in filling gaps of limited organisational or supervisory support. These interpersonal exchanges reinforced resilience and promoted a supportive professional climate, which acts as a buffer and counteracts the emotional demands of the role.

Peer support represents one of the two sub-contracts of social support within the organisational setting, the other being leader or supervisory support (Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988). Peer support, defined as employees' subjective assessment of the extent to which co-workers demonstrate care and support, contributes to numerous outcomes such as employee well-being, job satisfaction, performance, and organisational effectiveness (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). Due to similar experiences and challenges that peers face, they are often well-positioned to provide contextually relevant, practical and emotional support to one another, which supports their psychological, physical and social well-being. This finding aligns with several existing studies (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Leiter & Maslach, 2009), which note that peer support contributes to emotional well-being by providing a sense of belonging and camaraderie. These strong interpersonal relationships foster

a supportive and cohesive professional atmosphere, leading to enhanced job satisfaction and reduced stress levels.

However, there are fewer opportunities for social interaction among a largely dispersed workforce, even though, as a result, they appear to be highly valued. In light of this evidence, the study suggests that bus companies consider adopting and implementing peer support programmes, such as the Peer Assistance and Support Scheme (PASS). Under such initiatives, selected employees are trained to provide confidential emotional support, share coping strategies, and offer guidance to colleagues. This could be crucial for remote occupations like bus drivers, where drivers already rely on one another for encouragement, advice, and shared learning. It leverages the strength of social networks among employees, which fosters psychological well-being, resilience, and camaraderie, complementing broader efforts to strengthen both supervisory and organisational support.

5.6 Individual resources

This section examines drivers' personal resources through the lens of person-job fit (PJ fit) within the broader framework of the JD-R model. Personal resources, defined as an individual's ability to manage job demands (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008), are imperative in understanding how bus drivers cope with the challenges in their work. PJ fit, in particular, refers to the degree of match or mismatch between an individual's cognitive and behavioural traits (e.g., psychological needs, goals, values, personality and abilities) and the requirements of their specific job (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010). A closer alignment reduces employee stress and increases engagement and performance (Deniz et al., 2015; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Consistent with existing research, the current findings noted that, despite the inherently challenging nature of bus driving, those drivers with a seemingly closer PJ fit are able to better

cope and adjust (and perhaps have lesser need for other forms of support) due to higher job satisfaction. Nonetheless, it was also evident that these employees remained resentful due to low pay and insufficient PSS and POS, even though they enjoyed their jobs. This suggests that a PJ fit may not be sufficient and might even be counterproductive without broader organisational support. This evidence provides a nuanced perspective on the JD-R model, demonstrating that PJ fit, generally considered a personal resource (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008), may be insufficient in the absence of other essential resources. The findings of this study, therefore, extend existing literature by demonstrating that the full benefits of PJ fit are contingent on a supportive organisational environment. The nature of PJ fit in this context is explored through the lens of demand-ability (DA) fit and need-supply (NS) fit, emotional intelligence (EI), passion for the job, as well as perception of task significance.

5.6.1 Demand-ability fit and need-supply fit

The concept of DA fit provides a valuable perspective on occupational stress by emphasising congruence or discrepancies between work demands and individuals' abilities. Insufficient DA fit is detrimental to individuals (e.g., stress, performance deficiency, job exit), affecting both their well-being and work outcomes. Conversely, a good fit improves job engagement and performance (Edwards, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Complementing DA fit is NS fit, which refers to the alignment between personal needs and resources or rewards provided by the job. Themes related to both fits emerged in this study.

The notable theme *DA fit through experience and resilience* reflects how drivers relied on personal experience and coping strategies to manage the work demands during the pandemic. Participants D07 and D18, for example, described how years of experience helped them handle physically and emotionally demanding situations, such as broken shifts, long working hours

and the confrontation with hostile passengers. This was also reflected in the supervisor's fit to manage high demands as reported by S08 and S04. These findings align with existing study, which emphasises how experience mediates personality fit by aiding employees to develop coping tactics through exposure (Salgado & Moscoso, 2002). This evidence suggests that DA fit is not fixed by traits alone, but rather developed over time through exposure, reflection, and adaptation. Bus drivers draw on personal internal abilities, such as calmness and learned behavioural strategies, to navigate hostile passengers' interactions. These abilities reflect a personal resource, aligning with resilience. There are numerous conceptualisations of resilience, but it basically denotes the ability to sustain stable functioning when confronted with a stressful or traumatic event (Bonanno, 2005; Britt et al., 2016). Importantly, resilience in this context was not always about bouncing back with growth, but rather about sustaining coping through persistent adaptation to repeated stressors such as long hours (D07), driving conditions (D01, D09), or interpersonal hostility (D18).

Although DA fit supported drivers' ability to cope with the job demands, it was not sufficient to guarantee satisfaction and commitment. The theme *NS fit discrepancies* emerged when drivers' needs, such as fair compensation, recognition and respect, were not met by their employers. Participants M07 and D01, for example, highlighted the lack of adequate compensation relative to the drivers' skills and experiences, which are often underestimated. Similarly, participants U05, D12 and D01 reported insufficient recognition and organisational support. This misalignment undermined drivers' long-term motivation and well-being despite strong DA fit. The current findings suggest that NS fit is a more crucial form of fit, given both the demanding nature of the job and the broader environmental stressors, such as the rising cost of living. Perceptions of unfair pay and lack of recognition undermined DA fit and contributed to widespread dissatisfaction and retention issues, which compounded driver shortages in the

sector. This finding aligns with existing research (e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002; Edwards, 1991), which suggests that employees who perceive their needs as unmet are more likely to seek alternative employment that better meets their needs.

The findings suggest the significance of balancing DA fit and NS fit. Although a close DA fit enables drivers to cope with the job demands through personal competence and resilience, it is not sufficient on its own to guarantee a reduction in the effects of stress and improve overall job satisfaction. When organisations fail to meet core employee needs, even highly experienced and committed employees may become disengaged or exit the organisation. This supports earlier findings (e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002; Van Vianen, 2018), which suggest that when organisations provide adequate resources to employees who already possess strong PJ fit, they experience higher performance and satisfaction. In contrast, when NS fit is neglected, even committed and competent staff are likely to feel disappointed and disengaged. The study suggests that recruitment for DA fit must be complemented with sufficient NS fit to achieve strong PJ fit in such a demanding role (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

5.6.2 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI), defined as the ability to recognise, comprehend, and regulate one's own emotions and those of others (Zeidner et al., 2004), was identified as a significant personal resource in helping drivers cope, especially with emotional and interpersonal stressors. A central theme that emerged within the framework of EI was *emotional self-regulation*, reflected in drivers' accounts of handling abusive passengers. For example, participant D10 described choosing to “step back and let it go”, while participant D01 stated, “I don't let people get to me anymore”. These accounts reflect emotional control and situational awareness, which were particularly valuable in helping drivers cope in contexts where structural resources, such as

supervisory support or police support, were limited or inconsistent. Consistent with this finding, previous studies have shown that EI, particularly in service-oriented occupations, is vital for stress management and maintaining composure in challenging circumstances, such as interactions with difficult customers (Guy & Lee, 2013; Zeidner et al., 2004). A meta-analysis shows that employees with elevated EI are more adept at recognising their emotional states and understand how these moods influence job performance (O'Boyle et al., 2010). These findings highlight that EI reflects an individual's ability to adapt to emotionally charged encounters. It aligns with existing research, which demonstrates that individuals with higher levels of EI are more capable of regulating their emotions, enhancing resilience and mitigating the risks of emotional strain (Mikolajczak et al., 2007).

Self-awareness and self-management are two key components of EI and are particularly imperative in the context of bus driving. Self-awareness, the ability to recognise and understand one's own emotions, facilitates emotional control and reduces impulsive reactions (Gross, 2015; Zeidner et al., 2004). Drivers with high self-awareness are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies (Gardner & Stough, 2002), which are crucial for managing road-related stress and interactions with hostile passengers. Self-management, defined as the ability to regulate or redirect disruptive emotions and impulses while adapting to changing circumstances, is equally vital in sustaining focus and emotional stability amid traffic congestion, erratic road users, and public incivility (Gross, 2015; Zeidner et al., 2004). Participants D10 and D01 both demonstrated these competencies, which underscore EI as a resource for coping with the daily emotional demands of bus driving.

