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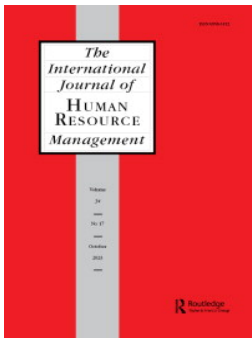
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Between mundane and extreme: the nature of work on the UK supermarket frontline during a public health crisis

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ABSTRACT

The normally low-risk and routinised nature of supermarket frontline work evolved drastically amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a refined conceptual framework of extreme work, this article examines how the public health crisis coupled with maxinisation of organisational flexibility gives rise to extremity in mundane work settings. The findings based on 50 interviews with workers and managers who worked throughout the pandemic on the UK supermarket frontline offer empirical insights into the macro-micro dynamics of extreme-mundane work. These insights reveal a nuanced narrative of supermarket work as both alienating, owing to the frequent encounters of abuse and undervalued responsibilities, and fulfilling as a respite from social isolation induced by the pandemic. This narrative illustrates the complexities of individual motivations to engage with extreme work, while highlighting a need for structural support in coping with elevated exposure to risks and uncertainties. The article argues that the nature of work and workplaces in the face of extreme externalities remains contingent upon human resource management practices on the frontline of a crisis.

Introduction

The rise of extremity in both risky and comparatively low-risk workplaces (Granter et al., 2015), increasingly exacerbated by disruptive events external to organisational operations (Bader et al., 2019; Holland et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022), necessitates further investigation into individual

experience of work and relevant implications for human resource management (HRM) practices in extreme contexts. Research on workplace extremity in the HRM literature has predominantly departed from a macro-level perspective, which tends to amplify managerialist approaches to developing 'positive' discourses associated with resilience while marginalising human dimensions at the micro level (Stokes et al., 2019). Organisational and managerial discourses of extremity can determine the pressure that individual workers face in meeting their usual performance targets under compromising circumstances (Granter et al., 2019; Turnbull & Wass, 2015). The ways that such discourses are translated into HRM practices on the frontline of a crisis are consequential in shaping the nature of work and workplaces, which is inseparable from individual and organisational preparedness for unanticipated disruptions (Cai et al., 2021).

This article contributes to the HRM literature with a refined conceptualisation of extreme work (Cai, 2023; Granter et al., 2015) by capturing three dimensions of extremity associated with both macro contexts and micro experiences, which include unpredictable working time, pace, and/or workload, expanded skills demand and responsibilities, and psychological and physical intensity. The persisting tendency of HRM to maximise labour flexibility (Heyes et al., 2018) and to mitigate extreme externalities (Johnstone, 2023; Stuart et al., 2021) through cost-cutting mechanisms has detrimental consequences for both workers and organisations. Echoing the call to put the 'human' back into HRM (Gold & Smith, 2022), we argue that the vulnerability of workers in the face of crisis deserves further attentions from HRM scholars and practitioners. Our conceptualisation of extreme work offers a theoretical and practical foundation for developing HRM strategies in supporting workers during a time of crisis.

This article also contributes to the HRM literature with empirical insights into how macro contexts and micro experiences give rise to extreme work in mundane and quotidian workplaces, based on a qualitative study of supermarket frontline work during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the macro level, the institutional and organisational unpreparedness in the food retail sector (The Environment & Food & Rural Affairs Committee, 2020) poses significant HRM challenges in dealing with dramatic fluctuations in supply and demand for labour. At the micro level, observations of profit-oriented managerial responses to the pandemic have raised concerns about potential deterioration of work conditions on the supermarket frontline (Hadjisolomou & Simone, 2021). We, therefore, seek to address two questions: what characterise the nature of UK supermarket frontline work during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do UK supermarket frontline managers and workers cope with and make sense of their experiences at work during a crisis?

The findings offer a relatively 'real-time' understanding of how extremity in the workplace emerges and evolves with a protracted crisis that continues to unfold. Management research on extreme externalities has predominantly examined how organisations cope with operational suspension and resume functionalities amid a critical incident (Hällgren et al., 2018). In contrast, the UK supermarkets continued to operate throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as food retail falls within the governmental classification of critical sectors (UK government, 2020) in response to the public health crisis. We conducted 50 semi-structured interviews to capture how workers and managers experienced and perceived supermarket frontline work as they were living through the pandemic. The interviews focused on identifying the key characteristics of supermarket frontline work, particularly the extreme elements which contrast with the 'normal' and 'mundane' elements in quotidian workplace settings. The interviews also probed individual perceptions of what gave rise to the extreme elements of their work and how these elements were dealt with.

This article proceeds with a discussion about how the context of extremity and the concept of extreme work relate to supermarket frontline work during the pandemic. Following an outline of the research method, the findings section presents evidence on two main themes that concern the rise of extreme-mundane work and the narratives of macro-micro extreme. The discussion highlights a nuanced portait of supermarket work as both alienating, given the frequent encounters of abuse and undervalued responsibilities, and fulfilling as a respite from social isolation in the pandemic. The article concludes with a call for structural support in managing extreme work and work conditions on the frontline of critical services in response to a public health crisis.

Supermarket as an extreme-mundane context

Management research on extremity can be classified into three categories: risky, emergency, and disruptive context (Hällgren et al., 2018). The risky context concerns potential extremity associated with the nature of the core operational activities in an organisation, such as the healthcare services (Desai, 2015), whereas the emergency context focuses on the actual extremity arising from any organisational activities. The work environment of supermarket frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast, resembles the disruptive context of critical incidents that occurred outside of organisational operation (Hällgren et al., 2018).

Prior to the pandemic, supermarkets are often considered uneventful workplaces with relatively routinised and mundane activities (Bozkurt,

2015; Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011). The nature of these activities drastically changed with the emergence of coronavirus, leading to a public health crisis. As the virus transmits through close in-person contact, customer interactions that form the core of much supermarket frontline services now suddenly bear risky implications for individuals, organisations, and the wider communities. Earlier observations of customer aggression associated with goods shortages and changing health and safety practices (Cai et al., 2021) also imply the emergence of a hostile work environment on the supermarket shopfloor, which is comparatively less documented than to sectors such as media and international aid operate (Fee et al., 2019) in the HRM literature. Supermarket frontline therefore presents an important setting for examining how disruptions and changes at the macro level shape individual experiences at the micro level in giving rise to extremity.

