Applying a social shaping of technology approach to the future of work debate: An examination of food retailing during the Coronavirus pandemic

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2022

Abbie Winton

Alliance Manchester Business School
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 9

1.1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 9
1.2 RESEARCH BACKGROUND ........................................................................................... 9
1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS ................................................................... 12
1.4 OVERVIEW OF THESIS .............................................................................................. 13

## 2 THEORISING WORK AND SOCIOTECHNICAL CHANGE .............................................. 15

2.1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 15
2.2 THEORIES OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE .................................................................. 15
  2.2.1 TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM: THEORY AND CRITIQUE ................................. 16
  2.2.2 DETERMINISM AND THE FUTURE OF WORK ......................................................... 17
  2.2.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORIES: SCOT AND ANT ....................................... 19
  2.2.4 ‘THE SOCIAL SHAPING OF TECHNOLOGY’ ......................................................... 19
  2.2.5 GENDERED SHAPING OF TECHNOLOGY ......................................................... 22
  2.2.6 SST AND THE FUTURE OF WORK ........................................................................ 23
  2.2.7 BROADENING THE SCOPE OF SST ....................................................................... 24
2.3 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO EMPLOYERS’ STRATEGY-MAKING .............................. 24
  2.3.1 ‘STRATEGY-MAKING’ AND SST ........................................................................... 24
  2.3.2 CRITICAL MANAGEMENT APPROACH: ‘STRATEGY AS DISCOURSE’ AND NARRATIVE .......................................................... 26
  2.3.3 LABOUR PROCESS APPROACH: STRATEGY AND THE UNCERTAINTY OF OUTCOMES .......................................................... 26
2.4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE VALUE OF LABOUR ............................................. 28
  2.4.1 THEORISING THE VALUE OF LABOUR .................................................................. 28
  2.4.2 FEMINIST CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE VALUE OF LABOUR ............................ 30
  2.4.3 ASSUMPTIONS LEADING TO THE UNDervaluing OF WOMEN’S WORK ............. 30
  2.4.4 CONSTRUCTING ‘WOMEN’S SKILLS’ IN SST ..................................................... 32
  2.4.5 AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE VALUE OF LABOUR .............. 33
2.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ...................................................................................... 34
2.6 CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................. 36

## 3 CONTEXTUALISING CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FOOD RETAILING ............................. 38

3.1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 38
3.2 EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS AND THE STATE ................................................................ 39
3.3 FOOD RETAILING IN BRITAIN .................................................................................... 41
3.4 CONTEMPORARY CHANGES IN FOOD RETAILING ................................................... 44
  3.4.1 THE CONSOLIDATION OF BRITISH SUPERMARKETS ........................................... 44
  3.4.2 FOOD RETAIL OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES .......................................................... 45
  3.4.3 THE ADVENT OF ‘WOMEN’S SHOP WORK’ ....................................................... 46
  3.4.4 JOB GENDERING MOVING INTO THE ‘NEW’ RETAIL-ERA .................................. 47
  3.4.5 THE INTENSIFICATION AND EXTENSION OF RETAIL WORKING-TIME .............. 48
  3.4.6 INCREMENTAL TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND THE GENDERING OF TECHNICAL SKILLS .......................................................... 49
  3.4.7 SELF-SERVICE TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW RETAIL MODELS ........................... 50
3.5 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF FOOD RETAIL WORK .......... 51
  3.5.1 ONLINE RETAILING DURING THE PANDEMIC ................................................... 53
  3.5.2 LOOKING FORWARD POST-PANDEMIC .................................................................. 54
FIGURES

Figure 1 Theories of technological change (Dafoe 2015, p.1050) ................................................................. 16
Figure 2 Linearity of future of work predictions ........................................................................................... 18
Figure 3 Theoretical framework .................................................................................................................. 36
Figure 4 Segregation of food retail work by occupation (ONS 2021d) .......................................................... 42
Figure 5 Age of retail employees (ONS 2020c) .......................................................................................... 43
Figure 6 Potential models for retail (Tait 2017) .......................................................................................... 56
Figure 7 Scheme for analysing assumptions about social science (Burrell and Morgan 1979) ................. 59
Figure 8 Four paradigms for analysing social theory (Burrell and Morgan 1979) ......................................... 60
Figure 9 Characteristics of (good) quality qualitative research (Yardley 2000) .......................................... 62
Figure 10 Theories of technological change (Dafoe 2015, p.1050) ............................................................. 63
Figure 11 Iterative research process ............................................................................................................. 64
Figure 12 Overview of anonymised case studies ......................................................................................... 66
Figure 13 Participant identifier code key ..................................................................................................... 70
Figure 14 Participant demographic information ......................................................................................... 70
Figure 15 Newspaper analysis search (via Factiva) ..................................................................................... 74
Figure 16 Newspaper identifier code key ..................................................................................................... 74
Figure 17 Examples of broad and detailed interview coding .................................................................... 76
Figure 18 Examples of side-by-side comparative coding .......................................................................... 77
Figure 19 Overview of store technologies in case studies ....................................................................... 85
Figure 20 Online delivery arrangements (before and during the pandemic) ............................................. 95
Figure 21 Case study pay increases (during the pandemic) ....................................................................... 114
Figure 22 Retailer B narrative comparisons ............................................................................................... 119
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines processes of sociotechnical change in food retailing in the context of the future of work debate and the Coronavirus pandemic. Food retailing has undergone significant change since the mid-twentieth century, as the UK’s socio-political, economic and technological context transformed. However, despite calls for greater academic focus on retail work, food retailing has been largely neglected within the work and employment literature. Instead, future of work commentators have adopted retail as an archetype of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ and predict that the need for human labour in retail will be eliminated by the use of new technologies. However, it is important to note that often the cost of technology can be higher than the cost of labour. Thus it is believed that some employers’ may choose to drive wider profit margins by minimising labour costs, as opposed to investing in productivity-enhancing technologies. Consequently, retail work today remains characterised by challenges such as income (in)security, increased work intensity and blurred work-life boundaries. In recognition of these challenges and the current debate, it can be argued that attention is better directed towards the current nature of retail work which can often be overlooked within technology-focused commentary. This thesis aims to address some of these issues, by first examining how processes of sociotechnical change are shaping food retail and, second, by assessing whether the pandemic led to a revaluing of labour in the sector.

The objective of this research is to apply the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) approach to demonstrate how sociotechnical change and the broader context are shaping the nature of work in food retailing. This demands a theoretical framework that shows how the use of SST can broaden the current debate by adopting it as an anti-determinist lens through which other complementary theorisations of work and employment can be viewed. To enrich the SST approach, this thesis draws on critical approaches to employers’ strategies and the debate surrounding the value of labour to further inform the analysis of current issues shaping the nature of work. The resulting integrated framework is applied to the case of food retailing. The research questions demand that social phenomena are understood from the perspective of the people who are experiencing it and so a qualitative approach is deemed the most appropriate. Thus, this study draws on 37 interviews with retail stakeholders (operations, HR and store managers, trade union officials and customer assistants) and an analysis of newspaper articles published over a 12-month period (covering 277 articles). The use of different sources provides a multi-level and longitudinal narrative of sociotechnical change within the sector throughout the pandemic.

The research findings show that there is little evidence of an overarching strategy shaping food retailing and the work available. Employers looking to boost their profit margins may favour a cost minimisation approach to labour management. Therefore, if current conditions persist, the quality of retail work is likely to remain problematic within the sector. This evidence supports the emergent view in the critical future of work literature that the declining quality of work may pose more of an immediate concern than the indiscriminate elimination of work in retail. The research also found that, despite the pandemic providing an opportunity to revalue food retail labour, the narrative surrounding the value of key workers did little to derail the low-road approach to the management of labour that is commonly adopted by retailers. This finding contributes to the broader analysis of the sectoral case study by adding an understanding of the extent to which the nature of food retail work changed throughout the pandemic. With these contributions considered, this thesis concludes by arguing that significant changes will be needed in the post-pandemic period to avoid further deterioration of the quality of retail work and improve the possibility of working towards a more equal future.

Key Words: Retail work, sociotechnical change, value of labour, Coronavirus, qualitative research, supermarkets
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given the University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trademarks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=24420), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, the University Library’s regulations (see http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/about/regulations/) and in the University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors, Debra Howcroft and Jill Rubery. It is safe to say that this journey has been an absolute pleasure because of the support I have received from you both. Debra, I feel incredibly privileged to have had the opportunity to work alongside you. You have always treated me like an equal and made sure that I was aware of the valued contribution I could make in academia (despite the doubts I’ve had at times). This alone would have been enough, but you have also been there for me throughout some pretty tough times over the past few years and without your support through it all, I really don’t think this would have been possible. Jill, I think it goes without saying that you are a superwoman. You never fail to amaze me (and everyone around you) by the way that you combine your professionalism with an unparalleled compassion towards your students and colleagues. I know I am not the only person who looks up to you both, so thank you again for everything.

To Mum, Dad, Regan and Jenelle. Thank you for always believing in me. You have shaped the person that I am today and without the strength and support you have all given me, there would be no way that I would be writing this today. I love you all dearly and want to thank you for everything, especially the advice and guidance shared over the years. It means the world to know that you are all proud of me and I truly cannot wait to celebrate with you when this is over – I will try not to cry too much.

To Storm, you really do deserve a medal for being there (quite literally) 24/7 over the past few years. Whenever my belief in myself wavered, you would be there to give me the reassurance I needed to carry on. Thank you for being a kind, loving, supportive partner and a big thank you needs to go to your family for always being there also. I think it is about time we agree never ever to be tempted by another degree again…!!

To Eva, what an incredible stroke of fate it was that brought us together. Words cannot describe how grateful I am for everything you have done for me and for the friendship, support and entertainment that you have given me on a daily basis. You really have been my rock. I am very proud of you and I know that this feeling is reciprocated, thank you.

To my colleagues at the Work & Equalities Institute, it has been a special experience to be involved in such a friendly and inclusive research environment. I have been very lucky to meet some inspirational people doing incredible work at the institute. Undoubtedly you have all inspired me to continue doing meaningful research and support others in the way that you have supported me.

To the rest of my friends and family, whether it has been helping me proofread, listening to me go on about work or just being a welcome distraction from the all-encompassing PhD process, thank you for keeping me sane and bringing me so much happiness.

A final thank you goes to my participants, without whom this research would not have been possible.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the research and the debate within which it is situated. This thesis explores how processes of sociotechnical change shape the nature of food retailing in the context of the future of work debate and the Coronavirus pandemic. First, the background and motivations behind the chosen line of investigation are discussed, positioning the research within the broader field of technology, work and employment. The research objectives and questions chosen to investigate them are then outlined. Finally, an overview of the thesis is given, summarising the chapters that follow, within which these objectives and research questions are subsequently addressed.

1.2 Research background

Food retailing has undergone significant change since the mid-twentieth century, as the UK’s socio-political, economic and technological context transformed. Women entered the workplace in large numbers, computer technologies became widely available, globalisation and international trade accelerated and neoliberal policies altered labour market supply and demand. However, these represent just a small proportion of the broader sociotechnical processes shaping food retailing during the post-war period. More specifically, food retail work has been highly feminised since the shift towards a self-service model (Scott 1994; Pettinger 2005). Consequently, atypical working arrangements and low-pay have long characterised retail employment (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011), as it has typically been organised so that it can be scaled to respond to fluctuations in demand and bolster profit (Perrons 2000). Furthermore, the ways in which men and women experience retail work has varied considerably because of the horizontal and vertical segregation within the sector (Scott 1994). Recently, retail work has attracted considerable attention from those interested in the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ based on the assumption that the work will largely be automated over the next few years (Frey and Osborne 2017). Yet despite once being a leading sector in technological innovation (Hopping 2000; Basker 2016), the implementation of new technologies on the shop floor has been relatively stagnant since self-service checkouts were first introduced in 2003. Instead, retail work has been subject to a deteriorating portfolio of employment relations (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011; Tait 2017; Wallace-Stephens and Lockey 2019) and is characterised by many of the contemporary employment challenges which exist today, such as income insecurity, increased work intensity and blurred work-life boundaries (Findlay and Thompson 2017).