EI is also pivotal in the supervisor-bus driver relationships as it underpins emotional leadership (Humphrey, 2002). Studies have shown that leaders with high EI are perceived as more

empathic, communicative, and supportive (Humphrey, 2002; Smith et al., 2008). This suggests how crucial EI is for supervisor leadership who have an immediate relationship with their subordinates, which is even more pressing in the supervisor-driver relationship context. However, as reported by participants D11 and D13, this was lacking in relation to supervisors' empathy, which contributed to distant relationships. This underscores the importance of emotional leadership, characterised by a leader's ability to recognise and respond to employees' needs, while providing a supportive climate (Gardner & Stough, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2008). Such leadership is also closely linked to psychological safety, where employees feel safe to express concerns or vulnerabilities without fear of reprisal. As previously discussed, this is critical for migrant and vulnerable workers, who often experience cultural or linguistic barriers and are less likely to voice concerns. EI is therefore a crucial attribute of supervisor leadership as it bridges the relationship gap and fosters inclusion, trust, and emotional security (Antonakis et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2022).

Within the framework of the JD-R model, EI serves as a crucial personal resource that enables both bus drivers and supervisors to cope with workplace challenges while also fostering their relationships at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In emotionally demanding and structurally isolating roles, EI contributed not only to individual well-being but also enhanced PJ fit by aligning emotional abilities with job demands. A strong fit between emotional ability and job demands is associated with enhanced job satisfaction, reduced stress levels, and decreased turnover rates (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). These findings reinforce the value of integrating EI into organisational recruitment, training, and leadership development initiatives. Training programs centred on emotional self-regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution are therefore recommended to enhance supervisory effectiveness and foster a more resilient and engaged workforce.

5.6.3 Passion for work and task significance

Within the current findings, *passion for work* emerged as a salient theme. Zigarmi et al. (2009) defined work passion as "an individual's persistent, emotionally positive, meaning-based, state of well-being, stemming from reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organisational situations that result in consistent, constructive, work intentions and behaviours" (p. 310). Within the JD-R model, passion for work functions as a personal resource that reinforces drivers' motivation and adaptive coping behaviour. As reported by D16 and D01, passion for the profession provided a source of intrinsic motivation that sustained the drivers' enthusiasm, even amid dissatisfaction with the extrinsic conditions, such as low pay and inadequate organisational support, which reflects the central premise of passion for work as it provides employees with the motivation and drive to achieve work goals and sustain positive affective engagement (Vallerand, 2012). The findings also show, as reported by participant D12, that those drivers lacking passion for driving tend to leave. This underscores the significance of passion in employee retention.

Closely associated with passion for work was the theme *task significance*. The concept of task significance refers to the extent to which employees perceive their work as having a significant impact on others (Cardon et al., 2009; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Research shows that task significance reinforces intrinsic motivation (Astakhova et al., 2023; Pollack et al., 2020), a pattern that aligns with the current findings. For example, D01 described a strong sense of purpose derived from serving the public and an enthusiasm for being part of the actual life of the city. Such perceptions of significance not only sustained motivation but also reinforced job satisfaction and engagement. The association between passion and task significance is consistent with the concept of PJ fit, where personal values coincide with the perceived value of one's profession (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

However, while passion encourages drivers to remain committed to their role and the organisation despite the poor working conditions, it is an ultimately self-defeating strategy to rely on such goodwill. The findings also demonstrate that those with a passion for driving tend to leave and join truck driving, which underscores the fragility of relying solely on intrinsic motivation. Even passionate drivers reported dissatisfaction with low pay and lack of recognition. This highlights that goodwill can be eroded when basic needs remain unmet, implying that intrinsic motivation alone is insufficient if complementary extrinsic resources are in short supply. This reflects Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Maidani, 1991), which postulates that motivators such as task significance can enhance engagement. However, their effectiveness diminishes when essential hygiene factors like adequate pay are absent. Thus, while passion functions as an adaptive and resilient personal resource that facilitates short-term coping, its long-term sustainability is dependent on the complementary extrinsic supportive resources, such as PSS, POS, and fair compensation.

The current findings, therefore, make a novel contribution by revealing the delicacy of relying on intrinsic passion alone in structurally demanding and under-resourced roles. Passion functioned as a temporary buffer against stress and turnover, but in the absence of systemic support, it becomes a self-exploiting strategy. This aligns with the JD-R literature (e.g., Gagné & Deci, 2005; Hakanen et al., 2006), which cautions that personal resources require reinforcement through job resources to maintain well-being and engagement. As stated by D12, those drivers lacking passion tended to leave, even the passionate drivers who eventually reached a threshold. Consequently, employers must not only recruit individuals based on work passion, but also support them with organisational resources such as better working conditions and leadership (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

5.7 Psychological contract perspective

The section provides an analysis of the empirical findings through the lens of the psychological contract theory. Although the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) offers a robust framework for understanding the interaction between job demands and resources, it pays limited attention to employees' subjective experiences, particularly the implicit expectations and obligations. This is where the psychological contract becomes imperative in offering interpretive insights into how drivers perceive organisational support in areas such as compensation, recognition and workplace relationships, within a remote and high-demand environment. Perception of individualised and relationship-oriented support is a key determinant of employee well-being and effective employment relationships (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). This understanding suggests that the increased focus of the JD-R model on tangible resources and demands may overlook intangible factors such as trust and personal interpretations of employment relationships, which are equally pivotal.

A key finding of this study is that both POS and PSS, when interpreted through the lens of the psychological contract, influenced drivers' well-being and engagement. This means POS sets broad expectations for employees within the broader organisational setting, whereas PSS reflects the relational and individualised dimension of the psychological contract. The findings suggest that these two forms of support are not interchangeable but complementary. High POS without adequate PSS, such as supervisors failing to advocate for drivers or meet their support needs, led to feelings of neglect. In contrast, strong PSS without sufficient POS created a perception of unfairness and a lack of organisational support. In both cases, the perceived psychological contract was undermined, which weakened the buffering effect of job resources.

The integration of the JD-R model and the psychological contract framework, thus, contributes novel insights into employment relations in isolated and under-resourced contexts. It highlights how the perceived erosion of trust, lack of voice and misalignment between drivers' expectations and managerial behaviours influence negative outcomes such as occupational stress and a weak employment relationship climate. The discussion begins by examining perceived pay inequity and lack of recognition, followed by issues of communication and supervisory leadership, and concludes with an analysis of trust and employee voice before providing a summary of these discussions.

5.7.1 Perceived pay inequity and lack of recognition

The findings revealed that perceptions of *inadequate pay and lack of recognition* constituted a central theme, reflecting a broader sense of psychological contract violation. This was evident as drivers often expressed feelings of unmet expectations, unfair treatment, lack of recognition and trust issues. POS and psychological contract are conceptually distinct, yet they are closely interrelated in influencing employees' perceptions of their relationships with the organisation. POS captures perceptions of organisational care (Eisenberger et al., 1986), whereas psychological contract encompasses a broader set of reciprocal expectations (Rousseau, 1989). From a psychological contract perspective, drivers expect a fair return for their contribution, comprising both tangible rewards, such as equitable pay and intangible rewards like recognition and respect. The current findings demonstrate that unmet expectations in these areas were not merely regarded as practical concerns but were also symbolically interpreted as a breach of the mutually exchanged relationship. Participants (e.g., U05 and D12) described how unmet expectations regarding adequate pay and recognition undermined their sense of value, highlighting a breakdown in reciprocity, whereby their effort, loyalty and stress endured were not reciprocated with fair compensation. This is consistent with the foundation work of

Morrison and Robinson (1997), which suggests that employees interpret unmet expectations as symbolic indicators of the organisation not valuing them.

Drivers also reported that remuneration and recognition need to align with those in similar occupations, such as truck driving within New Zealand and bus driving internationally. This sense of inequity was reflected in the reports of participants M07 and D36. Recognition, both monetary and non-monetary, was also viewed as part of the organisation's broader obligations to acknowledge drivers' contributions. However, the absence of such recognition, manifested in low pay, the removal of overtime and a general lack of public respect, led many drivers to feel undervalued, as noted by participants D01, D23, D05, and D12. These findings align with the psychological contract literature, emphasising that unmet expectations of fairness and appreciation are the main triggers of perceived psychological contract breach (Conway & Briner, 2006; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). This breach can also be understood through the lens of equity theory (Adams, 1963; Hartmann & Slapničar, 2012), which posits that perceived imbalance between input and reward contributes to perceptions of distributive and procedural injustice. In this case, drivers' perceptions of both distributive and procedural injustice compounded their sense of injustice and eroded their trust in the organisation, thereby undermining both the psychological contract and POS.