Supermarket frontline services have often relied on flexible employment contracts that guarantee minimum hours to achieve and sustain financial performance targets through budget control and cost reduction (Price, 2016). On the one hand, flexible contracts instigate difficulties for many supermarket workers in planning work and personal commitments (Heyes et al., 2018). The uncertainties that derived from the pandemic can exacerbate such difficulties. On the other hand, the pressure to meet performance targets has imperative implications for supermarket frontline managers who face a potential 'moral dilemma' (Hadjisolomou & Simone, 2021) between maintaining workplace health and safety, and increasing customer traffic and sales that bear individual and organisational ramifications. The reliance on flexible contracts also subject supermarket frontline managers to staffing challenges during the pandemic given its disruptions to the supply and demand for labour. This study, therefore, considers the perspective and experience of both workers and managers to understand the changing nature of supermarket frontline work. The following section discusses and refines the concept of extreme work, outlining its relevance to this study.

Conceptualising extreme work

The concept of extreme work derived from edgework and extreme jobs. Edgework describes the intensity of engaging with high-risk sport activities as a means of self-actualisation (Lyng, 1990), which distinguishes extremity from normality at work, with an emphasis on intentionality. The notion of extreme jobs also underlines intentionality, portraying individual engagement with work intensification in highly paid professional and managerial roles as a conscious choice (Hewlett & Luce, 2006).

Both concepts represent extremity at work as an outcome of voluntary involvement in inherently intense professional activities with the motivation of rewards.

This representation of extremity at work has its limitations. First, involuntary exposure to extremity at work is evident in both low-risk (Bozkurt, 2015) and high-risk environments (Suder et al., 2019). Hewlett and Luce (2006) characterise extreme jobs as those with an unpredictable workflow, tight deadlines, fast working pace, inordinate scope of responsibility, after-hours work events, 24/7 availability to clients, responsibility for profit and loss, responsibility for mentoring and recruiting, frequent travel, many direct reports, and a minimal demand for 10 hours of physical presence at work. In normal times, these characteristics bear little resemblances with routinised supermarket work (Newsome et al., 2013) with a comparatively predictable and narrow scope of responsibilities. During the busy trading period of Christmas, however, expanded skill demands and responsibilities, increased working hours, and frequent social activities that blurs work and non-work boundaries have been observed in supermarket frontline work (Bozkurt, 2015).

Second, The extreme job definition overlooks the physical and psychological risks associated with hostile work environments (Suder et al., 2019), which are not limited to managerial roles. A conscious choice of professions with frequent exposure to risks cannot be assumed as an active pursuit of extremity at work (Granter et al., 2019). Organisational practices rationalising work intensification have a potentially detrimental impact on individuals, organisations, and societies, especially in public service professions of a risky nature such as policing (Turnbull & Wass, 2015), and healthcare (Buchanan et al., 2013; Granter et al., 2015). The physical and psychological safety of workers in a hostile environment remains contingent upon the organisational practices and responses to extreme externalities (Fee et al., 2019).

Extreme work is neither necessitated by a conscious choice nor unique to inherently intense professions, but contextually constructed. Empirical studies have illustrated the importance of 'time and temporality' (Bozkurt, 2015, p. 488) in shaping how individuals perceive what constitutes extremity and how they cope with it. In the ambulance services, perceived extremity often arises from time-critical responses, actions, and decision-making (Granter et al., 2019). In the backdrop of recession and austerity, extremity from the perspective of police officers centres on the deprivation from expected rewards for working overtime rather than the risky nature of their work (Turnbull & Wass, 2015). In the context of supermarket work during the pandemic, perceived extremity emerges from unanticipated risks and unpredictable work intensity (Cai et al., 2021).

Therefore, we propose refining the concept of extreme work to encapsulate any forms of work that involve 1) unpredictability associated with working time, pace, and/or workload, 2) expansion of skills demand and responsibilities, and 3) heightened psychological and/or physical intensity, especially of a risky nature. On the one hand, this conceptualisation captures extreme uncertainty that prevails in various forms of work across different sectors such as retail (Heyes et al., 2018). On the other hand, this conceptualisation also draws attention to the dominance of role demand overload in contemporary organisations (Boxall & Macky, 2014). Both intensification and uncertainty persists as many organisations continue to exert pressures on managers to reduce labour cost (Cushen & Thompson, 2016), which have critical implications for the physical and psychological health of workers. Reflecting these key issues, our refined conceptualisation has foundational utility in developing HRM theories further with a focus on the 'human' dimensions (Gold & Smith, 2022) that require organisational support in both quotidian and extreme contexts, and beyond inherently risky occupations and workplaces. These dimensions serve as a conceptual and practical basis for challenging the role of HRM in amplifying rather than mitigating the deterioration of work and employment conditions (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021; Cumming et al., 2020).

The micro-macro dynamics of extreme work

Previous studies suggest that the rise of extreme work at the micro level is often inseparable from the macro contexts, particularly in the frontline services (Granter et al., 2019; Turnbull & Wass, 2015; Wankhade et al., 2020). A recent historical review unveils a growing trend of extreme working hours in 18 developed Western economies since the 1970s, pointing to the role of weakening employment protection regulations and collective bargaining power in driving individuals to work longer (Burger, 2021). Low-paid workers on flexible contracts tend to choose overtime as a mean to top up income (Hadjisolomou et al., 2017) and to demonstrate commitment by taking on work with last-minute notice in prevention of being replaced (Heyes et al., 2018). Highly-paid professionals also face 'flexibility stigma' (Stone & Hernandez, 2013) against those who are unwilling to work longer hours as some sectors become internationalised (Wren, 2013) and adopt the 'opt-out' clause in the EU Working Time directive (Hermann, 2018).

While lacking state interventions in addressing structural issues deem individuals more vulnerable to a culture of extreme work (Burger, 2021), rigid operational patterns that some organisations that are 'locked into' also reinforce such culture even when facing the pressure from macro environment to change (Blagoev & Schreyögg,

2019, p. 1819). Normalisation of extreme work observed in the UK Police Service at a time of austerity unveils that macro fiscal policy intertwins with rigid performance targets at the organisational level can aggravate role demands (Turnbull & Wass, 2015). Global competitions have also increased skill demands and expand responsibilities, especially for managerial roles (McCann et al., 2008), in pursuit of efficiency that often translate into questionable performance regimes. Technological advancement has also exacerbated the impact of such regimes for workers through monitoring the pace of work (Carter et al., 2011; Green, 2004; Newsome et al., 2013) and normalising work that require intense effort and concentration (Bloomfield & Dale, 2015).

Understanding these micro-macro dynamics of extreme work is of critical relevance to addressing relevant antecedents and consequences, specifically the physical and psychological dimensions reported by previous studies (Buchanan et al., 2013; Granter et al., 2019). Evidence on the association between income inequality and extreme work hours (Bowles & Park, 2005) highlights the role of macro-level policies related to pay and employment contracts. Meeting financial needs and employer demands are the two primary situational factors that drive individuals to work longer hours and take on additional work (Snir & Harpaz, 2012). Disruptions to the demand and supply of goods and labour amid the COVID-19 pandemic might induce or exacerbate extreme work in frontline services that depend on flexible and low-paid workforces. Institutional and organisational responses to such disruptions have implications for how the rise or aggravation of extreme work is managed at the workplace level. This study seeks to examine how UK supermarket frontline managers and workers cope with and make sense of their experiences at work during the pandemic.