The onset of the Coronavirus pandemic at the beginning of 2020 meant that this research was conducted during a pivotal point in food retail history. The pandemic has had significant, destabilising effects on food retailing and food retail work. The cataclysmic epidemiological context changed the way people shopped, transforming work in and around the sector. At the height of the lockdown, the demand for food retail items in-store and online surged. Other food outlets (cafes, restaurants and markets) were
closed and clinically vulnerable people were advised to shield in their homes. Thus, the sector needed to be immediately re-organised to meet these new demands and this research project was modified in order to take these changes into account. The research also needed to consider the renewed conversation that had been sparked regarding the dangers of working during the pandemic, what this challenging environment meant for ‘key workers’ and how their contribution was valued by wider society (Martínez Lucio and McBride 2020; Winton and Howcroft 2020; Hebson and Martínez Lucio 2020). Taking a less human-centred approach, the pandemic also prompted future of work commentators to revise their predictions in light of the changing context of physical restrictions, causing some to claim that the pandemic had, in fact, ‘accelerated’ automation (Nott 2020). However, these commentators failed to acknowledge the thousands of additional workers hired during the pandemic (Belger 2020), perhaps since it is not in keeping with their impending ‘end of work’ narrative. Therefore, this research aims to focus on that which is shaping work now, instead of the abstract future, in order to provide an alternative to these techno-centric narratives.

Mainstream commentators interested in the interrelation between employment and technologies have prioritised technology within their analyses. Consequently, much of the future of work narrative has become technologically deterministic, either passively by ‘asocialising’ analyses or purposely based on the belief that soon technologies will operate autonomously from humans. Some have successfully repackaged a dystopian/utopian sci-fi fantasy into something that is considered academic, rigorous and realistic (e.g. Rifkin 1995; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Ford 2015; Frey 2019). Two voices have been incredibly influential in creating a particularly troubling narrative, predicting that 47% of US jobs are at risk of computerisation (Frey and Osborne 2017). Frey and Osborne’s (2017) seminal paper has received almost 10,000 citations in 4 years and has been widely referenced within other forums. These predictions have been endlessly repeated (Wajcman 2017) and thus, there are concerns that they could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the narrative fails to change (Morgan 2019). Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the critical debate surrounding the future of work by applying the theoretical lens outlined in The Social Shaping of Technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985).

The social shaping of technology (SST) approach was first developed as a critique of technological determinism and drew on meta-narratives to inform sociotechnical analyses. At the centre of SST is the belief that the social and the technological are mutually constitutive and must be considered in this way within sociological studies. SST has been widely used to analyse technology in its productive capacity in the workplace, regarding how it shapes and is shaped by broader social structures, such as gender, economics, politics and technological change. Despite a growing critical interest in issues related to sociotechnical change, it is argued that SST has been under-utilised by work and employment scholars (Wajcman 2006; Howcroft and Taylor forthcoming). Therefore, this research seeks to build on this growing body of literature by adopting SST as a theoretical lens which draws on these broader social structures as a lens through which sociotechnical change can be analysed.
Gender is explored within the thesis as a dimension included within the SST framework which has long shaped the human experience of work and how it interacts with technology. It remains the case that, because of the abundance of cheap *female* labour, the use of technologies has been relatively limited in sectors such as the global garment industry (see Chapter 2 discussion of Cockburn 1983; Cowan 1985a) hospitality and food retailing. However, while gender remains pervasive in its shaping of work, it is not included as a standalone unit of analysis since the other SST dimensions (e.g. economics, politics and technology) as critically important in helping understand processes of change with regard to that which influences employers decision-making through to how organisations are structured more broadly.

Despite the focus within SST on the social structures shaping change, it is evident that the ‘contemporary zeitgeist’ has become dominated by a vision of the mass replacement of human labour by technologies (Howcroft and Taylor 2022), whereby technology is viewed as the sole unit of analysis. However, while there has undoubtedly been a surge in interest in sociotechnical change within the work and employment literature, there has also been less focus on issues concerning the ‘end of work’. Instead, for critical work and employment scholars interested in technological change, the focus has been empirically directed towards new types of working (e.g. the gig economy) (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014), methods of technological surveillance and control (Wood et al. 2019) and the degradation of work in sectors such as call centres (Bain and Taylor 2000) and logistics (Newsome et al. 2013). Therefore, until recently, the mainstream future of work narrative dominated and was subject to limited critique. As a corrective to this, a new narrative has emerged in which scholars have drawn on class-based (Moody 2018) and gendered (Howcroft and Rubery 2018; 2019) critiques in the context of the current future of work debate. They suggest technologies are not more pervasive than other social conditions and argue that existing forms of social differentiation need to be included within analyses. Also adopting a more critically-oriented perspective are researchers who believe that the quality of work is a more imminent threat than the quantity of work available because of how the cost of labour currently compares to the cost of technology and innovation (Spencer 2018; Fleming 2019; Morgan 2019). They argue that this is because current processes of sociotechnical change are embedded within a capitalist system in which the pursuit of profit shapes decision-making and how labour/technologies are managed.

As noted, frequently referenced within ‘end of work’ predictions is the risk of automation in retail and hospitality roles. However, as the emerging critical future of work perspective recognises, low-paid, feminised work may be protected from immediate processes of automation because of the low cost of this work (Fleming 2019). These diverging perspectives were of particular interest to me when I was developing the project as I worked as a sales assistant and a waitress before applying to do my PhD. What resonated most was how strikingly disconnected the mainstream narrative surrounding the changing nature of customer service work was from the reality I was experiencing. I was never particularly worried about whether technology was a threat to my work or my earnings as I found myself to be preoccupied with the vast array of other issues that my colleagues and I were juggling, such as
low pay, fluctuating hours and intense shifts (due to understaffing and poor treatment from customers/more senior staff). Therefore, the stark disjuncture between my experiences at work and the mainstream narrative became the initial motivation for the project. I was keen to contribute to the current debate in a way that could capture that which shapes the nature of customer service work in a way that looks beyond technology to do so.

Work is an inherently social process, shaped by social structures and the social beings that operate within the broader system. Thus, predictions that ‘asocialised’ work based on the belief that the future will be less social and more technological seemed insufficient to explain the realities of work and how it is typically experienced. Adopting SST as the theoretical lens provides a way to re-focus the narrative on current issues within work and employment and avoid the abstract allure of making predictions about the future. Furthermore, it offers the scope to draw on the vast critical tradition of work and employment research to enrich the future of work debate. The foundational belief that informs this research is that through addressing current issues will it be possible to shape the nature of work in the future for the better, thus this is where I believe scholarly attention is best directed.

1.3 Research objective and questions

The objective of this research is to apply the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) approach to demonstrate how sociotechnical change and the broader context are shaping the nature of work in food retailing. This has the aim of demonstrating how SST can be extended to have a broader application within the current future of work debate by drawing on complementary work and employment theories which can help when adopting it as a theoretical lens to analyse contemporary case studies. The thesis addresses this in two parts forming two research questions. The first analyses the extent to which SST could provide a framework for understanding the challenges faced by food retail workers in the current context. The second analyses the extent to which the pandemic brought about a revaluing of labour in the food retail sector. The following research questions were developed:

1) In the context of future of work debates, how are processes of sociotechnical change shaping the food retail sector?
   a. To what extent do retailers’ strategies shape trajectories of sociotechnical change within the sector?
   b. Is there an overarching approach toward the management of labour within food retailing?
   c. To what extent has the Coronavirus pandemic altered the trajectory of sociotechnical change in food retail work?

2) To what extent has the Coronavirus pandemic brought about a revaluing of labour in the food retail sector?
   a. Are we witnessing a shift in the revaluing of labour in the food retail sector?
b. Is the pandemic augmenting inequalities within food retail work given the ways in which the work is valued?

The first question sets out to examine how processes of sociotechnical change are shaping the food retail sector. This overarching question aims to develop an analysis of the food retailing by adopting an SST lens, that is further informed by the critical strategy literature. Much of the future of work debate is deterministic because of its assumptions about how change happens and what is most pervasive in shaping it. Thus, this question aims to further explore what is in fact shaping change recognising that the analysis needs to go beyond retailers’ technology ‘strategies’. The employer’s perspective comprises the central focus of Q1(a) and Q1(b). This is because mainstream literature tends to assume that their strategies will drive a jobless future, as other contexts, processes and structures that shape the nature of work are often neglected. Q1(c) also seeks to consider the extent to which unforeseen events, such as the pandemic, can alter the projected trajectory of change.

The second question aims to examine the extent to which the pandemic brought about a revaluing of labour in food retail. The inclusion of the broader context is central to the SST approach. Thus it was important to place the pandemic at the centre of this research question. This overarching question seeks to develop an understanding of whether the shift in narrative surrounding retail workers during the pandemic was enough to bring about a revaluation of the work. The approach to value adopted to inform Q2(a) draws on feminist employment theory and SST to construct a framework through which value can be assessed. Finally, the motivation for question Q2(b) was to capture how a revaluation of labour might have wider implications for gender equality in the future.

1.4 Overview of thesis

In Chapter 2, the key theoretical literature that has informed this study is reviewed. The focus is primarily on theories of technology and the SST lens adopted within the research. Then two bodies of literature congruent to SST are outlined, including employers’ strategies and the value of labour. All three bodies of literature are then presented within an integrated theoretical framework.

In Chapter 3, the context of food retail in the UK is outlined in-depth. First, the national socio-political context is discussed. Then the food retail context is presented in relation to the national statistics and the changes that it has undergone historically and more recently during the pandemic. In the final section, a model is presented to categorise the different approaches adopted by food retailers. This model will be drawn upon later in the thesis.

In Chapter 4, the research methodology is outlined. The chapter starts with a discussion of the research philosophy and the chosen approach is justified based on the theory presented in the theoretical framework. Then the research design is summarised along with the case study approach. The description of the practical method includes the generation, use and analysis of interview and
documentary data. Finally, the importance of critical researcher reflexivity is highlighted and my positionality as a researcher is reflected upon.

In Chapter 5, the first half of the empirical findings are presented that relate to RQ1. This chapter primarily draws on data from interviews with food retail managers to inform how processes of sociotechnical change are shaping decision-making within the sector. The chapter is structured around three models that can be used to categorise different approaches to retailing and the empirical evidence is discussed concerning each, both prior to and in the context of the pandemic.

In Chapter 6, the second half of the empirical findings are presented to address RQ2. This chapter draws primarily on newspaper data as well as interviews with food retail employees and trade union officials to examine the extent to which the pandemic brought about a revaluing of labour in the sector. The chapter is structured using the SOFLQ framework (security, opportunity, fair treatment, life beyond work, job quality) to assess changes to the value of work across pay and non-pay dimensions.

In Chapter 7, a substantive discussion addresses each of the research questions and how the broader theoretical and contextual debate (presented in Chapters 2 and 3) links to the empirical findings (presented in Chapters 5 and 6). The theoretical and empirical research contributions of the thesis that address the identified gaps in research are then identified. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research project and the measures taken to mitigate them. Lastly, avenues for future research are outlined before the conclusions are made.
2 THEORISING WORK AND SOCIOTECHNICAL CHANGE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the theoretical options for framing this research which investigates work in food retail. It is argued that there is a need for a theoretical approach that avoids prioritising technology and viewing it as the dominant force that will determine the future of work. This chapter examines alternatives for theorising sociotechnical change and presents these in an integrated framework that is then applied to the empirical context. The discussion begins with a summary of various theories of technology, including technological determinism and social constructivism. Justification is given as to why technological determinism and social constructivism, which sit at either end of the theoretical continuum, are not suitable for this research. Instead, *The Social Shaping of Technology* (SST) is the chosen approach as it offers the tools to analyse sociotechnical change by drawing on meta-narratives and other theories (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). The SST approach rejects cause-and-effect deterministic theories of sociotechnical change, by looking to major pathways (such as economics, politics and gender) to help understand how technologies are shaped.