The issue of psychological breach was salient among migrant drivers. For many of these migrant drivers, migration is underpinned by the expectation of fair employment conditions, which form a core part of their psychological contract. During the touch-base interviews, a migrant driver noted a discrepancy between the current job conditions and promises made during the recruitment interview prior to arrival in NZ. Such unmet expectations were experienced as a breach of trust, reflecting a violation of perceived fairness. Research confirms

that violations of perceived fairness, whether in terms of comparative effort and reward or demographic characteristics such as gender, race, or age, can negatively affect the psychological contract (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Summers & Hendrix, 1991). This impact is especially critical when drivers perceive that others with similar qualifications and experiences or those in a similar role receive more favourable treatment than they do.

Furthermore, the current findings suggest that POS declined in tandem with psychological contract breaches, especially as issues around pay, recognition and occupational stress worsened during the pandemic. With increased layoffs and reduced working hours, compensation became a key mechanism through which organisations were expected to demonstrate care and reciprocity. However, failure to adjust and protect rewards amid increasing stress, personal risks and rising living costs reinforced the belief among drivers that their employer prioritised operational continuity over their well-being. As reported by M10 and D04, the issue was not just about pay rate but the broader perceived lack of equity and recognition.

These findings affirm that the psychological contract and POS are co-constructed and mutually reinforcing. Employer's failure to reciprocate effort with fair treatment may lead to a decline in POS, and subsequently, perceived breaches of the psychological contract. Prior studies have shown that such conditions are associated with dissatisfaction and disengagement, as well as weakened employment relations (Gallie et al., 2021; Judge et al., 2010; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Hence, employees' perceptions of fair treatment are significant to fostering higher POS and sustaining an effective psychological contract. Equitable reciprocity plays a crucial role in influencing psychological contract outcomes and strengthening the overall employment relationship (Cohen, 2013; Rousseau, 1989; Turnley & Feldman, 1999).

5.7.2 Communication, frontline managers and psychological contracts

Since psychological contract is inherently implicit, it is vulnerable to misunderstanding and perceived breaches, especially when expectations and obligations are not clearly communicated (Guest & Conway, 2002). Effective communication, therefore, plays a pivotal role in shaping, maintaining, and fulfilling employees' perceived psychological contracts. Although it does not equate to any physical resources, effective communication in and of itself constitutes a valuable social resource in the workplace, including ensuring transparency, boosting employee morale and improving engagement (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Pincus, 1986). The findings, however, noted *ineffective communication*, especially from the frontline managers, as a dominant theme. Participants D01 and U03, for example, expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of regular communication between drivers, dispatchers and managers, which left drivers feeling excluded from organisational priorities. In psychological contract terms, this absence of communication was interpreted as a failure to honour implicit expectations of transparency, inclusion and care, undermining the relational aspect of the psychological contract (Guest & Conway, 2002; Rousseau, 1995).

As discussed in section 5.7.1, drivers also reported misleading or inaccurate information during the recruitment process, which created unrealistic expectations about the working conditions. This mismatch between expectation and reality exemplifies how communication failure can create clear perceptions of psychological breaches. Robinson and Morrison (2000) assert that communication at the point of recruitment is critical in forming realistic expectations, as it shapes employees' initial understanding of their roles, the organisation's culture, and expectations. Rousseau (1995) similarly emphasises that psychological contracts are built on perceived promises. If these promises are not accurately communicated at the outset, they lay the foundations for potential breaches of trust and dissatisfaction. Extensive literature confirms

that effective communication between management and employees, particularly in facilitating clarity, addressing concerns and managing change, strengthens the psychological contract and contributes to positive employment relations (Guest & Conway, 2002; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Roehl, 2019; Rousseau, 1989).

The findings also revealed concerns about supervisors' failure to advocate for the interests of drivers. Participant D01, for example, described supervisors as ineffective in representing drivers' issues affecting them, which led to a sense of indifference. This perceived absence of advocacy undermines relational expectations of loyalty and care, which also aligns with the premise of PSS (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Drivers interpreted the supervisors' inactions as a lack of concern, which diminishes faith and trust in the supervisory leadership and relationships. Moreover, the disparity between drivers' expectations that supervisors should be accessible and supportive, and the reality of remote, overburdened supervisors, further added to the drivers' dissatisfaction. Even when supervisors' lack of action stemmed from structural constraints or increased workload, drivers still ascribed responsibility to them for unmet expectations.

Lack of communication was further reflected during periods of organisational change. As reported by participant D11, drivers were not informed about the change of ownership of the company, leaving them uninformed about the change. Drivers perceived this exclusion as evidence that their contributions and commitment were not valued. This undermined drivers' trust in the company and reduced their sense of inclusion. Such communication failure reinforced the driver's sense of detachment, which violated their implicit expectations of openness and mutual respect (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989).

Unlike formal and codified contracts, the psychological contract exists in a state of flux and continuously evolves and develops based on ongoing communication between employers and employees (Guest & Conway, 2002). This dynamic character means that expectations evolve in response to organisational and external developments. Additionally, because individual expectations and perceptions of obligations vary, ineffective communication can magnify discrepancies in understanding, leading to perceived breaches of psychological contracts, even though there is no actual breach of the contract. Guest and Conway (2002) assert that without regular and transparent communication, such misunderstandings are inevitable. This reinforces the significance of consistent and effective communication in developing and maintaining positive psychological contracts (Clutterbuck, 2005). The emphasis on effective communication spotlights frontline leadership responsibilities.

5.7.3 Trust and employee voice

While communication is imperative to the psychological contract, trust forms its relational foundation (Atkinson, 2007; Robinson, 1996). In this study, *trust* emerged as a pivotal lens through which drivers evaluated their relationship with the company. A recurring theme identified in the findings was a *lack of trust*, particularly within the supervisor-driver relationship. This absence of trust undermined employee voice, as some drivers indicated feeling unsafe in voicing their concerns. For example, participants D04 and D05 described their relationship with supervisors as distant and marked with fears of reprisal, especially when discussing personal and sensitive issues, such as health conditions. Jones (1996) conceptualises trust as a willingness to put oneself to potential harm or risk, which underscores the precarious nature of interpersonal exchanges. The lack of trust signalled not only self-protection but also a broader breakdown in the social exchange that underpins healthy and effective employment relationships.

In contrast, trust and the relationships among drivers themselves were reported as strong, indicating that the problem lay less among peer relationships and more with institutional and supervisory relationships. As reported by participants D03 and D01, the limited interpersonal interaction and leadership approach impeded trust-building. Remote supervision was also a factor hindering the relational depth necessary to cultivate a climate of trust that fosters reassurance and confidentiality. This finding aligns with prior research, which suggests that trust is developed through consistent, meaningful interactions (Mayer et al., 1995; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). In their absence, drivers interpreted managerial disengagement as a lack of concern and commitment to their well-being, which undermines the relational component of the psychological contract (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Guest, 2016).

Trust is also intrinsically linked to employee voice behaviour (Morrison, 2011). Many drivers were reluctant to raise their concerns, whether about their working conditions, passenger abuse, or personal health issues, because of an underlying belief that such disclosures would be dismissed or potentially used against them. Participants D08 and D12, for example, reported that drivers withheld information about their health conditions for fear of losing their jobs. This finding aligns with prior studies, which show that trust and psychological safety are prerequisites for voice behaviour (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011). In an environment where psychological safety and trust are lacking, silence becomes a rational self-protective strategy, particularly among migrants and vulnerable workers for whom job security is more precarious.

Leadership also shaped drivers' perceptions of trust, with *leadership style and personality* emerged as a dominant theme in the findings. Participants D12 and D13, for instance, described supervisors' unapproachable demeanour as a barrier to voicing their concerns. Similarly, other

participants (e.g., D10 and D03) characterised supervisors as emotionally disengaged. Such behaviours align with laissez-faire or indifferent leadership styles, which often signal a lack of concern and availability (Skogstad et al., 2007). This can alienate workers, erode psychological safety and trust (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Edmondson et al., 2004; Kelloway et al., 2012). In contrast, studies have shown that supervisor approachability and emotional intelligence are critical for cultivating trust and employee engagement, as discussed previously (Brunetto et al., 2012; Humphrey et al., 2008).