Research method

We deployed the semi-structured interviewing method that fits with the research objective of examining micro moments of actions, reactions, and interactions in quotidian work settings during a large-scale crisis. This methodological choice is in line with the evident appropriateness of qualitative approach to encapsulating lived experience of crises (Teti et al., 2020) and disrupted events external to organisational operations (Hällgren et al., 2018). In particular, qualitative interviewing is useful for investigating relatively unknown impact of a pandemic that continues to unfold and evolve when the research was carried out. The method allows in-depth probing into critical incidents that characterise the nature of frontline service work during a public health crisis.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who had continuously worked in the same supermarket store before and throughout the pandemic. Participant recruitment took place *via* social media and store visits when the latter was permitted by the public health regulations. In total, 38 workers and 12 managers from five UK supermarkets participated in this study. At the time of the interviews, four of the supermarket chains involved in this study dominate the market share of food retail in the UK. Despite being comparatively smaller, the fifth supermarket chain in this study also had a considerable market share in the UK retail sector. The supermarket stores involved in this study were located in England and Scotland. Individual consent from research participants was obtained before the interviews. The interview protocol as shown in Appendix 1 was developed from the extreme work literature. The participants were asked to describe 'normal' days of work before the pandemic before being invited to recall key events and changes at work, and to articulate how they felt about and cope with these changes.

We applied a critical incident technique (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954) by asking interview questions that concern micro moments of interpersonal exchanges. The use of critical incident technique was motivated by the necessity to contextualise individual conception of 'normality' and 'extremity' at work as well as their coping mechanisms in the face of extremity, which are fundamental for answering our research questions. While scarcely used by prior studies of extreme work, this technique offers an advantage in generating detailed accounts of how individuals deal with difficult situations (Chell, 2004). This advantage is of particular relevance to the context of frontline service work during a public health crisis. For instance, encounters with customer aggression are often observed on retail shopfloors prior to the pandemic (Kashif et al., 2017) and appear to surge during the pandemic (Brown, 2021; Elliott-Carter & Martin, 2022). While recognising that using critical incident technique might limit the scope of interviews to specific events, we were able to probe the micro and macro contexts in which key events occurred and to draw on the in-depth reflections of research participants upon these contexts to offer valuable HRM lessons in managing future crises.

Each researcher conducted interviews with participants from an assigned supermarket (A, B, C, D respectively) and shared the responsibilities of data collection for supermarket E. The interviews lasted between approximately 60-120 min, which were audio recorded, anonymised, and transcribed verbatim. We stopped conducting additional interviews as later participants started showing signs of difficulties in recalling details related to critical incidents that occurred in the first wave of the pandemic. The interviews covered the length of three waves of the pandemic in the UK as well as pre-pandemic experience of supermarket work. The achieved sample is detailed in Table 1 with gender and ethnically appropriate pseudonyms.

Table 1. Characteristics of the achieved sample.

Supermarket	Pseudonyms	Job title	Contract	Length of service (years)	Gender
A	Charles	CA[a]	Part-time	2	M
	Amanda	CA	Part-time	5	F
	Ethel	Picker	Part-time	3	F
	Ali	CSM[b]	Full-time	5	M
	Avril	Cashier	Part-time	2	F
	Katie	CA	Part-time	3	F
	Ava	CA	Part-time	2	F
	Gail	CA	Part-time	3	F
	Nicole	Merchandise controller	Part-time	4	F
	Lisa	CA	Part-time	3	F
	Christine	TM[c]	Part-time	7	F
	Sharon	CA	Part-time	2	F
	Sunara	TM	Full-time	6	F
B	Rebecca	CA	Part-time	4	F
	Frederick	SM[d]	Full-time	10	M
	Elisabeth	CA	Part-time	6	F
	Juan	Cashier	Part-time	6	M
	Raja	CA	Part-time	2	M
	Ruth	CA	Part-time	13	F
	Ziad	LM[e]	Full-time	5	M
	Pat	Cashier	Part-time	3	M
	Angela	CA	Part-time	2	F
	Kira	Picker	Part-time	2	F
	Samir	CA	Part-time	3	M
	Julia	CA	Full-time	25	F
	Arthur	CA	Part-time	3	M
C	Satya	CA	Part-time	3	M
	Daniel	NSM[f]	Full-time	10	M
	Susana	CA	Full-time	5	F
	Aadan	CA	Part-time	2	M
	Rotimi	CA	Part-time	3	M
	Olivia	CA	Part-time	2	F
	Zahid	TM	Full-time	7	M
	Courtney	SM	Full-time	6	M
	Sophia	CA	Part-time	3	F
	Jaden	CA	Part-time	5	M
	Helen	CA	Part-time	2	F
	Tasha	CA	Part-time	3	F
D	Henry	CA	Part-time	8	M
	Lucy	Picker	Part-time	4	F
	Victoria	CA	Part-time	12	F
	George	TL[g]	Full-time	9	M
	Emma	CA	Part-time	3	F
	Peter	SM	Full-time	5	M
	Clara	Cashier	Part-time	3	F
	Devi	TL	Part-time	5	F
E	Edwards	CA	Part-time	2	M
	Michael	SM	Full-time	8	M
	Jane	CA	Part-time	6	F
	Ferit	CA	Part-time	8	M

[a]Customer assistant.
[b]Customer services manager.
[c]Trade manager.
[d]Store manager.
[e]Lead manager.
[f]Night shift manager.
[g]Team leader.

The diverse disciplinary backgrounds of the research team called for abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), which operates in a recursive manner and encourages multi-perspective dialogues about the findings. Each researcher independently analysed the same randomly-selected sample of five interview transcripts and developed a tentative coding structure using template analysis (King, 2012). Subsequent meetings in which the researchers discussed key themes that each of them generated the sample transcripts. These discussions helped establish an initial coding template, which was used to analyse the rest of the interview transcripts. Each researcher applied this initial coding template to analyse the interviews that they conducted during the data collection stage. The coding structure was further consolidated and refined in regular team meetings, during which the researchers shared the key themes that stood out for each of them respectively, debated different interpretations of the findings, and exchanged feedback on the initial template. These meetings continued until the data analysis was completed and informed the finalisation of a coding structure that was eventually applied to the analysis of all interviews. NVivo was used to facilitate coding.