It is argued within this thesis that SST can be applied to critique the mainstream future of work narrative that has, for some decades, led with the conviction that humans will be replaced by technology in the workplace. Nevertheless, the SST approach can be complemented by other critical work and employment theories. Thus the discussion also reviews critical perspectives on employers’ strategies and the value of labour. These theories provide more detail on specific work-related issues, enriching SST and its critique of technological determinism. First, the critical literature on employers’ strategies is drawn on to demonstrate how organisational change is not a simple cause-and-effect process that has implications for the future of work debate. Second, the discussion surrounding the value of labour is drawn on to demonstrate how the value attributed to work can shape job quality, and how the experience of work differs between groups which also has implications for the future. Finally, the three theoretical approaches are brought together within a common theoretical framework. This framework aims to provide the tools to help understand how processes of sociotechnical change are currently shaping work and how this is changing because of new contextual demands.

2.2 Theories of technological change

Positions in the debate surrounding processes of sociotechnical change vary considerably depending upon the perspective from which it is understood. Theories that focus more heavily on the *impact* that technologies have had on society have been considered ‘technologically deterministic’. Similarly, those who consider only the *impact* that social aspects have had on society and technology
can be considered ‘socially deterministic’. However, it is argued that change needs to be examined in relation to both the social and the technological because it is necessary to understand both if we want to understand either (Bijker and Law 1992, p.11), hence the use of ‘sociotechnical’ hereafter. Although it is not particularly well-defined within the literature, the use of the phrase ‘sociotechnical’ is best captured by Bijker (1993, p.125), who states:

“The sociotechnical is not merely an intimate combination of social and technical factors; it is something sui generis. Sociotechnical ensembles, rather than technical artefacts or social institutions, become our unit of analysis. And sociotechnical processes constitute the patterns discerned by our theoretical concepts... Society is not determined by technology, nor is technology determined by society...”

When mapping theories of technology, they can be viewed as existing along a continuum. At one end lies radical social constructivism and at the other end, hard technological determinism (see Figure 1). SST was first developed as a critique of the latter and it is argued that it is positioned on the constructivist side of ‘soft determinism’ (Dafoe 2015). Nevertheless, because SST is an umbrella term for a range of theories, it might be more accurate to suggest that it spans the mid-range of the continuum, between (mild) social constructivism and (soft) technological determinism. Howcroft et al. (2005) outline the two groups which fall within the overarching boundaries of SST: the first draws on meta-narratives that describe the construction of society (such as those rooted in feminist and/or Marxist traditions as found in the first edition of SST) (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985); the second looks to ‘more local-oriented approaches’ (i.e. as conceptualised by social constructionists included within the second edition of SST), including theories such as the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) and Actor Network Theory (ANT) (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). The following discussion explores the differences between the theories at either end of the theoretical continuum before justifying why SST is the chosen lens for this research.

2.2.1 Technological determinism: Theory and critique

Dafoe (2015) defines technological determinism as theories or framings of phenomena that emphasise the autonomy of technological change. However, deterministic theorists can be hard or soft in their approach (Dafoe 2015). Soft determinists pay more attention to social control and the context, while harder determinists emphasise the autonomy and power of technology, “…perceiving technological developments as an autonomous force, completely independent of social constraints”
Dafoe (2015) asserts that both hard and soft determinism holds a ‘legitimate intellectual position’ and argues that technological determinism has wrongly become the ‘straw position’ within certain debates. It was not uncommon for critics to argue that this idea of granting agency to technology was problematic because, as it stood, no technology has carried out an action that was not pre-programmed by a human (Marx and Smith 1994). However, with current advances in artificial intelligence, it is becoming more likely that deep learning algorithms will be able to take the place of top computer scientists by writing their own code from scratch (Dorrier 2020), thus strengthening Dafoe’s assertions that technological determinism can hold a legitimate position.

On the other hand, Bimber (1990) claims that technological determinism should not be considered a dichotomy between hard and soft because, as a theory, it is wider-reaching than this simplification would suggest. Instead, he proposes three approaches that categorise theories of technological determinism and argues that only one of the three should be considered ‘true determinism’. In Bimber’s (1990) view, true determinism refers to society evolving along a fixed path pre-determined by technology, regardless of human intervention. Take Braverman’s (1974) neo-Marxist conceptualisation of technology, for example. Braverman observed the de-skilling of the workforce occurring as technologies were being implemented into the labour processes. Some may believe that technologies drove the Industrial Revolution and displacement of human labour from manufacturing roles. However, it has been argued that the fragmentation of operations needed for the machine to control the work is a social process because it is carried out by human actors (Campbell 1977). Therefore, technology can be viewed not as a ‘neutral, autonomous and irresistible force’ but as a facet of a coercive system designed to control the worker (Hyman 1982, p.93). With these differing positions considered, there is a clear case for understanding these theories along a continuum, rather than as a dichotomy, as considerable overlap exists.

2.2.2 Determinism and the future of work

Falling along this continuum of perspectives on technology are the historical and contemporary theorisations of the future of work. While none of the commentators included within this discussion claim to be defending a technologically deterministic position, much of the mainstream debate is framed with a certain level of implied passivity where technologies are concerned (Morgan 2019). This passivity feeds into a technologically deterministic narrative as it portrays technology as ‘autonomous, unidirectional and self-propelling’ (Howcroft and Rubery 2019). Thus, technological change is discussed as though it occurs along a linear trajectory (see Figure 2). This linearity has characterised the current future of work debate even though it is relatively wide-ranging. Acknowledging this variety, Rubery and Howcroft (forthcoming) categorise the current debate into two strands: those who are conducting empirical studies to predict future levels of employment (e.g. Frey and Osborne 2017; PwC 2017; McKinsey 2017) and those who are envisioning a post-capitalist and/or a post-work future (e.g. Rifkin 1995; Smil and Williams 2015; Bastani 2020).
It is possible to see how a quasi-deterministic narrative has been formed within the wider debate because many of the leading voices have a particular interest in a technologically driven future (Morgan 2019) (whether this is within or outside of the current capitalist system). The existence of certain motivations might explain the oversight deployed among those who continue to cite Keynes’ century-old predictions which are in keeping with this vision of a jobless future. Keynes (1930) believed processes of change would lead to a shortened working week and mass technological unemployment by 2030. These predictions were made in relation to their potential utopian/dystopian outcomes depending on how wealth would be shared. However, Morgan (2019, p.380) argues that those who still use Keynes (and implicitly his 2030 timeline) as a crutch for discussing the future of work overlook the fact that “…the world of tomorrow that Keynes is focused on in his essay is not ours” – noting the socio-political and economic changes that have ensued since Keynes made his predictions. Similarly, Spencer (2018) notes how Keynes failed to envisage the rise of consumerism, in addition to the fall in collective bargaining and individualism of the workforce, thus rendering his predictions unsuitable for making claims within the current context.

It remains the case that technological change is discussed in mainstream literature with a certain level of inevitability and provides little alternative from this one prescribed vision of a jobless future (Pettinger 2019). For example, the authors of the Oxford Martin School report (Frey and Osborne 2017) explicitly state their decision not to account for future changes in wage levels, regulation or ‘political activism’ (i.e. any sort of resistance to change) in an attempt to ‘de-politicise’ their assertions. Nevertheless, it is argued that since these assertions have been endlessly repeated, they ultimately feed into a wider political narrative about the future of work (Wajcman 2017). On a similar note, within his more recent works, Frey (2019) claims to draw upon the history of technological revolutions (implying that there is just one version of such events) to provide a ‘perspective’ on the future of work. However, while such a version of history is widely recorded, it is a perspective that radical scholars contest for various reasons. For example, Cockburn (1985b) argued that it is a history in which the value of women, their roles, experiences and contributions have long been omitted (e.g. the role women played as inventors which went largely unrecorded because of legal restrictions during the Industrial Revolution).
Furthermore, the institutionalised patterns of power embedded within change during the Industrial Revolution have continued to shape experiences of work in a way that is markedly different for men and for women (Wajcman 2004). Despite this, these socio-political dimensions remain out of the scope for many mainstream commentators. Therefore, it is argued that an SST approach is essential for understanding past and present processes of change to better inform an understanding of how they might shape the future of work.

2.2.3 Social constructivist theories: SCOT and ANT

Social constructivism is also wide-ranging and is made up of theoretical approaches such as the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) (Bijker et al. 1987) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 2005). Both theories claim to emphasise the social and the technological, hence their inclusion under the SST banner, but arguably give the social more weight within their analyses. SCOT is centred on the notion of ‘relevant social groups’ whereby it is believed that groups of actors construct technological ‘artefacts’ through the design, development and use process. Thus, the ultimate aim of SCOT is to provide the theoretical and methodological tools to open up the ‘black box’ of technology. It is argued that opening the black box allows for a better understanding of both the inner workings of technology and the processes of social shaping which occur within it (as opposed to viewing technology as existing within a vacuum shielded from other processes of change) (Bijker et al. 1987).

In contrast, ANT views the social and the technological as inseparable, by adopting a network approach to analysing the relationships between technologies and human actors (Latour 2005). However, ANT can be deemed problematic because it removes the different levels of analysis and considers human actors and non-human objects to be equal (Howcroft et al. 2005). While SST deems them as mutually constitutive for the purpose of analysis, it recognises that in practice the social demands greater consideration. On the other hand, SCOT can be a useful theoretical framework for analysing individual technologies at a local level, but it is less suitable when trying to understand the structural dynamics that shape them. An issue with these more localised approaches is that they imply a level of political indifference in how technologies are conceptualised. This is a point of difference between SCOT and SST because social shaping theorists have argued that technological artefacts are inherently political because they are embedded within a wider socio-political structure (Winner 1993). Therefore, neither of these theoretical approaches are chosen to frame this research as it is believed that due attention must be given to broader socio-political and economic structures.

2.2.4 ‘The Social Shaping of Technology’
Taking the position that technology and society are mutually constitutive, the collection of essays in the seminal reader1 *The Social Shaping of Technology* (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985) rejected hard cause-and-effect deterministic theories of sociotechnical change. Their version focuses on major pathways, including the technical/technological, economic, organisational, political and cultural structures through which technology is shaped. The first edition of the reader was informed largely by meta-narratives used to help understand processes of change. At the time of writing the first edition, the very suggestion that technology was shaped by these meta-narratives or ‘particular social interests’ was especially radical but had great appeal to researchers aiming to explain why technologies worked in the interests of some groups over others (Howcroft et al. 2005). The second edition (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999) made room for a more localised approach to understanding sociotechnical change and included the work of social constructionists such as Latour, Strum, Kline and Pinch. Some would argue that the strength of SST is derived from the radical underpinnings of the first edition which were to an extent diluted in the second collection of essays (as both SST broadened its scope) (Sørensen 2002). Thus, this section explores some of these debates and differences, focusing primarily on the first edition of the reader and other research that adopts an SST lens.

It is argued that SST is multi-disciplinary by nature and is formed from a ‘cross-fertilisation of ideas’ from different disciplinary roots (Howcroft et al. 2005). In their collection of essays, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985) discuss how the major pathways shape technology, yet they argue that the economic shaping of technology is the most critical aspect. In their view, technical systems are economic enterprises, meaning that they are directly or indirectly involved with market competition. They recognise that competition is one of many powerful mechanisms that shape a technology's success, hence the importance of the economic shaping of technology (Cowan 1985b; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). A neoclassical approach would assume that capital pursues profit maximisation through ‘rational calculation’ and thus adopts the technology most likely to be the most profitable. However, it is argued that this assumption is flawed because it is not possible to know for certain what ultimately will be the ‘most profitable’ option (Schumpeter 1943). As a consequence, the technology that ‘wins’ (or is adopted) is not necessarily the ‘best’, most efficient or most profitable option (Arthur 1999). It is later argued in the following discussion that a reason for this is that economic decisions are often shaped by pre-existing social structures which means that economic actors do not always act in the best interests of capital. Therefore, the economic shaping of technology plays a critically important role but cannot be discussed in isolation.