Further, *trust and employee voice* emerged as a central theme in the exchange relationship. However, leadership style and personality were identified as enablers of a psychologically safe atmosphere that can nurture trust and encourage voice behaviour. When drivers perceive that their views and concerns are acknowledged and addressed, it affirms the perception that the company has upheld its implicit commitment and obligations, which reinforces the psychological contract. However, failure to recognise and address employees' concerns was perceived as a breach of the psychological contract. This is because psychological contracts operate according to the norm of reciprocity. According to Bal et al. (2013), when concerns raised are unmet with no meaningful action, employees may perceive this as the organisation failing to meet its side of the exchange. While the trade unions provided a third-party or indirect voice mechanism, the frequent industrial disputes suggests that these mechanisms were not always effective, further undermining trust in the employer. Hence, cultivating a trustworthy environment requires proactive leadership that promotes psychological safety and encourages voice behaviour to ensure drivers' concerns are not only heard but also addressed in a meaningful manner.

5.8 Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly altered the working environment of bus drivers and created additional pressures that exacerbated both individual and structural job demands. This qualitative study of bus drivers' working conditions provided insights that extend the JD-R model by integrating the psychological contract. The demanding nature of bus driving, characterised by long hours, irregular timetables, and frequent encounters with passenger hostility, low pay and lack of organisational support, underscores the need to examine job demands and resources not simply from an individual standpoint but also through broader employment relations lenses that consider for organisational policies, management practices, and external institutional factors such as labour regulations and sectoral changes like privatisation, which play an equally pivotal role in influencing the job demands and well-being outcomes (Winnubst, 2017). In the NZ bus sector, privatisation is associated with cost-reduction strategies and increased managerial control, which heightened work expectations and reduced resources. Drivers consequently perceived inadequate organisational support and a lack of commitment to their well-being, leading them to feel undervalued, further aggravating stress and turnover.

Privatisations also reshaped managerial and supervisory roles by shifting power dynamics and increasing operational responsibilities. Under the efficiency-driven policies of the PTOM, supervisors experienced reduced autonomy and heightened operational workloads, which affected their ability to offer quality support to the drivers. This finding aligns with research suggesting that privatisation often centralises decision-making and prioritises cost-minimisation (Hutchison & Garstka, 1996). In this case, supervisors were perceived to prioritise operational targets over drivers' well-being. This perception eroded trust and compromised the supervisor-driver relationship. From a psychological contract perspective, it

adds a subjective element to the JD-R model by highlighting how employees' perceptions of promises, fairness and expectations shape employment relations. Structural changes, such as privatisation and heightened management control, also alter drivers' perceptions of equity, support, and trust within the organisation, which are interpreted as breaches of the psychological contract (Conway & Briner, 2006). These violations exacerbated the impact of job demands since drivers may perceive their heightened workloads or reduced resources as contradictory to prior implicit promises of support and equity.

Furthermore, the pandemic disrupted employment relations by introducing new stressors, including job insecurity and increased workloads. When not balanced with adequate job resources, such as POS and PSS, these demands contribute to burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The pandemic also tested the resilience of the psychological contract, as economic pressure augmented the possibility of contract violation. Research consistently shows that contract violations are widespread in contemporary employment relations (Ngobeni et al., 2022; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Uen et al., 2022), with breaches relatively frequent across sectors (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Against this backdrop, this study highlights the importance of developing a nuanced understanding of the critical relational factors, such as POS and PSS, in which communication and trust are pivotal in employment relations. These insights suggest that sustaining employee well-being in high-demand contexts requires not only balancing job demand with resources but also maintaining the implicit commitments that underpin psychological contracts.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that the interplay of job demands, job resources and personal resources offers a valuable framework for understanding bus drivers' experience, but these dynamics cannot be fully explained without recognising the role of broader

institutional and relational factors. Drivers' job demands, such as passengers' hostility, inadequate pay, long working hours and inadequate sanitary facilities, contributed to increased stress, with women, migrants and older drivers facing unique vulnerabilities. These stressors were further intensified by the lack of PSS, POS and the pandemic, which contributed to perceived breaches of the psychological contracts. At the same time, resources such as peer support, EI and passion for work offered resilience, although their effectiveness was limited in the absence of systemic organisational support. Imperatively, the absence of formal HR capacity left supervisors to assume HR core functions without adequate training, which eroded adequate support and trust. This chapter concludes that sustainable improvement in this sector requires a holistic approach that integrates adequate job and personal resources with fair compensation, recognition, supportive leadership and strategic HR practices to enhance well-being, improve retention and strengthen employment relations.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

The thesis aims to understand how contextual factors impacted the occupational stress and employment relations challenges faced by NZ bus drivers. To achieve this, it explored the working conditions in the context of the industrial disputes and the pandemic. The study further explored how these conditions contributed to broader employment relations issues in the sector and what measures were taken to address them. It utilised the JD-R model and psychological contract theory to interpret these dynamics, but departed from a conventional positivistic psychological approach in order to capture deeper insights into the employment relationship in this dynamic environment (Cupchik, 2001). This final chapter synthesises the key findings of the thesis to establish how they respond to the research objectives and questions and demonstrate the contribution of the study. The chapter begins with an overview of the research and key findings in relation to the two research questions. Following this, the study discusses the implications of its findings in terms of contributions to theory, practice and methodology. Finally, it acknowledges the limitations of this study and provides suggestions for future research directions.

6.2 Overview of key findings by research questions

The working conditions of bus drivers have been well-researched. However, they are certainly not in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the roles of bus companies and their representatives, including supervisors, managers, and HR practices, as well as the contextual and individual factors that collectively influence drivers' occupational stress and overall employment relations, remained inadequately explored. To address these research gaps, this study collected and thematically analysed the views and experiences of 62 participants. The

analysis revealed several significant themes relating to working conditions and individual factors that impacted drivers' well-being and employment relations. By utilising the JD-R model and psychological contract theory, the thesis explains how these dynamics contribute to individual and organisational outcomes, such as stress, dissatisfaction, recruitment and retention problems, and broader employment relations issues. The first research question offers insights into occupational stressors and their impact on the well-being of drivers. The second research question provides insights into the organisational support aspects (i.e., job and individual resources). The summary of the findings is presented in the following sections, organised according to the research questions.

6.2.1 Addressing research question one

The first research question was “What job stressors (in the context of industrial disputes and the Covid-19 pandemic) impact the well-being of NZ bus drivers?”. To address this question, the findings presented in Chapter Five highlight the working conditions in terms of job demands and resources (both job and personal). Demanding aspects of the job included long and irregular working hours, mental exhaustion in often difficult traffic conditions, passenger hostility, isolation and family separation, as well as financial strain. These stressors were compounded by minority status and pandemic-induced stressors such as anxiety of infection, unpredictable passenger behaviour and job insecurity.

Individual factors such as person-job (PJ) fit in terms of demand-ability (DA) fit and need-supply (NS) fit, including emotional intelligence (EI) and passion for the job, were found to play a pivotal role in influencing how drivers adapt and cope with the contextual stressors as well as generate job satisfaction and reduce turnover. DA, such as the relevant abilities and skills, aided drivers in developing resilience and adapting to the job demands. In contrast, NS

fit, which is linked to organisational support, such as fair pay, work-life balance and supervisor support, generally failed to align with drivers' needs and expectations, resulting in increased stress and dissatisfaction. EI, such as self-awareness and self-management, aided drivers to cope, especially with complex interpersonal interactions with passengers. Moreover, the findings suggest that passion for the job alleviates job demands and improves coping abilities. Those bus drivers whose passion aligns with the job tend to adapt to the working environment with limited resources despite the job demands, which also fosters resilience and reduces the stress that stems from the physical aspects of the job and the lack of organisational and supervisory support, as opposed to those who do not have a passion for the job. However, it was also evident that individual resources on their own are insufficient to mitigate the effects of occupational stress and improve overall job satisfaction. This underscores the need for organisational and leadership support to be more effective in complementing individual resources with adequate organisational resources.

To the resource end, the findings suggest that a perceived lack of organisational and supervisory support exacerbated the various contextual and specific job stressors. This was indicated by insufficiencies in remuneration, such as basic pay and a lack of overtime or bonus incentives, as well as a lack of psychological safety and employee voice. Supervisory-related support issues included poor communication and trust, which was linked not only to the demands of their role but also to problems related to personality and leadership style. In contrast to the lack of POS and PSS, peers provided vital workplace support through camaraderie, which was critical to this demanding and isolated work context. The insufficient POS and PSS are also linked to trust and employee voice issues, which also affect psychological contract outcomes and overall employment relationships. From the perspective of POS, pay comparisons of similar roles and inadequate pay that fail to align with the skills and risks

associated with the job indicate a lack of recognition, which undermines drivers' perception of organisational support and its commitment to their well-being as well as appreciation of the value they bring to the organisation. This contributed to a perceived breach of the psychological contract as Covid introduced a more stressful working environment. Regarding PSS, the findings suggest that supervisors' competence, personality and leadership traits play a pivotal role in influencing the psychological safety and trust issues that impede drivers from voicing their concerns and views, which also contribute to less interactions and communications with supervisors and managers. Given the physically distant nature of the supervisor-driver relationship, it is even more imperative that supervisors are equipped with adequate time and resources to build and sustain effective relationships with their team of drivers.