Findings

Two main themes that we generated from the interview data concern the rise of mundane-extreme work and the dynamics of macro-micro extremity. The findings related to the first theme are illustrative of our refined conceptualisation of extreme work, which includes unpredictability, expansion of skill demand and responsibilities, and physical and psychological risks. The second theme encapsulates the perception of structural support and the nature of work. Overall, the participants identified similar critical incidents that marked drastic changes to their work amid the pandemic. Their narratives of these initial incidents placed an emphasis on describing their surroundings, such as unusually emptied shelves and busy aisles, and their encounters with stockpiling behaviours. When recalling critical incidents related to the changing nature of their work, the participants shifted the focus to recounting interpersonal interactions with customers, colleagues, and managers. The recollections of conversations, actions, and emotions related to these incidents revealed shared difficulties in navigating the impact of macro factors on micro experience at work, particularly the unpredictability and risks associated with the development of the crisis. Many incidents alluded to expanded responsibilities and skill demand in respond to such unpredictability and risks.

The rise of mundane-extreme work

The rise of mundane-extreme work on the supermarket shopfloor is characterised by unpredictable working hours, pace, and workload, expanded skill demand and responsibilities, and heightened physical and psychological risks.

Unpredictable working hours, pace, and workload

The earliest accounts of critical incidents signifying the rise of extremity on the usually mundane supermarket shopfloor dated in February 2020 before the UK's first national lockdown in the following month. All participants reported witnessing 'panic buying' with a dramatic surge in demand for goods deemed essential for coping with the pandemic. Such demand occurred in waves and resulted in fluctuated working hours at short notice for workers on flexible contracts. These fluctuations were symptomatic of 'forced availability' (Hadjisolomou et al., 2017) and 'uncertain work' (Heyes et al., 2018). Facing difficulties to plan and fulfil non-work commitments, some workers, like Olivia, attributed the uncertainties to lacking consistent communication from and between managers:

> Some managers had access to my phone [number] so they would just message me 'can you come and do these days?' Some managers were quite demanding, so I wouldn't expect to come into work and they would just put 'oh can you come and work the next two days?' Or 'can you come and work tomorrow?' And I would have to adapt to that and see if – I had to cancel plans to go to work. But within the store, it was quite varied so some managers would tell me one thing and then another manager would tell me another. So I would do certain job tasks and then a manager would come up to me and say 'do this, don't do that'. And it was very – sometimes the managers don't speak to each other. So you're trying to find out information from different people. (Olivia, customer assistant)

While recognising and sympathising with these difficulties, a few managers highlighted that the challenging nature of workforce planning in general was exacerbated by the pandemic. 'Panic buying' caused goods shortages and subsequently reduced staffing need for stock-sorting and shelf-stacking tasks. When the stock returned to a 'normal' level and the number of workers falling ill increased with COVID-19 or self-isolating on medical grounds, many temporary workers were recruited to address staff shortages during busy periods. This temporary workforce became a surplus later when customer demands declined. These unanticipated disruptions to the demand and supply of both goods and labour aggravated the managerial pressure to meet the usual performance targets that centre on budget control and sales. The frontline managers felt they had no choice but to adjust staffing under such pressure:

> Already my boss tells me 'you need to cut down your hours'. That's how I cut down my hours. This is like sales are unpredictable, you never know what's going to happen, what's going to hit us […] But wages are in our hands, we can control that. So cutting 30 hours every shift for the next week, so that's going to give me an extra heads up, which puts extra pressure on the colleagues, I do understand. But I can show that to my boss ok this week I have saved this amount of hours and this is how I've been judged […] I tell them [workers] 'you guys have to be flexible. If you are flexible, I can work with you, we can work along'. (Zahid, night shift manager)

The tension between performance target and workforce planning that Zahid described is reminiscent of previous research on frontline managerial experience in the food retail sector (Price, 2016). The disruptions brought by a pandemic further exposed such tensions, whose ramifications for workers spilled over from working hours to the pace of work and workload. Some workers experienced work intensification resulting from having to cover additional work within their assigned working hours rather than being permitted to work overtime. One supermarket developed business partnerships with food delivery platforms without increasing the staffing budget, subjecting workers to additional workload:

> At the moment, two of our staff are self-isolating as well and they've tested positive. But again, they're not getting any cover, not giving people overtime to cover them because they're still getting paid for being in isolation but they're not getting any extra staff in. No wonder people are getting ill. It's putting more pressure on the staff who are actually there. And the other thing that has been recent is that we've started doing Uber. And also from two weeks ago we started doing [supermarket] Click and Collect […] We're not getting any extra staff, and we've got less staff actually. It was just sprung on us. (Sharon, customer assistant)

Most customer-facing workers shared Sharon's experience of intensification, feeling inundated with constant enquiries about the locations and availabilities of goods. Supermarkets began to introduce restrictions on the number of customers entering the store, placing additional pressure on store managers to maintain sales targets while implementing change policies. This pressure translated into demand for faster and more frequent shelf-stacking, and a quicker pace in processing transactions. At the peak of the stockpiling momentums, online order 'pickers' like Kira also reported intensified pace of work and workload due to surging demand for grocery delivery.

> I think the actual workload doubled nearly overnight. We were picking say 14,000 items a day, and it was going up to over 25,000 items. We'd do about 250 trolleys a day and it was over 400 trolleys a day. (Kira, picker)

Comparing their roles to workers on the shopfloor, many managers felt that the unpredictability of their own working hours and the intensity of their pace of work and workload were less visible. The abrupt

evolvement of public health guidance and employment regulations required the managers to continuously update their knowledge more frequently than usual. The drastic fluctuations of supply and demand for specific goods also required timely managerial responses. Most managers worked throughout the pandemic without taking leave, citing the persisting presence of the pandemic and the prevalence of staffing issues associated with illness, and the insufficiency of relying on flexible contracts in coping with labour shortages. These accounts reflected some extreme elements that prevail in managerial roles (Hewlett & Luce, 2006).

> We have got 96 colleagues in that store, so we have to manage all the colleagues, all their training, performance, sickness. So in the absence of our store manager, we are in charge of the whole store; anything that happens we have to deal with it. People sometimes think 'oh you managers you just sit in your office', I wish! When people think that we […] don't do anything, we actually can spend some days – specifically me, my days are sometimes with no food, just drinking coffee and going back and forwards. It is stressful, it's not an easy job. I'm also in charge of cash office, training, all the legal documents, [and] all the disciplinary meetings. [M]y days are quite long. I can sometimes do 10-11 hours and due to COVID there were days I actually did 15 hours. (Christine, trading manager)

Expanded skill demand and responsibilities

The enforcement of health and safety policies was usually beyond the remit of responsibilities for the workers. During the first wave of the pandemic, the disparity between individual beliefs about the existence and severity of coronavirus induced an additional responsibility of 'policing' customer behaviours. When encountering customers who refused to follow public health guidance, specifically mandatory face covering and social distancing, most workers faced the dilemma between adhering to the health and safety practices and achieving customer satisfaction. Many workers recalled having to seek managerial support in addressing aggressive customers directly:

> You can't talk back to them; you can't raise your voice. I've done it as politely as I can and the security guard that we had then didn't do nothing, he didn't even stop him or told him to get out of the shop. He just let him carry on. I went outside to calm down because I was well upset, I was crying. I told him [manager] what happened, and I explained that the security guard had done nothing. So he said 'leave it with me and I'll deal with it'. (Gail, customer assistance)

An organisational strategy that was commonly used to moderate 'panic buying' behaviours also subjected workers to further responsibility, which involved checking whether the number of customers in a store and the number of goods in each customer's order met the quota set by the supermarket. The quota policy often rendered customer dissatisfaction, putting customer assistants in an 'odd' position after being trained to

prioritise customer needs and wants. Despite managing customer behaviours constituting a common and mundane element of retail work in normal times (Bozkurt, 2015), the substantially elevated demand for deploying 'undervalued' soft skills to mitigate confrontations at work felt extreme to most participants. The need to deploy 'instinct' while adjusting to unusual workplace policies and practices illustrated expanded responsibility and soft skill demand, especially when the supermarket left the quota to frontline managerial discretion:

> But one thing in the shop we deal with complicated customers a lot so it's just something you become accustomed to. Although in that situation it was around something that we'd never dealt with before, we just kind of had to stick to it. If we limited something we had to make sure that every staff member was on the same page, and we weren't giving out information to one customer and then somebody else was hearing different. So we really had to just work as a team […] I guess it just comes down to putting your human experience into the job in a situation like that because nobody really knows what to do. The management decided the exact number and limit on products that we were going to put out. But the staff communicated to them what products we were seeing being bought in excess so that they knew which products to limit. (Nicole, merchandise controller)

While the need to manage customer behaviours prevailed, some participants also recounted having 'uncomfortable' conversations with colleagues and managers who refuted the necessity of COVID-19 health and safety measures. These participants were concerned with the potentially adverse impact of such conversations on their workplace relationships, citing a lack of systematic training for persuasion and reasoning skills. A few workers ventured to 'monitor' and challenge poor implementation of new health and safety practices. Some managers also shared an 'uneasy' sentiment in navigating their relationships with customers and workers while enforcing 'unpopular restrictions', despite their apparent prerogative over workplace health and safety:

> [The] challenging part sometimes can be dealing with colleagues. Sometimes they think we're not fair to them and it can be sometimes very challenging explaining to colleagues that we have got policies in place, and we have to follow the process and the policies that the company have got. And sometimes they don't like that and can be very hard to deal with. And they can change suddenly, and we have to be very cautious in how we speak to them. […] Sometimes it's like colleagues' attitudes can be a bit of a challenge; everybody is different, and we have to know how to deal with it. (Christine, trading manager)

A few workers who were assigned with supervisory tasks at short notice in the absence of their managers echoed Christine's sentiment, while many workers from one supermarket faced additional cleaning responsibility as the cleaners were 'fired' just before the pandemic for

cost-saving purposes. These accounts of expanded responsibility without additional pay or training, specifically for the skills required for temporary supervision responsibilities, are characteristics of extreme work.

Physical and psychological risks

The presence of physical risks on the supermarket shopfloor was evident given the high transmissibility of the coronavirus. Compared to the frequent exposure to the potential life-or-death situations in specific occupations such as medical care (Granter et al., 2019; Wankhade et al., 2020), supermarket staff were unaccustomed to witnessing and experiencing critical incidents of illness in their quotidian work settings. The psychological intensity that prevailed in many emotional accounts of such incidents on the supermarket shopfloor signified the emergence of extremity.

> The anxiety was out there for everyone, the colleagues were quite anxious at times in the store. And it probably frayed the customer service a little bit because as you had customers who were coming in, and quite rightly, they were quite anxious and apprehensive, you could see tensions fraying when people weren't adhering to queuing guidelines[…] It was so intense because not only were you dealing with your own about COVID, and thinking what happens if I catch it, what happens if I bring it home? You're thinking about my colleagues if they catch it, if I had a death of somebody in my store because they caught it. Was it through something I did or didn't do? Was it going to impact the business if I had a whole load of people off? (Peter, store manager)

The intensified pace of work and workload with a high frequency of relatively close, interpersonal interactions contributed to the physical risks for customer-facing workers. The lack of adherence to health and safety practices among some customers and colleagues exacerbated such risks and subsequently psychological intensity, especially during the first wave of the pandemic when the access to personal protective equipment was limited. The remarks of feeling 'shocked', 'upset', and 'sad' dominated the accounts at this point in the pandemic.

> [T]here were just so many people and they just weren't listening to the whole 'social distancing' thing. I just had a massive panic attack and had to walk off the shopfloor. That happened a couple of times right at the beginning. Eventually I eased into it and knew that – so I just stayed behind my little counter. […] I really didn't want to work. But because [Supermarket D] didn't do furlough, I had to, I can't afford not to. So I had to work, I had no choice. (Victoria, customer assistant)

The anxiety over the physical risk was often inseparable from concerns with job security and income, as illustrated in Victoria's recollections. Most part-timers were contracted to work 12 to 26 hours per week, and many remained dependent on working overtime to generate a

'normal' income. The unpredictability of working hours induced stress over both the workplaces and the possibilities of being made redundant. Some workers, especially those who could not be furloughed, were asked by their managers to take unpaid leave to save operational costs for their stores during quiet periods. Workers in stores of smaller size or in remote locations also reported being forced to accept changes to their contractual hours and the availability of overtime as their stores performed pooly in sales amid the lockdown, resulting in intensified psychological risk associated with income and job insecurity.

> [M]ajor big contract change […] It was very complicated but if they didn't sign the new contract, they will be dismissed. So it was quite – don't sign, you're out. (Sharon, customer assistant)

The psychological intensity further elevated with a sense of frustration and demotivation, as many participants expressed nostalgia for cordial socialising with colleagues and customers. They shared conflicted feelings towards the COVID-19 health and safety measures, such as social distancing and self-isolation, which substantially restricted social interactions that were commonly considered a fundamental respite from the repetitive and mundane nature of supermarket work. Disagreements over the necessity of health and safety precautions also deteriorated the dynamics of customer and collegial relationships to some extent.

The narrative of macro-micro extreme

The descriptions of how macro factors shaped lived experience on the supermarket frontline reveal critical views of the fragmented structural support for 'key workers' in the pandemic.