The political shaping of technology draws most notably on the work of Langdon Winner, who believed that technologies are inherently political and economic. Winner (1980) drew on an example of the New York overpasses to demonstrate how technologies have been implemented to restrict the movements of certain groups of people. In his example, a parkway was constructed with a low overpass running over it which meant that only cars (but not buses) could pass through, thereby restricting lower-class people (often ethnic minorities) from entering the Jones Beach area. Based on these observations,

---

1 ‘Reader’ is the term used by MacKenzie and Wajcman to refer to their edited volume.
Winner (1980, p.124) argued that technological innovations such as the overpasses can embody “…the desires of some to have dominion over others” and thus reflect the politics of the time. There remains some debate about whether Robert Moses, the man responsible for the construction of the bridges, “…embedded his prejudices within his public works” (Campanella 2017). However, the very fact that there is still a debate to be had surrounding these actions almost one-hundred years on, demonstrates that, intentional or not, decisions surrounding the design, implementation and use of technologies are inherently politicised.

2.2.4.1 Critique of SST

One significant area of discussion that both SST readers lack is the intersection of race and technology, with the notable exception of two examples. Winner's (1980) example of the parkway demonstrated how technologies could be used to exert power over working-class people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Based on this, Winner argued that it is necessary to consider technologies, class and ethnicity to be mutually constitutive. In the second reader there is a short chapter describing how photography has been developed based on the image of the white face and the notion of the ‘white client’ – who was affluent enough to purchase the services of a portrait photographer (Dyer 1999). Thus, cameras were constructed on the basis of the white face and the effects of this early design decision remained visible as these technologies developed. Outside of the two readers, Pettinger (2019) acknowledges that technology can contribute to the unequal treatment of people and that this is visible in terms of technology being inherently racialised. However, aside from these examples, there has been no systematic study of technology and race that adopts an SST lens (unlike the many studies that have analysed gender, class or the intersection between the two), posing a glaring gap in SST theory.

Furthermore, there remains a handful of critics of SST, most of whom are unsatisfied with the weight given to the social and the technological within these analyses. Dafoe (2015) argues that often, social shaping theorists fail to sufficiently consider the effect that technology has on society in avoidance of being seen as ‘technologically deterministic’. Other work and employment scholars have chosen to look to labour process theory to inform their sociotechnical analyses. They believe that this approach is broad enough to account for sociotechnical change because of the political and economic pressure points that this type of analysis includes (Thompson and Laaser 2021). However, it has been argued previously that labour process theory fails to give sufficient attention to the role of women and their skills within the system (Wajcman 1991b). Furthermore, it is possible to argue that these political and economic pressure points are, in fact, central to the meta-narratives adopted by SST to explain processes of change, as this discussion has aimed to show.

---

2 It is also important to note that neither of the two readers included any non-white voices despite drawing on the works of approximately 40 academics.
Since SST occupies the middle ground along the theoretical continuum, some may also view SST as being guilty of social determinism. Acknowledging this critique, MacKenzie and Wajcman stress in the first edition, and reiterate in the second, that the mutual shaping of technology and society is central to the SST approach. As Howcroft and Taylor (forthcoming) also argue, “…rather than reducing everything to the interplay of social forces (as in social determinism) the characteristics of technical objects do deserve attention”. For Sørensen (2002, p.22), the social shaping approach encourages understanding change through ‘sociotechnical constellations’ (or ‘major pathways’) as opposed to falling into the ‘sociotechnical trap’ in which social changes are described through social actions. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the importance of the technological artefact is widely recognised by social shaping theorists who have embedded technologies at the centre of their research (e.g. printing press, refrigerator and the microwave) (see Cowan 1985b; Wajcman 1991; Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Webster 1994).

2.2.5 Gendered shaping of technology

The gendered shaping of technology forms a significant part of the first SST reader (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985) and is developed in more depth in Wajcman’s (1991a) Feminism Confronts Technology and much of her other work thereafter. Its use in this thesis is described in Chapter 1 as being one of the pervasive dimensions (or major pathways) through which technology is shaped. However, instead of using it as a single unit of analysis, it is considered alongside the economic, political and the technological shaping of technology – following the same approach adopted within MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985). However, since it is developed somewhat further within SST than the other dimensions, additional consideration is given as to the contribution that gender makes to the theoretical framing of this study.

Before the publication of The Social Shaping of Technology, Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1976) and Cynthia Cockburn (1983) both made radical contributions to understanding the relationship between gender and technology (which were later included in the first SST reader). From the empirical works carried out by Cowan and Cockburn, the restriction of women’s entry into technical trades was perhaps one of the most prevalent examples demonstrating why systems of male power, alongside capitalist dominion, needs to be considered within sociotechnical analyses. Cockburn (1983) argues that technology acts as a vehicle for asserting male dominance which can explain why women have historically been excluded from technological design and development. Nevertheless, she recognises that the treatment of women has shaped society and the nature of work that is available within it. This argument is drawn on within the SST reader, as MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999, p.147) argue that “…technology is designed by men, with men in mind…”, which is central to understanding why technologies are reflective of the interests of men over women3.

---
3 For recent examples see (Criado Perez 2019).
Similarly, it could also be argued that gender biases are embedded into the design of technologies because of the historical segregation of gender roles (in relation to paid and unpaid work) and the exclusion of women from certain industries and professions such as ICT (Webster 1994; Howcroft and Rubery 2019) and in medicine (Wajcman 1991a). Through conducting a feminist analysis of sociotechnical change, it is also possible to see how the gendering of technical skills has shaped the value of labour and the nature of ‘women’s work’. For example, when technological innovations reduced the artisanal skills required to work in the garment industries (Cowan 1985a) and the printing sector (Cockburn 1983), large numbers of women moved into these roles. However, within the global garment industry today, it remains the case that, because of the abundance of cheap female labour, the use of technologies has been relatively limited and much of the work continues to be done by hand. Therefore, these notions of ‘skill’ and how they are embedded within pre-existing power imbalances are necessary to consider when trying to understand the processes of sociotechnical change that may shape the future.

2.2.6 SST and the future of work

A final point to consider concerning SST is how it aligns with the current emerging alternative narrative surrounding the future of work. There is a growing argument that the end of work is unlikely to materialise in the way that mainstream future of work commentators predict, justified on the grounds of how capitalism (Spencer 2017; 2018; Moody 2018; Morgan 2019; Fleming 2019) and gendered employment systems (Piasna and Drahokoupil 2017; Howcroft and Rubery 2018; 2019) continue to shape the nature of work available. As it stands, only one critical work and employment study has explicitly adopted an SST lens for its analysis (Howcroft and Taylor 2022). However, there is a theoretical closeness between SST and the approaches referenced previously as they make political and economic observations about that which is currently shaping change within the labour market. These theorists have questioned that there is a need to question whether there exists a motive for capital to replace labour with technology when low-cost labour is so widely available. Consequently, Fleming (2019) and Spencer (2018) suggest that the proliferation of low-quality work poses a more imminent threat to current employment systems than the elimination of work entirely. The gendered critique of the current future of work literature further supports the idea that the elimination of work is not imminent, at least for certain groups. On the one hand, it is argued that the fragmentation of employment could potentially deepen gender-related workforce segmentation which could further confine women to low-quality employment (Howcroft and Rubery 2018). On the other hand, it is noted that women may be more vulnerable to automation processes as they are more likely to hold jobs that consist of routine and repetitive tasks (Piasna and Drahokoupil 2017). Ultimately, the SST analysis of skills and the valuing of women’s work further feeds into this discussion, demonstrating how an SST lens is particularly suited to constructing a critical perspective on the future of work debate.

---

4 It is also important to note that this argument is not restricted only to feminised industries and will exist so long as there is a pool of low-cost labour to be exploited (e.g. the use of migrant labour in hand car washing) (Clark 2018).
2.2.7 Broadening the scope of SST

The discussion so far has shown that SST is a broad church but not a theory of everything. It offers a lens for analysing sociotechnical change, yet to understand the processes shaping change more broadly, it is necessary to draw on congruent theories developed to investigate certain social phenomena. Many of the works included within the two editions of *The Social Shaping of Technology* predate this conception of what came to be known as SST, but still, they can be considered social shaping approaches as they contribute to a broader understanding of these systems of sociotechnical change. This chapter, in a way, adopts a similar approach to outlining the merits of SST and other congruent theoretical approaches that can be used to investigate the specific aims of this project. Firstly, critically oriented research relating to employers’ strategies is drawn on to support the key principles within SST that one cannot expect the future of work to be characterised by a linear trajectory of change. Secondly, the theory surrounding the value of labour is brought in to develop the idea within SST that social structures influence employment practices which will also shape current experiences of work and how this is likely to develop in the future. It is the purpose of the theoretical framework developed for this research to outline how both can be adopted to enrich the use of SST and thus add to the current critical future of work narrative.

2.3 Critical approaches to employers’ strategy-making

Strategy, as a concept, first became popularised in academic fields during the 1950s and 1960s. It was a militaristic term that was then adopted by modern management based on the assumption that managers may be able to review a business situation in the same way a military general may review a battle (Thurley and Wood 1983; Hyman 1987). Strategic management thus became an established academic discipline and is highly considered within corporate practice and other organisational forms (e.g. government and NGOs) (Phillips and Dar 2011). Hyman (1987) argues that strategy can often be elusive and imprecise. However, others note the increasing number of activities that are being labelled as ‘strategic’ to emphasise their importance (Phillips and Dar 2011). Given the importance attached to strategy by some, it cannot be dismissed, but it also should not be exempt from scrutiny. Indeed, much of the debate surrounding employers’ strategies within the critical management and labour process literature is closely aligned with how organisational change is conceptualised within SST. In keeping with the SST lens, it is possible to argue that strategy does not determine trajectories of change and that the wider sociotechnical context needs to be considered.

2.3.1 ‘Strategy-making’ and SST

Employers’ decision-making practices have long been subsumed under the banner of ‘corporate strategy’, the discussion surrounding which tends to de-politicise/de-socialise the approaches taken by management. However, as the theoretical discussion surrounding SST in this section clarifies,
organisational actors, decision-making processes and their outcomes are all embedded within a particular context. When addressing business strategy issues, this context needs to be considered to inform how and why certain choices are made and what effect they might have when considering the future of work. For example, it is argued that a sociotechnical approach to analysing technology strategy needs to consider organisational actors and the power dynamics embedded within the decision-making process (Marabelli and Galliers 2017). A similar approach can be taken by drawing on SST which is critical of conceptualisations that assume decision-making is based on simple or pure economic rationality. Therefore, although MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985) discuss organisational change and decision-making primarily in relation to choices surrounding the design, implementation and use of technology, this approach also has wider applications to other strategic processes within organisations.

MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) reject the neoclassical approach to economics on the basis that human decision-making does not conform to the strict requirements of this model. While it is acknowledged that few strategy writers are likely to take a traditional neoclassical perspective, some who contribute to the future of work debate assume a simple relationship between market signals and technological know-how/decision-making (i.e. the most profitable option will be chosen and achieve its intended effects). Similarly, it could be argued that within the strategy literature, too many assumptions are made surrounding the ability for organisations to make ‘rational calculations’ (Wilkinson 1983). As SST shows, economic decision-making is as much about the social relations of production as it is about economic calculations which themselves are shaped by sociotechnical considerations (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). These broader structures thus feed into the decision-making process, further highlighting how decision-making does not occur within a vacuum. This point is also broadly relevant for the future of work debate within which processes of change (including employers’ decision-making processes) are discussed as though they exist along a linear trajectory. However, this oversimplifies how processes of change typically work. By adopting an SST lens it is possible to see how change is complex and contingent on a vast array of sociotechnical mechanisms that shape these trajectories (Williams and Edge 1996). Therefore, taking a critical approach towards strategies can also help re-focus the future of work debate on current organisational practices instead of abstract future promises.

The SST approach suggests that the choice and pursuit of certain strategies will be shaped by both internal and external conditions, including the supply and demand of goods and services, market competition and decisions made by non-organisation actors (governments, other businesses, regulators, suppliers), among other things. Thus SST can provide the tools to help understand the conditions within the wider context that shape decision-making processes and their outcomes (intended or otherwise) (see Fleck 1999). Although the social shaping of technology might appear central to this approach, it is possible to argue that SST can help analyse organisational processes more broadly in relation to how they are shaped by the context within which they are embedded. Furthermore, while technology may or may not be central to strategic change, it can be understood as being inextricable in terms of how it shapes costs and other inputs into the decision-making process. However, although SST can be useful when analysing strategy, it is also acknowledged that drawing on the broader strategy
literature expands the scope of the discussion beyond the social/technological aspects and provides greater detail regarding organisational change.