6.2.2 Addressing research question two

The second research question was, “What have bus companies done to mitigate stress to safeguard the drivers' well-being?”. To address this question, workplace support was examined from the perspective of POS and PSS. Despite the articulation from bus drivers that demonstrates dissatisfaction with the support from their organisations and supervisors, the findings indicate that some specific organisational initiatives, such as EAP, counselling, and technical training programs like stress management, de-escalation and safety training, aid in driving and managing the risks associated with the job. During the pandemic, bus companies provided basic resources, such as face masks and assisted drivers with Covid vaccination to protect them. However, beyond this physical support, drivers' perceptions of organisational support, such as fair pay, recognition, or adequate supervisor support (as explained in the previous section), would foster a sense of value and improve the overall job satisfaction.

In addition, the older workforce who are vulnerable were not allowed to work to protect them. However, this study discovered that efforts were constrained by structural issues such as job characteristics (long working hours, shift schedules, passengers' hostility and toilet facilities on bus routes) and compensation (inadequate pay and incentives), which are not solely determined by the employer but also the Te Manatū Waka Ministry of Transport under the PTOM. This model resulted in an increased focus on cost efficiency in the pretext of service efficiency and hindered the organisation's ability to commit adequate resources for improving working conditions, enhancing employee benefits, or offering more extensive support for bus drivers. The findings suggest that employee well-being was not a priority in this model, yet its deterioration due to an increased focus on cost reduction led to 'lose-lose' consequences, as it also contributed to recruitment and retention problems in the sector.

Additionally, it was noted that PTOM constrained the efficacy of conventional job resources, particularly supervisory support, in addressing the demands drivers face. Although supervisory support is useful in mitigating job stressors, the structural design of PTOM reduced supervisory capacity and increased workload for both supervisors and drivers. This operational reorganisation reduced the availability of supervisors to offer adequate assistance, such as emotional support and recognition, or even serving as a listening ear to alleviate the stress of bus drivers. Thus, the supervisory support that may have alleviated the stress of drivers dealing with challenging passengers became increasingly inconsistent and ineffective, depriving drivers of the adequate assistance and emotional support they needed during arduous shifts. In some cases, it even inadvertently added to the drivers' stress.

The current findings suggest that job demands, like physical and emotional stressors (e.g., extended hours and difficult passengers), can be mitigated by sufficient job resources,

including social support (i.e., supervisor and peer support) and organisational policies designed to alleviate these demands. However, institutional factors, particularly cost-reduction strategies in a privatised environment, restrict the availability of these resources, rendering them insufficient to mitigate the elevated demands. Conceptually, this study advances our understanding by highlighting the systemic barriers that employers encounter in managing workplace stress, particularly when financial constraints limit their capacity for effective resource allocation.

6.3 Contributions of the study

Although extensive research has examined the occupational stress and well-being of bus drivers, the collective functions of organisational-derived forms of support (POS, PSS and peer support), including individual factors, in alleviating these stressors (to my knowledge) are relatively under-researched. This gap is particularly pronounced in resource-constrained environments and remote job contexts, where individual resources and organisational support play an essential role (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Hence, the primary original contribution of this study is that it is the first study to examine the relational aspects of PSS and individual factors, as well as their interplay within these collective support mechanisms, in relation to drivers' experiences of stress. The thesis emphasises frontline leadership by focusing on relationship mechanisms, such as communication and emotional support, to demonstrate value and recognition, which is lacking, as suggested by the findings. Furthermore, this research represents the first to explore bus drivers within the unique context of NZ, especially under the Covid-19 pandemic circumstances, representing a significant contribution to the knowledge and existing studies of bus drivers. Responses from the participants suggest that a broad range of strategies can be used to manage drivers' stress and improve overall well-being and employment relations. Table 20 presents the summary of the

findings, contributions (theory, practice and methodology) and recommendations, which are presented in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Table 20. Summary of findings, contributions, and recommendations.

Key findings	Theoretical contribution
Supervisory support became more transactional.	Enhances psychological contract theory by showing how relational deterioration contributes to perceived contract breaches during crisis conditions.
POS and PSS were viewed as insufficient.	Reinforces POS and PSS as central job resources in the JD-R framework, particularly in distal and crisis-prone environments.
Peer support emerged as a key informal resource.	Extends JD-R model by validating peer support as a significant yet underexplored job resource in high-strain, remoted and low-supervision occupations.
Drivers felt a breach of psychological contract.	Demonstrates how crisis contexts alter employee expectations, showing that perceived employer neglect reshapes psychological contract norms.
Key findings	Practical contribution
Drivers' stress heightened due to pandemic demands.	Underscores the need for tailored health and well-being protocols for transport workers during crises.
Organisational and supervisory support were perceived as insufficient during the pandemic.	Suggests leadership visibility, active listening, and relational engagement as critical factors during organisational crises.
Supervisory roles became more transactional and less relational, weakening trust and communication.	Emphasises training for supervisors in relational leadership under crisis conditions.
Peer support was significant and emerged as a vital informal coping mechanism.	Encourages organisation to recognise and facilitate peer-based support systems.
Absence of professional HR support.	Advocates for decentralised, embedded professional HR presence to manage employment relations and well-being effectively in remote workplaces.
Area explored	Methodological contribution
Use of qualitative interviews with drivers, supervisors, managers, and union reps.	Provides rich, contextualised insights into stress and employment relations, often overlooked in quantitative JD-R and PC studies.

6.3.1 Theoretical contribution

This study was designed to offer an original contribution by; (a) adopting an integrative approach from a qualitative perspective drawing on established theories of the JD-R model, and the psychological contract; (b) examining an unusual 'distal' employment relations context in which work is demanding but relations with supervisors and peers are largely remote; and (c) exploring these dynamics in the unique context of the Covid pandemic. In doing so, the study advances our understanding of the distinct yet interconnected roles of organisational, supervisor and peer support, including PJ fit, in influencing drivers' experience of stress and employment relations. The study makes several contributions.

The first key contribution this study makes is in advancing our understanding of the distinct yet interconnected roles of POS, PSS and peer support in shaping the employment relations within the bus driving occupation. Each of these forms of support functions at different levels of the organisational system, but collectively influences how bus drivers experience stress and employment relationships. POS functions at the macro-organisational level and reflects an organisational commitment to drivers' well-being through fair pay, safety initiatives, recognition, and organisational communication (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). For many drivers, POS formed a core of their psychological contract. However, the failure to meet those implicit expectations and obligations led drivers to interpret it as a breach, which resulted in widespread dissatisfaction among drivers and industrial disputes.

In contrast, PSS operates at the meso-relational level and reflects supervisors' day-to-day interaction with drivers. PSS, although it is critical, the supervisor's capacity to provide adequate support is constrained by the physically detached nature of supervision. In such a

distal context, the supervisor is perceived more as an administrator and authority figure than as a source of support, and this perception is further reinforced in a cost-focused operational environment, where training, for example, is often circumscribed. Supervisors may contribute to stress, even unwittingly, more than they are able or willing to alleviate it, which in part may reflect unrealistic expectations on the part of drivers. For example, the interviews with drivers suggested that the role of supervisors in overseeing the work of drivers creates a sense of authority in their eyes, in which drivers attribute symbolic power and authority to the supervisors. However, the interviews with supervisors reveal that they may not have sufficient decision-making authority or relational skills to address employee concerns effectively.

Furthermore, the limited resources available to supervisors to address drivers' needs and concerns may influence the dynamics of their relationship, potentially contributing to tensions such as stress and employment relations issues like unmet expectations, which negatively impact both drivers and supervisors alike. More research is needed on the ambiguity of supervisory relations in remote yet demanding work settings, and quantitative researchers should consider how to integrate implications related to such contextual, contested, and dynamic relationships into their empirical research and conceptual frameworks. Given the interrelated nature of POS and PSS, the findings from these two forms of support underscore how their absence can contribute not only to the driver's experience of stress but also to a perceived breach of the psychological contract, which may negatively impact employment relationships.