Fragmented structural support

Participants exhibited polarising views of how management practices on the supermarket shopfloor affected their work and workplaces during the crisis. Overall, many workers were empathetic towards frontline managers who had to improvise responses to stressful and rapidaly-changing circumstances. Most workers highlighted that they were able to rely on managerial support in dealing with customer aggression. Framing their experience within the macro context, some participants felt the difficulties at work remained trivial compared to the large-scale societal impact of the pandemic, and the challenges and sufferings of others:

> So I gave two packs to this elderly lady and she was so happy, she burst into tears in front of me. And that was just toilet roll and she's got a terminally ill husband at home. And that shocked me. (Kira, picker)

Critiques predominantly stemmed from witnessing a laissez-faire managerial approach to communicating and implementing changes. Some participants observed disparities between organisational policies and shopfloor practices, while a few repeatedly raised concerns with their managers over the clarity and enactment of pandemic-specific policies. Compulsory COVID-19 health and safety training was often delayed or conducted as a 'tick-box' exercise with little worker engagement. Managers argued that they were often uninformed themselves of the latest health and safety guidance during the first wave of the pandemic and had to rely on general and sometimes confusing corporate communications. As a result, they were under a great deal of pressure to exercise discretions over preventive measures that have substantial implications for staff safety, store performance, and public health.

> We had to make local decisions about can I open my butcher's counter today? Can I have my deli counter today? What routines and processes needed to be dropped. And it was all hands to the pump, we were just all pitching in and trying to put out fires as they happened. (Peter, store manager)

Many workers attributed the inconsistent managerial responses to the crisis to the initial absence and delay, and later the confusion and inadequacy, of organisational and governmental guidance. Contemplating upon the externalities at the macro level, some participants contrasted the politically and socially imposed importance of their work as 'critical' during the pandemic with a sense of feeling insecure and insignificant. Despite the evident pride of having contributed to the collective efforts in 'feeding the nation', most participants suggested that the identity 'key workers' failed to improve how the general public perceived the value of supermarket work. Neither did the identity materialise in financial support for all 'key workers' on the shopfloor. Some part-timers felt disproportionately disposable while worrying about income, sick pay, and job security. The financial incentive of a one-off bonus that some workers received felt unsubstantial:

> I was given this title as a key worker, but no respect came with it. Nothing. Basically, we got £100 bonus, 'thanks very much for all that you did; we know you put up with a lot of abuse', but it just didn't feel like it was important enough. [I]f we work here and dealing with the abuse that we're taking, nobody would have any food, no store would open. If there was more done for the staff – if we all walked out there wouldn't have been, for the things we had to put up with, there wouldn't have been no supermarkets opened. (Ruth, customer assistant)

Most managers echoed Ruth's observation of insufficient societal recognition for the atypical risks in supermarket work during the pandemic. Neither financial incentive nor job security prevented some managers feeling disposable themselves, citing the potential life-and-death extremity in contrast with fragmented structural support.

We didn't feel like we were key workers. I'm not expecting fanfares. I don't think people realise the customers […] we have to deal with, and the fear of thousands and thousands of people coming through and potentially putting the people that work in those places at risk, and the fear of coming home to their families. I know it doesn't sound heroic […] you know, it's only supermarkets. […] They did give us incentives. We had job security, but I feel as if 'you're a key worker but not high enough to care, not high enough on the paid grade to care about. If you die, you die'. It was like they didn't really care. (Daniel, night shift manager)

Both fulfilling and alienating

The extraordinary experience of extreme-mundane supermarket work during the pandemic stimulated some reflections upon the meaning of work. Some participants aspired to pursue 'dream jobs' elsewhere, albeit remaining positive about the 'undervalued' skills they gained on the shop-floor at a time of crisis. Recalling the rampant disagreements, aggression, and abuse at work during the pandemic, many participants felt alienated from their familiar work environment that used to be predictable and friendly. These participants also seemingly contradicted themselves in depicting their workplaces as a site for 'community building', especially during the pandemic. Despite the deteriorated dynamics of their work relationships, most participants still went into work with a hope for positive exchanges with others. Reflecting upon their own fear over isolation, some participants felt that supermarket work was imperative for not only supplying basic goods for survival but also providing physically or mentally vulnerable individuals with community support. For instance, one cashier showed resistance to the managerial intruction to quicken the pace of customer services. She highlighted the importance of listening and exhibiting compassion towards specific customer groups in a time of crisis:

I know it can be quite lonely and due to COVID it was quite isolating, the whole coming to get your food shopping was a key thing for them to feel they could be around someone or say, 'how's your day?' so that lifts them up and some of them don't have families, especially the older ones, people that might have mental health or something […] Some people just go 'next, next', and they don't know that you're actually calling if they can't hear or their vision is not so good. […] You can't just go oh you know like we're cattle, yeah, 'next, next'. You've got to kind of plot the faces, which I've learnt to do. (Clara, cashier)

Many managers also cited the importance of social elements in mitigating the sense of isolation during the pandemic. While having a broader scope of responsibilities than the workers, some managers also considered their work mundane and repetitive in general. Despite feeling stressed over unpredictable disruptions, a few managers remained positive towards the learning experience and felt optimistic about their ability to cope with future crises.

It is mundane that in the sense where you're doing the same thing, but it's the people around you that making [it] enjoyable. Those little moments when you're speaking with colleagues, and you know you're talking about life. And I know it sounds silly, but those things make working there enjoyable. (Daniel, night shift manager)

Discussion

Within the extreme context of disruptive events (Hällgren et al., 2018) and the mundane settings of supermarket frontline work, this article contributes to the conceptualisation of extreme work (Granter et al., 2015) through analysing the dynamics of workplace actions and interactions at the micro level and the impact of externalities at the macro level. The empirical insights into supermarket work during the COVID-19 pandemic resemble some characteristics of extreme work that were previously observed elsewhere, specifically the presence of physical and psychological risks that normally characterise work that involves safety-critical tasks (Granter et al., 2019; Wankhade et al., 2020). The accounts of unpredictable working hours, pace, and workload as well as expanded skill demand and responsibilities also resonate with an earlier study of intensified supermarket work during Christmas (Bozkurt, 2015).

Yet, contextual and conceptual contributions that this study adds to prior scholarship are evidenced in the nuanced narratives of what motivate individuals to engage with extreme work in times of crisis. Contrary to the definition of extreme work as a conscious and rewarding pursuit of exhilarating challenges (Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Lyng, 1990), the elevated exposure to extremity on the supermarket shopfloor was involuntary and deemed undesirable with limited rewards of individual and collective contributions to dealing with a public health crisis. Despite the predominant concerns with a variety of risky consequences, a strong inclination is shown towards being present at work as a respite from social isolation and as a mean of community building during the pandemic. This inclination suggests limitations of articulating extreme work within a dichotomy of motivations as in either voluntary or involuntary, which can be problematic with its oversimplified treatment of micro experience and neglect of macro context.