2.3.2 Critical management approach: ‘Strategy as discourse’ and narrative

The critical management studies (CMS) literature is diverse in how it conceptualises strategy (Phillips and Dar 2011). Strategy as an ‘organisational discourse’ is at the centre of the CMS critique which considers the embeddedness of strategy at the organisational (meso/micro)-level. Knights and Morgan (1991, p.251) note how it is believed that “…every organisation must have a strategy”, acknowledging how ubiquitous strategy-making has become within the modern corporation. Furthermore, Barry and Elmes (1997, p.430) describe strategy as “…one of the most prominent, influential and costly stories told in organisations”. The concern within CMS regarding strategies is not necessarily whether they are intended to be ‘true’ (i.e. will occur in practice as defined on paper), but rather, what the implications are if they are defined as ‘true’ in relation to their potential outcomes (Knights and Morgan 1991). Thus, some believe that the effects of ‘strategy as discourse’ can allow for the control and assertion of power over organisational actors in the absence of any actualised outcomes (Hyman 1987; Knights and Morgan 1991). Therefore, a cautious approach is needed when considering strategy as a process, as while it is made possible under certain environmental conditions, its outcomes are not inevitable (Phillips and Dar 2011, p.423). As mentioned, several CMS theorists have noted that managers and those in charge of ‘making strategy’ cannot be assumed to be ‘rational’ actors as they do not exist within a socio-political vacuum (Phillips and Dar 2011). For example, critics argue that short-term profits could lead to individual promotions and may encourage strategy-makers to act in favour of personal rather than organisational interests (Wilkinson 1983). It must also be recognised that strategy-makers are not the only stakeholders participating in the strategic process. Therefore, the CMS approach is an important complement to SST because it highlights the presence of multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests that may not prioritise an organisation’s strategic aims as it is often assumed.

2.3.3 Labour process approach: Strategy and the uncertainty of outcomes

The labour process approach further supports the view that conceptualising strategy as a cause-and-effect process is problematic. Labour process theorists diverge from CMS by noting that an organisational-level approach to analysing strategy-making fails to consider how the macro-structural conditions influence organisational change. They argue that it is necessary to analyse the labour-capital relations embedded within decision-making processes and that without taking a macro approach, these structures can be overlooked (Hyman 1987). The external influences (e.g. the Coronavirus pandemic) that shape change are often unknown (or immeasurable) and are rarely accountable in the planning or decision-making stages. Therefore, approaches that suggest a sequential cause-and-effect approach to organisational change should be regarded with caution. Froud et al. (2006) propose a ‘narrative and numbers’ approach to assessing strategies that highlight instances whereby performance initiatives
derived from company narratives do not ‘accord with the financial numbers’. Although not a labour process perspective, it is in keeping with how Hyman and Thompson view organisational strategy. For example, Hyman (1987) notes how contradictions are embedded within capitalist strategic choice (e.g. the expectation for workers to be both dependable and disposable), thus accounting for some of the disjuncture between what managers claim to be doing ‘strategically’ and what they are doing in practice. Thus, the existence of this paradox helps explain why the narrative and numbers may not add up.

Since it is believed by labour process theorists that decision-making can occur at a number of different sites within organisations, it is argued that one cannot assume there is one overarching ‘strategic vision’ at the organisation-level (Thompson 2003). Different actors are likely to have different ‘visions’ or different interpretations of the same strategy. This is because the social organisation of these actors and their decision-making power, influence, and relationship with one another are all shaped by pre-existing societal conditions. Therefore, even when a ‘strategy’ is communicated from the top-down, how it is translated throughout the organisational hierarchy will shape how the strategy works in practice. Inevitably, this will depend on the context and actors involved in the process (Hyman 1987). As Thompson (2003, p.363) argues, “…models are dependent on assumptions of cohesiveness and reciprocity between… strategic, functional and workplace levels”. Without this cohesiveness, strategy in practice at a lower organisational level might take a different form. This idea is developed in Thompson and Laaser (2021) in relation to first- and second-order strategic choices, whereby the first-order is the level at which technological systems are developed and adopted, whereas the second-order refers to the level at which technology is controlled and labour is configured. The first-order is subject to contextual influence, whereas the second-order is open to influence or contestation from actors (Thompson and Laaser 2021), thus explaining the disjuncture between the two levels.

Similarly, it is also argued that there is an observable intra-organisational disjuncture between strategy and practice, referring to the disconnect between organisational decision-making and the wider capitalist system. Thompson (2003, p.371) argues that employer objectives “…are frequently at odds under the inter-related impacts of globalisation, the shift to shareholder value in capital markets and systemic rationalisation across the whole value chain of firms”. For example, what might generate the most financial value in the long term might be forgone in the short-term, as Wilkinson (1983) also argued. This has wider relevance to the future of work debate since organisations may choose to forgo large investments in labour-saving technologies in favour of using low-cost labour. While this may be beneficial for profits in the short-term, it has the potential to harm productivity and profits in the future. Consequently, capitalism and the pursuit of profit-maximisation provide no additional guarantee to support predictions surrounding the future of work based on this disconnect (Moody 2018). In short, there is a political economy of strategy-making that needs to be considered, as only through understanding what is behind decision-making practices can one adequately grasp that which is currently shaping change and that which is likely to shape change in the future.
2.4 Critical approaches to the value of labour

Given the centrality of labour costs to employers’ decision-making processes and the capacity this has to shape the future of work, a theoretical exploration of the value of labour is also necessary. Much like the critical approach to employers’ strategies, the debate surrounding the value of labour is also complimentary to SST, yet it features more explicitly within the SST literature. SST scholars have long explored the value of labour in relation to employers’ decisions surrounding the design, implementation and use of technologies, and how this shapes the nature of work. They argue that the undervaluing of certain roles can be attributed to stereotyped presumptions about the work which men and women do, and the skills that it demands/that reside in the worker (i.e. men’s work as technical versus women’s work as non-technical) (Cockburn 1983; Wajcman 1991b). However, it is recognised that skills are not the only cause for the undervaluing of women’s work (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007), so it is necessary to look beyond SST for an explanation of this.

To address the shortfall of the traditional value of labour debate and lack of conceptualisation within SST surrounding the non-skill elements that shape the perception of women’s work, it is useful to draw on an alternative framework. Rubery and Howcroft (forthcoming) propose that the ‘SOFLQ’ framework (security, opportunity, fair treatment, life-beyond work and job quality) can be adopted to assess people’s needs from work and employment. It is thus argued within the latter part of this section that this framework can be in discussions surrounding the value of labour a more holistic view of women’s work and the characteristics within it that can be considered valuable to those involved in the employment relationship. In conceptualising work in this way, the focus is shifted away from just standard, waged, routinised work carried out by men. Instead, it captures the other ways in which value can be derived from waged labour. Therefore, the following section briefly explores some of the traditional theorisations surrounding the value of labour, before discussing the feminist viewpoint adopted within the SOFLQ framework which is presented in more depth at the end of the chapter.

2.4.1 Theorising the value of labour

Traditional neoclassical economics views wage-setting in terms of the supply and demand of employment and is based on the notion that labour can be measured in homogenous units that reflect skill and productivity. These conditions assume that “…demands and suppliers optimise their choices and thus are perfectly free and of independent will” (Vercherand 2014, p.53). However, it is not possible to describe the market as being characterised by the boundaries of pure and perfect economic competition. Thus, it has long been recognised that wage-setting will not occur based on these units alone. Both Karl Marx (1964) and Adam Smith (1776) recognised this and argued that workers would not be fully remunerated for the value of their labour. For Smith, this was a consequence of contemporary capitalism, whereby the value of what labour produces does not belong only to labour but is also part-owned by the employer (see 1776, p.74). In contrast, Marx believed that workers are not
fully remunerated for their labour because productive labour produces a surplus of goods or services that is extracted by capital as profit or as a means for reinvestment within the system. Nevertheless, both theories assume that workers with the same productivity will be remunerated at the same level through the payment of wages, hence suggesting their work is of the same ‘value’. Therefore, it is possible to argue that Smith and Marx’s observations were not too dissimilar in this regard.

Both Smith and Marx are united in their failure to conceptualise the value of the work carried out by women. Smith’s (1776) ‘Economic Man’ depicts a rational male, economic actor, incentivised by the pursuit of income. However, his model does not account for the unpaid labour carried out largely by women within the home (Marçal 2015). Smith depicted women as objects of sympathy and support, of the emotional kind, instead of active economic actors who have a productive and reproductive capacity (Harkin 2013). Marx (1864), on the other hand, recognised that all labour inherently had a ‘use value’, yet he argued that not all labour had an ‘exchange value’ – a distinction he used to separate labour which was ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ delineating between the work which men and women typically do. This conceptualisation has been widely rejected by feminists, such as Federici (2012) and Huws (2012; 2019), who took issue with the dismissal of unpaid domestic labour as being ‘unproductive’ and argued that domestic labour was better viewed as being ‘reproductive’. They recognise that it is essential to highlight that this notion of ‘value’ goes beyond wage-setting. While value can be derived through the exchange of labour, it can also be derived through its uses, such as the reproduction of the family/household (Huws 2012; 2019). Thus, it is argued that analyses of the value of labour need to adopt a feminist lens (see further discussion in Section 2.4.2).

2.4.1.1 The social valuing perspective

While notions of wage-setting need to be considered, there is also a smaller body of literature that addresses the non-tangible conceptualisations of ‘value’. Mostly coming from the field of psychology, the ‘social valuing perspective’ is assessed on the basis of “…worth that is composed daily on the job as individuals interact with others at work” (Dutton et al. 2016, p.4). This worth is derived through ‘symbolic interactionism’ which relates to how interactions with others reflect a sense of significance (Cooley 1902). The contribution of the social valuing perspective is that it helps understand how employees experience their work and construct their occupational identities and sense of self. The psychological perspective acknowledges that there are similar class, race and gendered dimensions that shape experiences of work and how it is socially valued. However, little consideration is given to how the financial value of the work shapes these interactions. In contrast, McBride and Martinez Lucio (2021) associate the low value of work with a perception (from employers, the public or employees themselves) that the work itself is ‘low skilled’ and thus somehow less worthy of good treatment, respect and dignity within the role. However, unlike some of the literature surrounding the social value of work, McBride and Martinez Lucio (2021) suggest that the workers’ position on the pay hierarchy will also shape how their work is viewed because the financial and the social are mutually reinforcing. Therefore,
it can be argued that it is necessary to draw on a variety of perspectives that cover both the tangible and intangible facets of value when considering how the value of labour is best conceptualised.

2.4.2 Feminist conceptualisation of the value of labour

Some argue that the value of women’s work, and the extent to which it has been historically undervalued, needs to be understood as both a product of capitalist oppression (as is the focus in traditional theorisations of the value of labour), as well as an outcome of existing within a wider patriarchal system (Phillips and Taylor 1980; Cockburn 1983). Phillips and Taylor (1980) argue that both capitalism and patriarchy need to be analysed in relation to the value of work because women’s productive characteristics had long been under-utilised. In the early 1980s when Phillips, Taylor and Cockburn were producing this work, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 had only just been put in place outlawing marriage bars and other policies that excluded women from certain parts of the labour market. While Phillips and Taylor (1980) argue that capitalism does not benefit from excluding women in this way, Huws (2019) argues that it enables the (male) ‘breadwinner’ to engage more in paid employment because they did not have to tend to their own reproductive needs (as it lessens the need for capital to pay for reproduction). However, both positions and that of other critical feminist scholars recognise that the interests of capital and the patriarchy are not always aligned (Hartmann 1979). Thus, the shaping of the labour market and the division of labour cannot be fully understood through the lens of mainstream or heterodox economics alone (or the other critiques of capitalism mentioned). Instead, a feminist analysis is needed to explain the complexities of how labour is valued.