Peer support that functions at the micro-relational level emerged as a vital social resource. This resource compensated for the lack of PSS and POS by fostering camaraderie that reinforces a sense of belonging, reduces isolation, and acts as an informal buffer against occupational stress,

which was critical during the pandemic (Agarwal et al., 2020). Although brief, social interactions among drivers who gather in the common room for lunch/napping, or at layover points away from the depot, have a real impact. These contextual factors encouraged the drivers to form more intentional peer support networks to provide that extra layer of support, both emotional and instrumental, among themselves. This finding facilitates the development of an informed and detailed understanding of the peer support environment, which can be considered and integrated into the conceptual framework of the JD-R model and social support theory, even in settings where work is mostly independent.

The second contribution emphasises the importance of PJ fit and, unusually, suggests that even a good fit may increase stress problems, especially when there is intrinsic motivation without external support. Some drivers valued the public service and autonomous aspects of their work, yet this was undermined by a sense of lack of recognition and support. In fact, their heightened commitment led them to feel even more undervalued due to passengers' hostility, long and erratic working hours, low pay, and lack of communication and direct supervisory support. This study also illustrates the social dimension of PJ fit by emphasising the influence of positive relationships and team dynamics. In demanding and isolated jobs, it is imperative to sustain a supportive team environment that fosters a sense of camaraderie that makes individuals feel valued and socially integrated. 'Fit' is not just with the job, but also with the social atmosphere, and this becomes even more important in individualised roles.

Additionally, cultural considerations in jobs characterised by diversity underscore how employees perceive and interact with organisational norms, interpersonal interactions, and the allocation of resources from the employer. Employees from various cultural origins bring varied expectations to the workplace. This perspective suggests that expanding PJ fit to

integrate social and cultural elements could offer an additional dimension to the conventional conceptualisation of aligning an individual's abilities and needs with job demands and rewards. In diverse workplaces such as the NZ bus sector, social and cultural factors impact drivers' perceptions of their roles, interactions with colleagues, and experiences with workplace resources. This context suggests that PJ fit addresses not only technical alignment, but also cultural compatibility, acknowledging the importance of cultural backgrounds in influencing expectations, behaviour, and perceptions of job resources. Extending the PJ fit to include cultural elements provides a theoretical framework to investigate the interaction of diversity, organisational support, and job demands. Future research could explore the interaction between cultural PJ fit and other personal resources, such as resilience, in moderating the impact of job demands across various contexts. Hence, researchers seeking to extend the JD-R model may consider elaborating on PJ fit as an individual resource (in both negative and positive senses, and in relation to the social environment, not just the job) for employee well-being and talent management.

6.3.2 Practical implications

The first implication for practice that this study highlights is the need for the selection and subsequent training and development of frontline leaders in relational HRM, alongside more systematic engagement with employee representatives, which are critical to fostering a positive employment relationship. The drivers' feelings of low support were indicative of dissatisfaction with their immediate supervisor and managers. The lack of support, trust and interaction between supervisors/managers and drivers is attributed not just to physical separation but also to leaders' incompetence in creating an environment where relationships thrive. This gap is due to supervisors (and a few managers) transitioning from being drivers themselves, and they may not have acquired the necessary people management skills and competencies to manage

employee relations. Hence, this study advocates the need for a comprehensive approach to developing frontline leaders to bridge the gap between role familiarity and leadership competence. The distal employment relationship does not, in fact, abrogate the personal dimension of the supervisory role, but rather emphasise it.

The second contribution to practice that this study makes is highlighting the significance of HR practice and expertise. HR practices that emphasise well-being initiatives, equitable compensation, and career development opportunities are critical to the set-up of employment relations within the sector. However, the absence of a dedicated HR professional or team, as evident in the findings, may impede suitable HR initiatives as well as specialist support for frontline leadership to navigate employee relations issues and maintain a positive work environment (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). Additionally, without dedicated HR professionals, organisations may struggle to implement effective recruitment, training and development programs to upskill employees, particularly frontline leadership, to manage employee relations challenges. Moreover, the conduct of HR expertise is crucial to the development of functioning psychological contracts, and trust being central to these contracts, positive interactions, such as transparent communication or fair treatment, can strengthen employee trust (Guest, 1998; McDermott et al., 2013; Petersitzke, 2009). However, the effects of poor supervisor interactions or perceived unfair treatment were magnified in a distal employment setting, which makes HR function even more crucial in supporting effective supervisory selection, training, and oversight. Thus, this study argues that HR should not be viewed merely as a cost factor, but rather as a strategic business partner, aligning human capital management with business objectives.

6.3.3 Methodological contribution

Quantitative research has generally dominated the study of bus drivers. Through the surveys and statistical analysis of extensive databases, quantitative research has identified key stressors in the working conditions of bus drivers that contributed to increased stress levels and decreased job satisfaction. The key contribution of this study captures the intricate, lived experiences of bus drivers, which are important in understanding how stress is developed and experienced but often overlooked by quantitative studies. Qualitative approach is known to yield nuanced insights, which are particularly pertinent to the context of bus drivers. This method has provided insights into how individual bus drivers perceive and cope with their work environments by examining their work's emotional and psychological dimensions, uncovering aspects such as feelings of isolation, coping strategies for conflict and stress, and individual interpretations of POS and PSS.

In addition, the qualitative approach in the study contributes to exploring subjective experiences and individual perceptions of stress and coping mechanisms within the broader psychological and social implications of the job. The interview and narrative approach enabled the study to identify and establish how the broader organisational culture, interpersonal relationships, and personal interpretations of POS and PSS, including the systemic and institutional factors, interact to influence employees' well-being, which is not easily quantifiable. For example, findings on immigrant bus drivers revealed that cultural identity, language barriers, and social isolation exacerbate their stress, which might be more difficult to tease out even in large-scale data sets. Future researchers on the JD-R and the psychological contract theories may consider mixed-methods approaches, whereby qualitative insights can help explain patterns identified by quantitative techniques (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

6.4 Study limitations and implications for future research

This study elucidated the stress that NZ bus drivers face during times of acute challenges. It pursued this through qualitative techniques, from multiple participant perspectives, to address the complexity and fluidity of the pandemic situation. However, this methodology has a limitation in that the insights may not be representative, and further work may benefit from a mixed-methods approach to establish generalisability as well as depth and theoretical relevance in the findings.

Other limitations relate to the peculiarities of the NZ context. For example, although the participating bus company is one of the biggest in NZ, it does not have dedicated HR professionals. Future research should examine the views of HR to establish more nuanced knowledge of the practices in managing the well-being and employment relations within the sector, whether in NZ or overseas. Similarly, the implementation of the PTOM in the NZ bus sector, though modelled on the UK, is unusual internationally. This research might have benefited from contributions from a policy perspective from stakeholders such as the government, Auckland Council and Auckland Transport, though this was beyond its scope. Future research could involve the perspectives of stakeholders beyond those covered in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the sector's political economy and its impact on the work experience.

Notwithstanding the necessary limitations of this research, it offers new insights into the working conditions and employment relations of bus drivers in a changing and challenging context, and so hopefully creates valuable opportunities for future research. As discussed, the nature, prevalence, causes, and consequences of job stress have been extensively studied and are relatively well-documented. The field of research has now shifted towards

managing stress and improving drivers' well-being. By focusing on the problem in a pandemic context, this research suggests that well-being policies are insufficient without organisational support, such as the appropriate training of supervisors and managers to implement these policies effectively in the workplace. Further research into the constraints and effective mechanisms for people management in remote settings is long overdue.

6.5 Concluding remarks

Coming from an HRM background, I have always been interested in understanding HR practice and the development of best practices that are contextually relevant and work-centred. My research was motivated by the situation of NZ bus drivers, particularly the recurring industrial disputes. The issues of pay equity and the working conditions raised important questions about how HR practices were delivered, perceived, or absent in the sector. Those issues were further intensified in the wake of the pandemic as bus drivers were considered essential workers during the lockdowns and were exposed to heightened personal risks. As I progressed with the research, I found myself deeply engaged not just academically, but personally. The stories I heard from the drivers, many of whom were migrant workers, who had to navigate this difficult job away from home, challenged my understanding of what it means to be supported in the workplace. The issues of fair treatment, trust, employee voice, and psychological safety were not just theoretical concepts, but lived experiences for these workers. These realities provided an opportunity to explore and generate insights into how employment relationship is experienced and how policies and workplace practices might be improved. Engaging with drivers, supervisors, managers, and trade union representatives provided a nuanced perspective on the employment relations in this context. I walk away from this research project more convinced than ever that HRM must be relational, inclusive and grounded in the realities of the

people it is meant to serve. But even for HRM to be effective, it must have the full support of top management.