Theoretical HR implications

This study offers two theoretical implications for understanding and managing extreme work, which illustrate the value of using context as an analytical framework rather than a descriptive given in HRM research (Cooke, 2018). First, the tension between fulfilment and alienation highlights the interplay of micro and macro factors in shaping individual

conceptions of extreme work and problematises the theorisation of work motivation. At the micro level, anecdotal stories of others pertaining to job losses, illness, and death associated with the pandemic seemed to stimulate individual reconciliations with extremity in their workplaces. Against the backdrop of such stories, a sense of achievement and fulfilment arose from playing the role as 'key workers' in supporting the wider community to cope with a crisis. At the macro level, fragmented structural support from the state and employers appeared to aggravate the perceived level of physical and psychological risks. The common remarks on being socially undervalued compared to 'key workers' in other professions revealed a sense of alienation. Many workers and managers also shared a sense of 'substitutability' (Garsten, 1999) despite the differences in their contractual status, perceived job security, income, and the variations in individual exposure to the three dimensions of extreme work in relation to specific roles and tasks. The co-existence of two seemingly contradictory states of emotion - fulfilment and alienation - illustrate the complexities of individual motivations to work in risky environments (Dickmann & Watson, 2017), which are shaped by the micro-macro dynamics of extreme work. These findings suggest that centring the interdependence of contexts at different levels is crucial in theorising and conceptualising extreme work.

Second, the structural issues evidenced in this study challenge the normative discourses of flexibility and resilience in the HRM literature. HR practices that prioritise organisational flexibility and labour control (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021) have long-term implications for individual and organisational resilience in response to extremity (Stokes et al., 2019). Symptomatic of a 'locked-in' operational pattern (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019, p. 1819), the prevalence of these HR practices is inseparable from the wider socioeconomic and political climate (Cumming et al., 2020). Organisational discourses of resilience that legitimise extremity during crises, such as economic recession and austerity (Turnbull & Wass, 2015), could exacerbate precarious experience of deteriorated work conditions and environments. Despite giving consent to the narrative of extremity at work as primarily a result of a pandemic, the supermarket staff also exhibited resistance to the implied expectations of individual resilience from 'key workers' by pointing to the delayed and inconsistent responses at the governmental and organisational level. Many critical incidents on the supermarket shopfloor reflect the impact of structural factors on exacerbating extreme work conditions observed elsewhere (Granter et al., 2019). The accounts of staffing difficulties for the managers and job insecurity for some workers also expose the inadequacy of the sectoral and organisational reliance on flexible contracts in a pandemic, which reflects persisting shareholder dominance (Bidwell et al.,

2013) and financialisation in value extraction (Cushen & Thompson, 2016). These issues are of imperative relevance to theorising resilience in the ethical and sustainable HRM research.

Practical management implications

This study presents practical implications for HR devolution in managing the rise of extreme work and worker motivation. The findings suggest that devolving staffing responsibilities to line management can, to an extent, provide agility in dealing with disruptions to business operation. This agility, however, can remain short-lived and constrained by a focus on workforce scalability that primarily serves cost-saving purposes (Evans, 2015). To achieve sustainable agility in response to extreme events, HR policymakers need to recognise the impact of feeling dispensable on moral and consider a shift away from the dependence on flexible contracts that warrant scrutiny for aggravating pronounced experiences of uncertainty and substitutability for workers (Roper et al., 2022). Evidence on the tension between budget control and workforce demand further indicates a need to contextualise performance targets and to provide line managers with adequate support in implementing devolved HR responsibilities.

The protracted nature of a public health crisis also necessitates regular consultations and communications with frontline staff to develop an understanding of the most pressing issues as they emerge, which is fundamental for identifying and allocating organisational resources appropriate for managing extreme work. The complexities of what motivate individual engagement with extreme work deserve further attention in designing and implementing support mechanisms. HR managers and practitioners must recognise the strategic value of frontline work and seek to amplify the sense of fulfilment that frontline staff associate their contribution to the wider community with. Drawing on micro experiences from the crisis frontline can help align HRM strategies with specific needs for support, motivate adaptation to change, and promote consistency in policy implementation.

Future research directions

The scope of this study is limited to identifying the characteristics of extreme work and its rise on the supermarket shopfloor during a public helath crisis. Within similar research setting of frontline services, future research on extreme work could examine the role of gendered organisation of work and working practices that are of particular relevance to the retail (Kerfoot & Korczynski, 2005; Williams & Connell, 2010) and

healthcare sector (Buchanan et al., 2013; Gascoigne et al., 2015). Extending to wider research contexts, future studies could address the complexities of individual motivation to engage with extreme work such as the co-existence of alienation and fulfilment. More broadly, future studies could also investigate the micro-macro dynamics of extreme work in developing economies that have received limited attention so far.

Conclusion

This article explores the rise of extreme work on the usually mundane and low-risk supermarket frontline against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the macro-micro dynamics between adverse events and managerial practices. Theoretically, the study contributes a three-dimension framework that consolidates and refines the existing conceptualisation of extreme work, which include 1) unpredictability associated with working time, pace, and/or workload, 2) expansion of skills demand and responsibilities, and 3) heightened psychological and/or physical intensity, especially of a risky nature. This framework presents a valuable lens for examining extreme work across different occupations and sectors, which serves as a theoretical and practical foundation for investigating crisis responses and informing resolutions in the HRM literature. Empirically, the qualitative findings based on 50 interviews support our refined framework and contribute insights into the risky implications of extreme work for both individuals and organisations. The findings also present nuanced perceptions of extreme work that deviate from previous studies to some extent. While recognising some characteristics of extreme work found in previous studies, we seek to draw attention to the multifaceted nature of individual motivation in engaging with extreme work and the co-existence of alienation and fulfilment. Practically, this study offers critical lessons for crisis management, HRM practices, and policy making in employment relations through presenting evidence on macro-micro dynamics of extreme work. This study has its limitations in terms of the uneven access to participants in different roles, especially those in managerial positions. The focus on five supermarket chains that dominate the UK food retail market also limits the representativeness of the sample without the voices from smaller organisations. However, the lived experiences captured in this study while the pandemic unfolded itself remain valuable and critical for understanding and addressing HRM issues in future crises.

Data statement

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Interview protocol.

Section A: Background
1. What are your job responsibilities?
2. How long have you worked for the supermarket?
3. What is your employment contract? *Prompt*: Typical contract hours, actual working hours, how work fits around care responsibilities, if any.