It is helpful to return to the future of work debate to put the need for an SST approach into context as the undervaluing of ‘women’s work’ explains, in part, why capital has not pursued higher levels of labour replacement (Cowan 1985a). It is argued that the systematic undervaluing of certain occupations, most notably those carried out by women, has discouraged further investment in labour-saving technologies because low-cost labour remains available (Howcroft and Rubery 2019; Howcroft and Taylor forthcoming). Wage-setting, and thus how labour is valued, is a profoundly political process (Figart et al. 2002), but few economic actors would directly attribute their wage-setting behaviour to gendered assumptions. Instead, they look to standard implicit wage theories, such as ‘wages as a living’ or ‘wage as a price’, without considering ‘wages as a social practice’ (Rubery et al. 2021). Thus, when wage-setting is justified through a purely economic and ‘asocial’ lens, it leads to an incomplete analysis (Figart et al. 2002). With this in mind, it is necessary to look more broadly within the employment relations literature that conceptualises ‘women’s work’ to understand how the value of labour is shaped.

2.4.3 Assumptions leading to the undervaluing of women’s work

The lower returns given to ‘women’s work’ has typically been considered as an indicator for the extent to which work has been undervalued (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). Thus, it is necessary to
consider the assumptions that have systematically led to this. Firstly, there is an assumption that ‘women’s work’ is a supplementary income which justifies its underpayment. This is based on the belief that women are not self-supporting and that their incomes only need to reflect the level of a secondary or supplementary wage (Power 1999). In the 1920s, campaigns surrounding the living wage were formed because employers refused to pay gender-neutral wages (Power 1999). While successful attempts to neutralise the living wage in terms of gender were made, the gendering of occupations and internal wage-setting continued to be shaped by stereotyped assumptions that ‘women’s work’ was done for pin money (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). These outdated assumptions have been replicated in modern-day pay hierarchies and are visible in the growing share of jobs that do not provide enough income to sustain a single person, nor a whole household (Grant et al. 2005; Grimshaw and Rubery 2007).

Secondly, there is an assumption that high levels of job satisfaction equate to the need for less remuneration. This covers the compensating differential argument that has long impacted ‘women’s work’ and particularly those jobs which are associated with relatively high levels of satisfaction (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). It might be assumed that if the pleasure outweighs the pain for women engaging in paid employment, the level of remuneration in the form of wages need not be as high, even if working conditions are poor (Huws 2019). Within care work, it was found that there is a taken-for-granted assumption that workers are willing to tolerate bad working conditions because of the intrinsic rewards that the work brings (Hebson et al. 2015). It is argued that care workers may feel as though the altruism, or the non-monetary rewards, outweigh the financial benefits of the work because of gendered social norms (Atkinson and Lucas 2013), somehow justifying the low pay and poor conditions attributed to the work.

Thirdly, there is an assumption that there is an abundance of ‘inherent’ skills held by all women and that these skills command a lower value than the comparative ‘inherent’ skill set held by men. The low value attributed to these skills is further compounded by the fact that they are often not formally recognised or certified, thus devaluing them further (Huws 2012). Huws (2019, p.21) argues that the value of labour depends on the skills, knowledge and bodily strength of the worker but these can be affected by presumptions of the workers’ capacity based on their gender. For example, machine/technical-related ‘skills’ and ‘skills’ associated with physical strength have become associated with ‘inherent’ masculine status (Wajcman 2004). On the other hand, ‘feminine’ skills have been associated with perceptions of women’s ‘inherent’ capabilities which ultimately feeds into how they are valued financially:

“Skill definitions are saturated with sexual bias. The work of women is often deemed inferior simply because it is women who do it. Women workers carry into the workplace their status as subordinate individuals, and this status comes to define the value of the work they do.” (Phillips and Taylor 1980, p.79)
Acker (2006) also found that men’s natural strength may be valued more highly than a woman’s natural ability to be caring, for example, despite both skill-sets being deemed ‘inherent’ to the respective genders. Cockburn (1985c) explores this disparity in-depth, paying particular attention to men’s materiality and how their socio-political dominance reinforces their ‘inherent’ physical power. Furthermore, ‘women’s work’ and the skills it requires are often also viewed as an extension of the unpaid work carried out in the household and thus further weakens their bargaining power in effect because it is done ‘for free’ elsewhere (Huws 2012). With these considerations, skills themselves can be seen as a ‘class-political concept’ whereby skill is valued as per existing social stratifications instead of the actual demands of the work (Cockburn 1983).

2.4.4 Constructing ‘women’s skills’ in SST

It is important to give this matter of the value of women’s work and their skills more thought by drawing on the work of Cockburn (included within the SST readers and in her own works) (1983; 1985c). Cockburn (1983) proposes a three-part typology in which she analytically separates the skill which resides in the worker (including the workers’ ability and experience gained over time), the skills demanded by the job and skills as a socially constructed political concept. The final part of the typology is perhaps the most important when exploring the value of labour as it depicts skills as being a subjective concept constructed by social perceptions of work. Cockburn and others (see Wajcman 1991b; Bolton 2004; Nickson et al. 2012; Hurrell et al. 2013) reject the idea that skill is an objective measure upon which wage-setting can occur and believe skill acquisition, utilisation and valuation should all be considered a social act. Furthermore, it is argued that the level of skill attributed to a role has as much to do with the gender of the person doing it, as it does with the actual demands of the work (Phillips and Taylor 1980)

Hurrell et al. (2013) frame their conceptualisation of skill on Cockburn’s work and suggest that the social construction of skill accounts for the ability of employers to demand certain attributes or personal characteristics (e.g. ‘middle-classness’, ‘positive attitudes’, ‘work ethic’) in place of ‘actual skills’ (Hurrell et al. 2013). While it is important to recognise the common confusion between skill and personal characteristics, Hurrell et al.’s (2013) reading of Cockburn’s work does not fully capture the crux of her claims. Another reading of Cockburn’s work might recognise how ‘skills’ (e.g. leadership, computational, dexterity) are socially constructed themselves because they can be used to further certain agendas and have suppressed women’s earning ability because of the ‘value’ attributed to feminised skill-sets. Despite Cockburn’s explicit embeddedness of gender, Hurrell et al. (2013) choose to exclude gender in their discussion surrounding the underpinnings of skill. This is problematic because gendered norms are integral to the undervaluing of certain occupations and abilities, such as the hotel work included in their study. Therefore, it is possible to go as far as to say that gender is inextricably linked to the value

5 For example, employers may be describing a preference for a certain level of cultural capital as opposed to a level of skill that is pervasive in shaping a candidate’s perceived suitability or fit for a role (Pettinger 2005).
of work thus how it is valued, meaning that removing gender leads to an incomplete analysis of the work itself.

Huws (2012) also argues that skills partly account for the occupational segregation that characterises work, yet much like Cockburn she centralises gender within her analyses. From an SST perspective, it is argued that in situations in which women and men are deemed to have the same skills – such as an eye for calculation, problem-solving, design and construction – women are more likely to veer towards domestic-related roles (e.g. cooking, knitting and quilt-making), while men pursue jobs in engineering (Cockburn 1985a, p.55). Evidently, this is an outdated example, yet it poses the important question of what social conditions lead to the choice of work and whether there is, in fact, any real choice involved at all. While Huws (2012) adopts the same logic, she also recognises that these explanations surrounding skill cannot account for all of women’s disadvantage in the labour market and that it is necessary to look to the household division of labour to fully understand male dominance over women in paid and unpaid work. Occupying different spaces of work, social norms and household commitments all reinforce the reproduction of the difference in value between men, women and their labour-power. These feminist accounts of the value of labour make clear the embedded social structures that can shape employers’ decision-making practices and processes of change. Therefore, by applying an SST lens to issues regarding the value of labour, the inequalities that characterise employment in relation to the broader conditions that systematically disadvantage women can be brought to the fore.

2.4.5 An alternative conceptualisation of the value of labour

It is argued throughout this chapter that SST is theoretically congruent with a feminist approach to conceptualising the value of labour. Traditionally, value theory covered little more than standard, waged, routinised work which is predominantly ‘men’s work’. Within this frame, it is believed that an employer extracts surplus value by paying labour less than the value of the goods produced, and labour receives value from the process in the monetary form of wages. However, as demonstrated, ‘value’ is subject to gendered assumptions that have led to the undervaluation of work associated with women (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). Whether this undervaluation is justified on the grounds of the work being a supplementary income, reflective of higher levels of job satisfaction or based on notions of skill, the effect is that ‘women’s work’ is valued lower than men’s. The issue that has not yet been addressed is how to conceptualise the value of work if traditional approaches assume that value is objectively reflected in levels of pay which do not suffice when analysing ‘women’s work’. Therefore, it is necessary to include the other ways through which value can be derived from waged labour (aside from wages alone) when analysing gendered patterns of work and employment. For example, for some, higher wages may be of less value if work does not fall within the standard employment relationship (SER) as they may lack other desirable protections that shape the overall experience of work more significantly. The rising participation of women in the labour market has been linked with a move away from the SER which was traditionally built around the single-breadwinner model (Bosch 2004). Thus, it is necessary
to look to an alternative theoretical approach to analyse how value can be better understood and conceptualised across different groups.

Employers may seek to actively commodify the employment relationship to increase the extraction of surplus value (e.g. cut labour costs and increase profits) (Herman et al. 2021). Yet, in the long run, processes of commodification are not beneficial for labour, capital, nor society. For employees, it means a lack of welfare and security; for employers, a lack of worker cooperation and poor returns on investment in human capital; and for society, the commodification of labour can ultimately lead to greater inequality (Bosch 2004, p.633). In contrast, decommodification (the process through which additional buffers between market and employment relationships are placed) and the function of the SER “…is of value not only to employees but also to firms and society as a whole.” (Bosch 2004, p.620). Consequently, it is being proposed that, in order to assess changes to the value of labour, it is more effective to look towards a multi-dimensional framework that considers the SER to be a benchmark from which the value of work that falls outside the SER can be assessed.

It has been proposed in the introduction to this section that an alternative framework for assessing the value of labour is needed. Yet it is important to recognise that the chosen framework is closer theoretically to the broader arguments made surrounding social reproduction, job quality and the decommodification of labour than it is the traditional conceptualisations of the value of labour. Rubery and Howcroft (forthcoming) have developed an updated multi-dimensional framework for assessing people’s needs from work and employment that addresses the security of income; access to opportunity; fair treatment at work; recognition of life beyond work; and the quality and meaning of work. By adopting this framework, the analysis of the value of labour can be extended to feminised work that falls beyond the SER by drawing on Bosch’s (2004) notion of de-commodification from which the SOFLQ framework was developed.

By drawing on the five elements from the SOFLQ framework, it is possible to analyse how the value of labour is shaped and thus experienced by employees. If an increase in the value of labour were to occur in roles that fall outside the SER, one would expect to see at least a partial decommodification across each of the five dimensions. Within this framework, the importance of wages in relation to the security of income is acknowledged. Yet it avoids overemphasising the role of pay when discussed in relation to other parts of the employment relationship and the significance they have for different groups. Therefore, although the original intention of this framework was not to conceptualise the value of labour as such, it captures the value of good quality work and the different ways in which it can be derived.

2.5 Theoretical framework

---

6 The first four dimensions were originally developed within Rubery et al. (2018) to specifically address issues related to paid employment, yet the fifth dimension was added in Rubery and Howcroft (forthcoming) to broaden the discussion to include issues related to work and employment, in addition to making it relevant to the debate surrounding the future of work.
A summary of the literature review outlined within this chapter is presented in Figure 3. This framework shows how SST constitutes the primary theoretical lens – one which is anti-determinist – for examining the future of work debate in food retail. SST is described as a ‘theoretically informed research project’ (Howcroft and Taylor 2022) which means it is supplemented by other complementary theorisations of work and employment as this chapter has aimed to show thus far. These theories provide more detail on specific work-related issues, enriching SST and its critique of technological determinism. Therefore, these three approaches combined are presented as an integrated framework which can be applied to the empirical sectoral case study.