For researchers interested in the employment relations of often overlooked occupations with a large proportion of migrant workforces, I would offer several reflections. First, these workforces, like bus drivers, truck drivers, construction labourers or care workers, who often feel unheard and underrepresented, require an empathetic approach. Building trust with them is essential for gathering meaningful and authentic data, especially in qualitative research. Second, when conducting research in the context of a crisis, flexibility and ethical sensitivity are paramount. The Covid-19 pandemic reminded me of the unpredictability of fieldwork and that people's lives do not fit neatly into research timelines. Therefore, be prepared to be flexible and adjust interview schedules and modes of communication to meet participants where they are. Third, it is important to be aware of your role as a researcher in the process. I often reflected on how my background, values and emotions influenced the questions I asked and how I understood what participants shared. This research felt personal and at times emotionally challenging, especially when I discovered that the treatment people received was unfair. I saw this research as a privilege to be trusted with the experiences shared, so I could share them in a way that could help bring about a change.

Finally, this research has made a small contribution to the existing knowledge on issues affecting NZ bus drivers and to wider research on bus driver stress and well-being. It would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of participants who unreservedly shared their experiences, views, and challenges. Their voices offered crucial insights into the complexities of interactions between numerous factors that account for occupational stress and well-being of drivers, which enhances the study with authenticity and depth. I aspire for this

work to provide a meaningful contribution, both to the NZ bus sector and the wider research community, by shedding light on the essential role of employee well-being in the workplace and its trickle-down effect on organisational outcomes. This research elucidated the complex relationship among organisational support, systemic barriers, and well-being, with the intention of informing policy, guiding organisational strategies, and inspiring other studies that emphasise employee well-being and promote more supportive work environments. I hope this research makes a small contribution to improving how we think about and practice leadership and HR in essential yet often underappreciated occupations.

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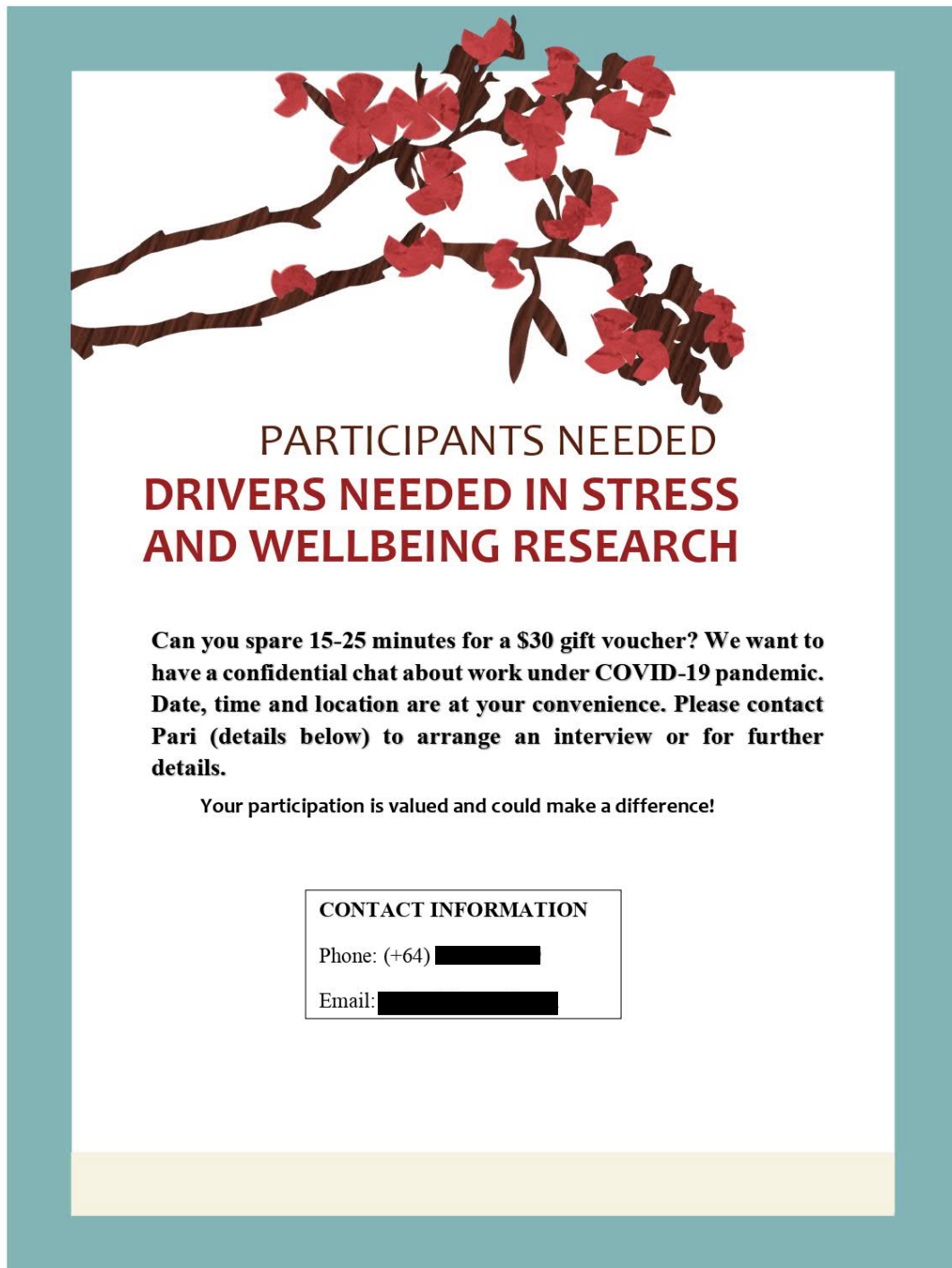
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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Participant Recruitment Flyer



The flyer features a teal border and a white central area. At the top, there is a stylized illustration of a brown branch with several red flowers and green leaves. Below the illustration, the text is centered and reads: 'PARTICIPANTS NEEDED' in a dark brown font, followed by 'DRIVERS NEEDED IN STRESS AND WELLBEING RESEARCH' in a larger, bold, dark red font. Below this, a paragraph in bold black text states: 'Can you spare 15-25 minutes for a \$30 gift voucher? We want to have a confidential chat about work under COVID-19 pandemic. Date, time and location are at your convenience. Please contact Pari (details below) to arrange an interview or for further details.' Underneath this paragraph, a line of text reads: 'Your participation is valued and could make a difference!'. At the bottom, there is a white box with a black border containing the heading 'CONTACT INFORMATION' and two lines of text: 'Phone: (+64) [REDACTED]' and 'Email: [REDACTED]'. The bottom of the flyer has a light yellow horizontal bar.

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED
DRIVERS NEEDED IN STRESS
AND WELLBEING RESEARCH**

Can you spare 15-25 minutes for a \$30 gift voucher? We want to have a confidential chat about work under COVID-19 pandemic. Date, time and location are at your convenience. Please contact Pari (details below) to arrange an interview or for further details.

Your participation is valued and could make a difference!

CONTACT INFORMATION
Phone: (+64) [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix B. Participants Information Sheet



INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Research Description and Invitation

I am Pari Irai, a current PhD research student in the School of Management at Massey University, under the supervision of Professor Jim Arrowsmith and Dr Fatima Junaid. My research focuses on understanding employee wellbeing and the challenges of covid-19 in the New Zealand bus sector with the aim to assist organisation in creating a supportive environment for employees. I am interested in exploring the above from the perspective of bus and coach association officials. I hope that the outcome of this research will be of close interest and use to all involved in the study. I would therefore greatly appreciate your contribution to this project.

Study Procedure

This research project involves face-to-face or virtual interviews of approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be conducted at the venue and time convenient for you. The proceeding of the interview will be audio-recorded with consent, and the transcript will be shared with you after the analysis.

Rights of the Participants

Participation is completely voluntary, and you will be guaranteed confidentiality. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular question and /or terminate the interview without explanation at any point during the interview. You are also free to ask any questions at any time during the interview. If you experience any form of distress after the interview, call the helpline on 0800 543 354/ 0800 111 757 to receive the available help and support services. Information collected from the interview will be entirely confidential. All information will be anonymized before using it for analysis. At the end of the study, a summary of the outcome of the study will be made accessible to you through your personal email, which will be collected at the end of the interview if you choose.