Section B: 'Pre-pandemic' experiences of work
1. Could you take me through a 'typical' day/night of work before the pandemic?
2. How would you describe the characteristics of your work before the pandemic? *Prompt:* perceived work intensity; relationships at work including customer interactions, relationships with managers (i.e. whether felt comfortable to ask for leaves or shift changes) and relationship with your colleagues (socialisation within and outside of work)

Section C: Working through the crisis
1. Can you recall when people at work started talking about coronavirus? *Prompt:* details about the conversations (i.e. specific incidents - what was being said and who was involved in the conversation, perceived level of health and safety risks associated with the virus at that time, and responses to this risk
2. The UK Prime Minister announced the national lockdown on 23rd March 2020. Could you describe what working in your store was like during the first week of the lockdown? *Prompt*: any changes in working practices, workload, working hours, pace, change of roles/responsibilities etc. at this stage; health and safety practices; how they were introduced if any; how they were perceived if any; specific incidents of interactions with customers, colleagues and managers (what happened, how did it make you feel about going into work); managerial and organisational responses (communication and/or consultation if any, how did it make you feel about going into work)
3. Thinking now about how work may have changed after that initial 'lockdown week', what has changed in your work since the coronavirus crisis started? *Prompt:* as above
4. The second wave began around October 2020. How would you compare the impact of the second wave on your work to the first wave? *Prompt:* as above

Section C: Perception of support
1. How would you describe the ways how your supermarket as an organisation dealt with the first wave of the pandemic between March and June 2020? *Prompt*: speed of organisational response, specific incidents - adequacy of precautions health and safety measures (i.e. PPE wearing, social distancing, staggered breaks, hygiene, risk assessment); communications about changes (channels, content and perceived level of clarity and usefulness), perceived level of organisational support
2. How would you describe the ways how your managers as dealt with the first wave of the pandemic between March and June 2020? *Prompt*: What did your managers say to you about the risk? Communications about changes (channels, content and perceived level of clarity and usefulness), specific incidents - perceived level of managerial support (i.e. managing psychological intensity, difficult customer relationships; sick leave, and pay; scheduling; communication), health and safety measure implementation according to the supermarket policies
3. Any further changes to organisational and managerial responses to the pandemic since the second wave that began around October 2020?
4. How did you feel about the health and safety measures? Did they make you safe about going into work? Any changes to your feeling about going into work between two waves? Did you take any extra precautions in any ways? Any concerns about the health risk of yourself or anyone else?
5. Did you have to self-isolate at any point? *Prompt:* If yes, did you receive sick pay? Are you aware of your eligibility for sick pay? What if you have to self-isolate for more than once? Have you taken any sick/holiday leave since March 2020? *If yes*, how comfortable did you feel about asking for leave? Has any of your colleagues and manager go on sick leaves? And how does it affect your work?
6. Were you ever worried about your pay and keeping your job during the pandemic?
7. How were the health and safety measures perceived by the customers, your colleagues, and the managers? *Prompt*: the degree of adhering to the measures; perceived any differences between two waves?
8. How did you feel about being classified as a key worker by the government? *Prompt*: Overall, how would you describe your experience of work during the pandemic?
Are there any other comments that you think I should know about regarding your experience of work during the pandemic? Thank you for your time.

Table A1. (Continued).

Interview protocol with managers

Section A: Background
1. What are your job responsibilities?
2. How long have you worked for the supermarket?
3. What is your employment contract? *Prompt*: Typical contract hours, actual working hours, how work fits around care responsibilities, if any.
4. How is your performance measured? *Prompt*: Budget control, staffing cost; any changes since the March 2020 the first lockdown?

Section B: 'Pre-pandemic' experiences of work
1. Could you take me through a 'typical' day/night of work before the pandemic?
2. How would you describe the characteristics of your work before the pandemic? *Prompt:* perceived work intensity; relationships at work including customer interactions, relationships with managers and staff that you manage (socialisation within and outside of work), experience of customer interactions if any

Section C: Working through the crisis
1. Can you recall when people at work started talking about coronavirus? *Prompt:* details about the conversations (i.e. specific incidents - what was being said and who was involved in the conversation, perceived level of health and safety risks associated with the virus at that time, and responses to this risk)
2. The UK Prime Minister announced the national lockdown on 23rd March 2020. Could you describe what working in your store was like during the first week of the lockdown? *Prompt*: any changes in working practices, workload, working hours, pace, change of roles/responsibilities etc. at this stage; health and safety practices; how they were introduced if any; how they were perceived if any; specific incidents of interactions with customers, colleagues and managers (what happened, how did it make you feel about going into work); organisational responses (communication and/or consultation if any, how did it make you feel about going into work); responsibilities towards staff that you manage
3. Thinking now about how work may have changed after that initial 'lockdown week', what has changed in your work since the coronavirus crisis started? *Prompt:* as above
4. The second wave began around October 2020. How would you compare the impact of the second wave on your work to the first wave? *Prompt:* as above

Section C: Perception of support
1. How would you describe the ways how your supermarket as an organisation dealt with the first wave of the pandemic between March and June 2020? *Prompt*: speed of organisational response, adequacy of precautions health and safety measures (i.e. PPE wearing, social distancing, staggered breaks, hygiene, risk assessment); communications about changes (channels, content and perceived level of clarity and usefulness), perceived level of organisational support - specific incidents
2. To what extent did you feel informed of the changes to work practice, i.e. health and safety policies, that you had to implement? *Prompt:* measures such as PPE wearing, social distancing, staggered breaks, hygiene; training related to measures; risk assessment; any training offered, specific incidents – the response of customers and staff to the changes; any differences between two waves?
3. What challenges did you encounter in implementing new workplace practices, if any? *Prompt*: communicating policies (what, when, how did you communicate with staff?); specific incident - enforcing measures (customer relationships; staff response); resource provision (PPEs, trainings, budget control, staffing demand), perceived any differences between two waves? How did you feel about the health and safety measures? Did they make you safe about going into work? Any changes to your feeling about going into work between two waves? Did you take any extra precautions in any ways? Any concerns about the health risk of yourself or anyone else?
4. How did you deal with these challenges? *Prompt:* Did you feel that you received sufficient organisational support in managing these challenges? Any differences regarding your feelings between two waves?
5. Did you have to self-isolate at any point? *Prompt:* specific incident - If yes, did you receive sick pay? Are you aware of your eligibility for sick pay? What if you have to self-isolate for more than once? What if they need to self-isolate more than once? Any conversations about worries over pay? How did self-isolations affect the staffing level and how did you deal with it? Staff shielding, being furloughed, and their pay?
6. Have you taken any sick/holiday leave since March 2020? *Prompt:* specific incident -*If yes*, how comfortable did you feel about asking for leave? Has any of your staff go on sick leaves? And how does it affect your work? If yes, were they all eligible for sick pay? Were they aware of their eligibility of sick pay? Did you communicate about sick pay to your staff?
7. Were you ever worried about your pay and keeping your job during the pandemic?
8. How did you feel about being classified as a key worker by the government?
9. How would you describe your experience of working as a supermarket manager during the pandemic? (Key lessons and good practices)

Are there any other comments that you think I should know about regarding your experience of working during the pandemic? Thank you for your time.