It is argued within the critical strategy literature that ‘strategies’ do not determine change because they are shaped by internal and external influences (Hyman 1987). Within SST, it is argued that economic decisions are made and shaped by pre-existing social structures (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). Strategy-making as a concept is not explicitly referred to in SST, nor have critical strategy scholars engaged with SST meaningfully. However, by complementing the SST approach with the critical strategy literature, it is possible to see how the combination can add to a deeper understanding of the future of work debate. It is argued that a disjuncture exists between strategy, practice and organisational outcomes (Hyman 1987; Thompson 2003; Froud et al. 2006). By applying an SST lens, it is possible to show that this perspective is congruent to the idea that decision-making is not a simple cause-and-effect process which thus has implications for the future of work debate. Consequently, this rejects the technologically deterministic assumptions made by mainstream commentators that organisational change occurs along a linear trajectory. Therefore, it is worth noting that although SST cannot provide the detail to analyse all processes of organisational change, its usefulness is amplified when applied alongside existing critical theories.

The other side of the framework is similar in that it complements the SST lens with the feminist literature chosen to conceptualise the value of labour. However, unlike strategy-making, the value of labour is discussed within SST. Social shaping theorists, Cockburn (1983) and Wajcman (1991b), argue that the social construction of technical skills subjectively shapes how labour is valued. Yet this analysis is broadened within the work and employment literature, as other assumptions that lead to the undervaluation of women’s work are also acknowledged (see Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). Both approaches view the value of labour as being socially constructed, which suggests a need to challenge traditional conceptualisations of value. It is argued that non-pay elements need to be centralised so that the value of the work can be assessed based on the quality of the employment relationship offered (e.g. by adopting the SOFLQ framework) (Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming) as opposed to what many perceive to be ‘objective’ measures of wage-setting. This theoretical approach also has implications for the debate on the future of work because, if the value of labour is suppressed, job quality (rather than quantity) is likely to suffer (Spencer 2018; Fleming 2019). The undervaluing of work may also shape how gender equalities are likely to be configured in the future (Howcroft and Rubery 2018). Therefore, the social structures emphasised within SST analyses need to be included within discussions surrounding the value of labour.
The link between the value of labour and employers’ strategies is also acknowledged within the framework because, as the SST approach has shown, the prevalence of low-cost feminised labour has historically shaped employers’ decisions surrounding investment in technology (Cowan 1985a). The final part of the framework shows how these three complementary approaches can be applied as an integrated framework to an empirical case study setting, embedded within the broader research context. By adopting this framework to help inform the analysis of the empirical research, the usefulness of SST is demonstrated, highlighting how it can be combined with the rich tradition of work and employment scholarship and further contribute to our understanding of the future of work debate.

2.6 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has outlined the theoretical underpinnings of this research and how it is situated within the broader future of work debate. The discussion firstly explores the different ways in which technologies can be theorised and explains why The Social Shaping of Technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985) is deemed most suitable for this project. It is argued that SST is a valuable lens for analysing sociotechnical change in order to provide a corrective to technological determinism. In the current context, SST provides a framework that can be adopted to critique the future of work debate and
the predictions that have been made regarding the impending elimination of large numbers of jobs. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the commonalities between SST and critical approaches to employers’ strategies and the value of labour which can eschew determinism. These three approaches are woven together in the proposed framework, highlighting that it is possible to regard outcomes as non-linear and shaped by multiple (and potentially divergent) actors and social, political, economic and technological forces. Although SST is the primary approach, the use of complementary theories can enrich SST which can further contribute to the critical future of work debate and challenge the current mainstream narrative. The chapter concludes by outlining the integrated theoretical framework that is applied to a sectoral case study in the following chapters.

The theory discussed within this chapter has been chosen to frame the course of investigation. Through doing so, a framework has been constructed that responds to calls for more research to seriously engage with SST (Howcroft and Taylor 2022). The critical discussion surrounding strategy has been drawn on to further strengthen the SST critique of the current future of work debate (Wajcman 2017) and issues with technological determinism more widely (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985) by acknowledging that processes of change do not occur along a linear trajectory. Furthermore, it has been shown how feminist theory concerned with the value of labour also aligns with SST in relation to its conceptualisations of skills, occupational segregation and the gendered power differentials (Cockburn 1985a). As SST demands a feminist lens, a framework for assessing the value of labour has been adopted which centralises the importance of the non-pay elements of the employment relationship (Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming). The next chapter contextualises this theoretical discussion by outlining the case study setting.
3 CONTEXTUALISING CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FOOD RETAILING

3.1 Introduction

Despite calls for a greater academic focus on retail work (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011), food retailing has been largely neglected within the work and employment literature. Instead, food retail work has become a point of interest within the media as a sector which is currently experiencing significant change (both in relation to new technologies and more recently the pandemic), prompting questions about the future of work in the sector. Consequently, future of work commentators have adopted retail as an archetype of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ in which it is believed that shopping will either be carried out entirely online or in fully-automated physical stores (e.g. Begley et al. 2019; McKinsey 2020; Geddes et al. 2021). Nevertheless, retail work today remains characterised by challenges such as income (in)security, increased work intensity and blurred work-life boundaries (Findlay and Thompson 2017). However, it also remains highly feminised and segregated along lines of gender, race and age which means that there are significant equalities implications that need to be considered when analysing retail work. Therefore, it could be argued that attention is better directed towards the current nature of retail work which can often be overlooked within technology-focused commentary.

This chapter aims to construct the context which can help understand that which has shaped this research by analysing the broader processes of change that have occurred within the sector in recent history. This approach is in line with the framework developed in Chapter 2 that takes as its starting point the need to avoid the presumption that technology is the dominant force determining the future of work. Furthermore, the analysis of the broader context is central to SST, thus the theoretical framework that includes this context will later be applied to the sectoral case study in the empirical chapters that follow. The empirical chapter also adopts an additional framework which serves as a heuristic device for discussing the evidence which represents the potential pathways down which food retailing could go in the future: ‘automating to efficiency’, ‘squeezing the cost-base’ and ‘competing on connectivity’ (Tait 2017). However, since this framework was developed by the Fabian Society (a political think tank) outside of the academic literature, it is positioned away from the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, the framework outlines the different scenarios for the potential use (or non-use) of technology which diverges significantly from the deterministic, mass job-loss narrative critiqued in the previous chapter. The assumption from the future of work debate is that ‘automating to efficiency’ will become the dominant model, yet as the historical and current context outlined in this chapter makes the case that there has been more evidence of ‘squeezing the cost-base’ in recent years – through the introduction of discounters, shifting customer behaviour and the different strategies deployed by an evolving portfolio of supermarket owners.

By examining the political economy of food retailing since the post-war period, the reality presented provides a compelling case for emphasising the importance of the wide range of forces that have shaped the nature of retail work up until now, aside from technologies alone. The chapter begins
by outlining the social, political, and economic climate in order to identify the institutions that work across sectors in the UK. The second level of contextualisation looks to the case of retail and outlines both the demographic factors and recent trends that make it the most appropriate sector for this research, identifying food retail as the chosen sub-sector. Next, an overview of contemporary British food retailing is given, focusing on product and labour market trends. Following this, the current context is discussed concerning the Coronavirus pandemic. In summary, this chapter aims to synthesise multiple strands of academic literature and disciplines to provide the necessary contextualisation for the methods, empirical findings and discussion chapters that follow.

3.2 Employment relations and the state

This section summarises the socio-political context of employment in the UK at the national-level, before moving on to a sector-specific analysis. The UK has a population of 68.2 million people and the employment rate in March 2021 was estimated at 75.1% (4.9% unemployment and 20.9% economic inactivity) (ONS 2021b). Currently, 76% of all people in employment work full-time (88% of working men and 62% of working women) and women continue to be overrepresented in part-time work (74.6% of all part-time workers are women) (ONS 2021d). There has been a significant shift in the sectoral division of employment towards the service sector in which almost three-quarters of people work. This figure is reflective of the fact that the shift away from industry in the UK was the most significant of the OECD countries since the 1970s (Marchington et al. 2004). In terms of the industrial and regulatory context, the UK is a liberal market economy (LME) in which free-market mechanisms mediate relationships between employers, employees, suppliers and consumers (Heery and Noon 2008). Additionally, the system of industrial relations is relatively decentralised and is more reflective of the US system than other countries in northern Europe (Heery and Noon 2008; Eurofound 2015). Consequently, collective bargaining tends to occur at the company level and attitudes towards trade unions are typically adversarial. Nationally, trade union membership is 23.7% of all employees which has risen slightly in recent years, but members and collective agreements remain typically concentrated in specific sectors of the economy (e.g. public sector) (BEIS 2020). Unlike European countries, it is rare for an employers’ association or third party to be involved in the negotiation process in the UK, as collective bargaining tends to take place at the company level (Marchington et al. 2004).

The neoliberal policies and industrial relations reforms pursued by Margret Thatcher (Conservative Prime Minister in the 1980s) have transformed the composition of employment in the UK and the industrial relations system. Since this period, the political drivers shaping changes to work and employment can be categorised as the deregulation, decollectivisation and depoliticisation of the employment relationship (Rubery 2015). In place of collective representation, the state plays a central role in regulating employment through new regulations (e.g. the national minimum wage) and enforcement mechanisms have become increasingly important as work has become decollectivised (Mustchin and Martínez Lucío 2020). However, overarching trends of deregulation and depoliticisation have also further deepened entrenched power imbalances between employers and workers (Rubery...
The political and industrial context, coupled with government policies that have deregulated the employment relationship since the financial crisis, have contributed to a situation whereby work in the UK has become increasingly segmented (Rubery and Piasna 2017). Policies that aimed to promote the growth of employment 'at the margins' ultimately led to the expansion of new, more precarious types of non-standard employment (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007).

After the financial crisis, growing numbers of workers were unable to find permanent or full-time work and thus were in a position where they had to opt for temporary/part-time roles or become self-employed (Grimshaw et al. 2015). The practice of giving employees less hours than they need, underemployment, has become a growing concern since the crisis as it is no longer uncommon for contractual hours to bear little relationship to actual hours worked (Moore et al. 2017). Furthermore, the minimum wage in the UK for employees over the age of 23 is £8.91, which is comparable to northern European countries (Aumayr-Pintar et al. 2020). Yet the minimum wage often acts as a wage-setting mechanism for employers in the UK, particularly those in the lowest-paid sectors, including retail (Moore et al. 2017). It is also argued that there is a need to protect hours, as well as wages, hence the ongoing ‘Living Hours’ campaigns for guaranteed minimum hours. This has the aim of reducing the number of those experiencing poverty levels of pay despite being protected by the minimum wage (Dobbins and Prowse 2021). Finally, it is worth noting that as of 31st December 2020, the UK is no longer bound by EU law which leaves significant scope for change in employment protections. For example, post-Brexit tribunal decisions can be made without being referred to the European Court of Justice and legislative adjustments can diverge from EU law (see Ford 2016).

A long-standing development has been the feminisation of work in the UK since women entered the labour market in large numbers during the 1970s and 1980s (Roantree and Vira 2018). However, while certain advances have lessened the burden of unpaid domestic work on women, the organisation of work and employment remains highly gendered. The female employment rate in the UK is 72.2% (increasing by 17 percentage points in the past four decades) (ONS 2021a), yet women remain concentrated within specific sectors and occupations. Most notably, they continue to be overrepresented in part-time work, primarily found in feminised segments of the service economy (Rubery 2015). The concentration of women in these roles can, in part, be explained by extortionate childcare costs (currently the third-highest OECD country as a percentage of average wages) (OECD 2020) and societal norms. These childcare costs limit the accessibility of certain roles and routes for progression, creating a situation whereby both parents working full-time can become unaffordable. This poses a problem for gender equality in the UK as part-time work has become increasingly precarious (see Grimshaw et al. 2015; Rubery 2015; Warren and Lyonette 2018). Although many roles remain feminised, it is also important to note that workers from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience insecure working patterns. For example, Black workers in the UK are almost twice as likely to be working in temporary roles than white workers (ONS 2021c). Furthermore, 1 in 8 Black and minority ethnic women work in insecure jobs, compared to 1 in 16 white women and 1 in 18 white men (TUC 2020). Undeniably, entrenched inequalities continue to persist throughout the labour market.
that shape employees’ experiences of work in the UK and must be considered within any retail employment analyses.