Ethics Committee Approval

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

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Massey University, Private Bag 102904, Auckland 0745 T +64 9 414 0800 F +64 9 441 8109
www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix C. Participants Consent Form



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the “Information Sheet” attached and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name]_____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 21/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact A/Prof Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800, x 43347, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz

Appendix D. Interview Schedules

Bus drivers Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Can you please tell me about your job and what it involves?
2. How long have you been working in this role and for this company and what have you done prior to joining bus industry?

A) Drivers' role and experience

3. What would you say are the greatest challenges facing you in your role as a driver? have they been getting any better, or worse over the past few years?
4. What are the best aspects of the job?
5. When you have work-related problems affecting them, are you always open about discussing with your supervisor or the management?

B) COVID Pandemic

6. How has covid impacted you personally, in your job or at home?
7. How has your employer responded to COVID-19 in terms of managing drivers? Have there been any initiatives/actions around driver wellbeing?
8. How did you cope with any stress or anxiety during the pandemic?
9. How do you feel about returning to work when restrictions are lifted, and normalcy is restored?

C) Supervisors' role and support

I would like to understand your relationship with your supervisors, given that you are on the road and are being supervised remotely.

10. What does the role of the supervisor and managers involve?
11. How does the supervisor monitor and support drivers in terms of health, safety and overall wellbeing? (Or is it more performance management and discipline)?
12. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor/managers vs your colleagues?
13. What are your perceptions of challenges such as recruitment and retention problems facing the drivers? Is it due to pay vs living costs, or limited migration or funding environment for companies?
14. If there is another job opportunity not related to your current role, would you move to this new?
15. Can you briefly describe your educational background and any relevant training that has prepared you for your current role?
16. What specific skills or experiences do you feel have been most valuable in your role as a driver?

D) Industrial disputes

There were some industrial disputes in the bus sector prior to COVID pandemic.

17. What were the main issues behind these disputes?
18. How would you describe the management/HR approach in addressing these issues and have those issues been resolved?
19. If there is one or a few issues in the bus industry that you would like it to be addressed by management, what would those issues be and why?
20. Thank you for your time and valuable insights. Is there anything that you think I have missed that are important?

Interview Questions for Trade Unions

Introduction

1. Can you please tell me about your job and what it involves?

A) Work Experience of Drivers

2. I've been reading a lot about how challenging the bus driver job is, with issues such as a long working day (due to split shifts), long at-work hours, maybe a lot of overtime because of low pay and labour shortages? - as well as low basic pay. What would you say are the greatest challenges facing drivers? have they been getting any better, or worse over the past few years?
3. How has covid impacted on drivers generally? I'm thinking that many are older workers, so many might have health worries. Also, many are migrants so have family overseas. On the other hand, dealing with fewer customers and less traffic on the roads. What is your sense from your members of how covid has affected them over the past 18 months or so?
4. I've also been trying to understand the drivers' relationship with their supervisors, given they are on the road. What does the role of the supervisor involve? How does the supervisor monitor and support drivers in terms of health, safety and overall wellbeing?

B) Covid responses

5. How have companies responded to Covid in terms of managing staff? Have there been any initiatives around driver wellbeing?
6. Has the union made any proposals around supporting drivers through covid, or dealing with stress and wellbeing generally?
7. How have they been received – are there constructive relations around these kinds of issues with the companies, maybe some more than others?

C) Industrial relations

8. There were industrial disputes in the bus sector in the years before Covid - what were the main issues behind these?
9. What do you think industrial relations in the sector will look like as we hopefully emerge from covid in 2022?
10. How would you describe the relationship between trade unions and management in the bus transportation sector?
11. Thank you so much for your time and valuable insights. Is there anything that you think I have missed?

Managers Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Can you please tell me about your job and what it involves?
2. How long have you been working in this role and for this company and what have you done prior to joining bus industry?

A) Drivers' role and experience

3. How do feel about the role bus driving?
4. What would you say are the greatest challenges facing drivers?
5. When drivers have work-related problems affecting them, are they always open about discussing with you or the management or they like to keep those problems to themselves?
6. What qualities and attributes do you look for when you are recruiting supervisors?

B) COVID Pandemic

7. How has COVID impacted you and in your role generally?
8. What is your sense from your drivers of how COVID has affected them over the past 18 months or so?
9. How has the company responded to the COVID in terms managing drivers? Have there been any initiatives/actions in terms of protecting drivers and help get through the pandemic? If so, can you give some examples of any policies/practices introduced by the company as a result of COVID?

C) Supervisors' role and support

I would like to understand supervisor role, given that drivers are on the road and are being supervised remotely.

10. What does the role of supervisor involve?
11. How would you describe their role in supporting bus drivers on a daily basis?
12. How do they monitor and support drivers in terms of health, safe and wellbeing?
13. How often do they interact with drivers and normally around what issues?
14. What qualities and attributes do you look for when you are recruiting supervisors?
15. How are they trained and developed?
16. How do you feel about the role of supervisor? Is it challenging and if so, what are the challenging aspect of this role?
17. What are your perceptions of challenges such as recruitment and retention problems facing the drivers? Is it due to pay vs living costs, or limited migration or funding environment for companies?

D) Managers role and experience

18. What are the main operational challenges you face in running a bus transportation service?
19. How does the operational team coordinate with HR or management to address employee concerns or issues related to working conditions?
20. Can you briefly describe your educational background and any relevant training that has prepared you for your current role?
21. What specific skills or experiences do you feel have been most valuable in your role as a Manager?

E) Industrial disputes

There were some industrial disputes in the bus sector prior to COVID pandemic.

22. What were the main issues behind these disputes?
23. How would you describe the management approach in addressing these issues and have those issues been resolved?
24. If there is one or a few issues in the bus industry that you would like it to be addressed by management, what would those issues be and why?
25. Thank you for your time and valuable insights. Is there anything that you think I have missed that are important?

Supervisors Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Can you please tell me about your job and what it involves?
2. How long have you been working in this role and for this company and what have you done prior to joining bus industry?

A) Drivers' role and experience

3. How do you feel about the role bus driving?
4. What would you say are the greatest challenges facing drivers?
5. When drivers have work-related problems affecting them, are they always open about discussing with you or the management or they like to keep those problems to themselves? And why is that?

B) COVID Pandemic

6. How has COVID impacted you and in your role generally?
7. What is your sense from your drivers of how COVID has affected them over the past 18 months or so?
8. How has the company responded to the COVID in terms managing drivers? Have there been any initiatives/actions in terms of protecting drivers and help get through the pandemic? If so, can you give some examples of any policies/practices introduced by the company as a result of COVID?

C) Supervisors' role and support

I would like to understand your role, given that drivers are on the road and are being supervised remotely.

9. What does the role of supervisor involve?
10. How would you describe your role in supporting bus drivers on a daily basis?
11. How do you monitor and support drivers in terms of health, safe and wellbeing?
12. How often do you interact with drivers and normally around what issues?
13. How do you feel about your role as a supervisor? Is it challenging and if so, what are the challenging aspect of this role?
14. What are your perceptions of challenges such as recruitment and retention problems facing the drivers? Is it due to pay vs living costs, or limited migration or funding environment for companies?
15. If there is another job opportunity not related to your current role, would you move to this new?
16. Can you briefly describe your educational background and any relevant training that has prepared you for your current role?
17. What specific skills or experiences do you feel have been most valuable in your role as a supervisor?

D) Industrial disputes

There were some industrial disputes in the bus sector prior to COVID pandemic.

18. What were the main issues behind these disputes?
19. How would you describe the management/HR approach in addressing these issues and have those issues been resolved?
20. If there is one or a few issues in the bus industry that you would like it to be addressed by management, what would those issues be and why?
21. Thank you for your time and valuable insights. Is there anything that you think I have missed that are important?

Appendix E. Ethics Approval Letter



29/11/2021

Dear: Pari Irai

Re: Ethics Application - NOR 21/62 - The role of supervisor and human resource management in mitigating stress: Bus driving in a pandemic context.

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

Ohu Matatika 2 at their meeting held on **Thursday, 26 August 2021**

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

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29/11/2021

Dear: Pari Irai

Re: Ethics Application - NOR 21/62 - The role of supervisor and human resource management in mitigating stress: Bus driving in a pandemic context.

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

Ohu Matatika 2 at their meeting held on **Thursday, 21 October 2021**

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

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