3.3 Food retailing in Britain

The food retailing landscape in the UK has changed considerably since the post-war period. There are four distinct categories of British food retailers: traditional supermarkets (Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, Asda), discounters (such as Aldi and Lidl), convenience stores (such as the Co-op, independents and other traditional retailers with convenience branches) and online-only retailers (such as Ocado). Employment is concentrated within chain-owned supermarkets instead of smaller independent stores and sites are typically owned by retailers directly (rather than operating as franchises). Employment relations across the sector tend to be standardised across chains relying on local managers to implement national policies (with slight variances in the devolved nations Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). Perhaps the most compelling explanation as to why retail work makes an interesting case for this study is that it has become in many ways “…the new generic form of mass employment in the post-industrial socio-economic landscape” (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011, p.2). Retail has ultimately taken the place of manufacturing after its gradual decline since the 1960s (ONS 2019b), currently employing approximately 791,100 people in the UK (ONS 2021d). The retailing of food and other essential items is the most significant part of the retail sector (one-third of retail employees work in the sale of food) (ONS 2021d). Thus, work in food retail remains the fifth-largest industry class (after public administration, primary/secondary education and hospital activities) (ONS 2021d). However, it is worth noting that over the past ten years, the proportion of the working population in food retailing has fallen from 4.1% to 2.6% (ONS 2021d).

As mentioned, retail work in the UK remains highly gendered. Currently, 58% of all retail workers are women, yet within certain retail subsectors, the gendering of roles is more stark. For example, in the sale of electronics and hardware, women hold 32% of jobs, whereas in clothing retail, this figure is 72% (ONS 2021d). In food retail, the overall representation of women is lower than the sectoral average at 56%, but the gendering of roles within this subsector is important to consider further for several reasons (see Figure 4). Firstly, women in food retail are almost twice as likely than men to work part-time, who hold only 17% of all the full-time roles (much lower than the industry average of 24%). Secondly, in terms of vertical segregation, women only hold 39% of managerial roles within food retail. Thirdly, in terms of horizontal segregation, the roles that women and men hold remain distinctly different. For example, 70% of cashier roles are carried out by women, yet their representation within non-customer service-related roles is much lower (ONS 2021d). It is also worth noting that women make up just 23% of the workforce in food wholesale roles and in home delivery. While these figures are not directly related to the stratification of food retail work, they indicate the concentration of men in

---

7 Tesco, Britain’s biggest food retailer, remains the largest private-sector employer in the country.
expanding parts of the broader sector (particularly when the gradual shift towards online food retailing is considered).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Retailing</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers, Directors</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Senior Officials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Customer</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Occupations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process, Plant and</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine Operatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Occupations</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 Segregation of food retail work by occupation (ONS 2021d)

In addition to the gendering of food retail work, recent labour force data shows that white men are almost three times as likely to be found in retail management positions than women from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, while women from BAME backgrounds are five times more likely to be found in retail cashier/checkout roles than white men (ONS 2020d). Further to this, the age of the retail workforce follows a U-shaped pattern (see Figure 5). It is typically reported that younger workers are the preferred workforce in retail, which is also reflected in the food retailing sector. However, it is also worth noting that a higher proportion of workers aged 51-57 also work in this part of the sector (ONS 2020d). It is argued that age-related segregation persists in food retail because some still perceive the work as a ‘stop gap’ either before ‘starting a career’ (e.g. students) or as a (near) ‘retirement job’ (Huddleston 2011). Yet it is worth noting that these assumptions can have implications for the quality of work offered.

---

*‘BAME’ is included here as the acronym used by the Office for National Statistics to group ethnic identities.*
These demographic trends for food retail are statistically similar to labour market contexts found in North America (Carré and Tilly 2017) and within certain European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands (van Klaveren and Voss-Dahm 2011). Collective bargaining in food retail is relatively widespread due to joint partnership agreements between the shopworkers trade union Usdaw and several major food retailers. This coverage is considered unusual for an LME, particularly in the retail sector, thus some argue that it is sustained by Usdaw’s ‘moderate business-orientated unionism’ (Geppert et al. 2014, p.217) and ‘focus on building consensual relationships’ (Simms 2015, p.405). Despite this collective representation, retail employees remain among the lowest-paid workers in the UK (Low Pay Commission 2020) – the median pay for food retailing is £9.72 (£0.04 above the industry median and £0.81 above the national living wage) (ONS 2020a; 2020b). The number of retail workers below Real Living Wage has fallen yearly but the figure remains much higher than average at 42% (compared to 17% across sectors) (Richardson 2021). The Low Pay Commission (2020) argues that rising wages in the sector are a sign of retail employers attempting to gain competitive advantage in the labour market by offering more attractive wages. Some argue that employers may choose to increase hourly pay but retract terms and conditions leading to the removal of other pay/non-pay benefits (e.g. paid breaks) (Moore et al. 2017). Low pay further widens existing structural inequalities as women remain over-represented in lower-paid jobs within the sector (ONS 2021d) and are more likely to experience in-work poverty while working in retail (Usdaw 2018b). The severity of this situation is overlooked by industry experts who claim that “…low pay doesn’t necessarily equate to poverty” (British Retail Consortium 2016b, p.5). Precarious employment patterns within the sector, accompanied by low pay, mean it is common for retail workers to have trouble meeting their basic living income costs (Usdaw 2018b). Therefore, low pay is one of several factors contributing to the higher-than-average levels of in-work poverty within the sector (McBride and Smith 2021). Furthermore, research has shown that

---

---
retail work is a growing primary source of income for many families (Gardiner and Tomlinson 2019), despite the nature of the contracts typically offered being insufficient to sustain an entire household.

3.4 Contemporary changes in food retailing

In order to understand the context that shapes the nature of retail work, this section reviews the broader food retail setting in the UK throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The embeddedness of gender, the gradual degradation of employment conditions and the relatively limited extent of technological innovation have all shaped the quality and the quantity of work available. The following section demonstrates how retail change has been incremental, suggesting that the current wave of technological change is perhaps no different from other waves throughout history (Wajcman 2017). To exemplify the extent to which change is an incremental process, the history of retail change in the UK is discussed regarding the formation of the modern supermarket and the creation of contemporary retailing. Then the feminisation of food retailing is outlined regarding how it links to certain sociotechnical changes (e.g. working-time developments, the move to a self-service model and the implementation of new technologies). Finally, the status of retail technologies today is explored with particular reference to two emerging models (self-service and online), which were granted ‘disruptor’ status some time ago (Twentyman 2015), to consider whether there is any evidence of them transforming the nature of retail work as it currently stands.

3.4.1 The consolidation of British supermarkets

In post-war Britain, the retail landscape was transformed as part of the new ‘modern consumer society’ whereby rations were lifted and food retailing was ‘Americanised’ (Shaw et al. 2004). Sainsbury’s opened the first ‘self-service’ supermarket in 1950 and in the three decades that followed, a small number of retailers gained a hold over the market. Household technologies underwent a transformation, which had implications for how people shopped and used their time. In particular, cars and refrigerators became cheaper meant that consumers could transport and store larger quantities of food (Basker 2016). In part, this contributed toward the expansion of store sizes and the move towards out-of-town locations. By the early 1980s, Tesco, Sainsbury’s and Gateway had established oligopolistic power within food retailing and they all remained relatively mid-cost in terms of their approach to pricing. All three firms aimed to expand elements of ‘experience shopping’, enhance customer service, implement new technologies such as electronic points of sale (EPOS) systems and offer a wide variety of goods to improve choice (Ogbonna 1989). In the period that followed, these retailers ramped up prices and formed an oligopoly to limit competition on price (Marchington and Harrison, 1991). However, the late 1980s was viewed as the beginning of the end of the ‘golden age of food retailing’. In the early 1990s, discount retailers created a ripple effect on price competition, triggering ‘price wars’ among the more dominant retailers whose margins were being squeezed (Wrigley 1994). What unfolded was considered a national ‘scandal’ in the media because the entry of the discounters into the UK market revealed the high prices charged by the major retailers which had been allowed due to the government's
willingness to deregulate the sector (Wrigley 1994). The new era of supermarket competition looked different as a result. Stricter planning restrictions in the late 1990s meant that fewer sites were available for new stores and there was growing competition for these spaces from new entrants such as Aldi and Lidl (Wood and McCarthy 2014; Goodley and Haddou 2014).

In the 2000s, major retailers were becoming increasingly able to 'work around' the regulatory restrictions placed on them and devised new approaches to achieve market dominance (Sparks et al. 2008). Retailers retained oligopolistic power which meant they could operate with little intervention from regulatory bodies, suppliers, employees or the government (Sparks et al. 2008). Research by Sparks et al. (2008) shows how Tesco, the UK's biggest retailer, was able to invest in operational activities to maximise profits in a way that rivals could not (e.g. the management and control over their supply chain). Furthermore, it has been argued that the fundamental transformation of Tesco's supply chain methods and practice in the late 1990s and early 2000s was more central to Tesco's success than any other changes that were taking place (Sparks 2019, p.174). The centralisation of decision-making, standardised stores and EPOS systems aided more accurate stock management mechanisms. This allowed for the leaner management of the new food retail supply chain and reinforced the power Tesco and other major retailers had (and continue to have) within the country. Perhaps one of the most significant changes was the move away from a 'conventional relationship' with supply channel members by adopting just-in-time ordering practices. Tesco was able to alter the power balance between themselves and their suppliers, as avoiding stock-holding allowed them to increase efficiencies by placing that burden on their suppliers (Burt and Sparks 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to note the importance of retailers' supply chain strategies because, evidently, cost-cutting on the shop floor is not the only approach used to widen margins.

3.4.2 Food retail ownership structures

Changes have also been made to the ownership structures of British supermarkets which will likely have implications for the future of retailing. What is now considered the 'big four' (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Asda), all came from relatively small beginnings, given their size and dominance today. The four retailers began as family-owned businesses and were founded around the beginning of the twentieth century (except Asda, founded in 1949). Tesco was the first to float on the London Stock Exchange in 1947. Morrisons followed in 1967, as did Sainsbury's shortly after in 1973. Asda was listed on the stock exchange until it was bought by the US retailer Wal-Mart in 1999. This acquisition was a major event in British retail and represented part of Wal-Mart's attempts to move into the European market (Cowe et al. 1999). Asda then underwent another change of ownership in 2021, after its failed merger with Sainsbury's, which has since signalled the start of a chain of private equity acquisitions within the sector. Several months after Asda was purchased, Morrisons was taken over by another American private equity firm with the aim of “…helping the business realise its full potential and delivering for all of its stakeholders” (BBC 2021). The other two major retailers, Tesco and Sainsbury's, are public limited companies owned by shareholders and the ownership structure of the other smaller
retailers varies slightly more. Waitrose (owned by parent company John Lewis & Partners) is the only (indirect) employee-owned supermarket in the UK (Pendleton and Robinson 2015). The Co-operative Group operate a membership model whereby it is jointly owned by members (employees and customers) and Independent Co-operative Societies (Co-op 2021). Additionally, although Aldi and Lidl are both expanding their UK operations (currently hold a combined market share of 14%) (Kantar 2021a), they remain family-owned and based in Germany.

Changing retail ownership structures will likely shape the approach taken towards an organisation's management and thus must be considered. It is argued by employment relations scholars that there is a need to take an interest in the mechanisms of financial capitalism to capture how financial actors activities influence management strategies and the outcomes they have for stakeholders (including employees) (Appelbaum et al. 2013). For example, it is suggested that private equity takeovers can have 'welfare neutral' gains for stakeholders (Jensen 1993). On one hand, it can reduce managerial opportunism and improve efficiency. On the other hand, it can increase the likelihood that existing agreements between incumbent stakeholders can be breached (e.g. the employment contract) and a further divergence of interests between owners, middle-managers, workers and local communities may occur (Appelbaum et al. 2013). Furthermore, some believe that employee-owned firms are more likely to have a flexible, productive and committed workforce as they can engage meaningfully in decision-making processes and business developments (Tait 2017). Consequently, it has been recommended that the government diversify the mix of retail ownership and support long-termism within the industry (Tait 2017; Portas 2021; Murray 2021). However, there is little reason to suggest that the British food retail sector is reversing its approach to ownership with the recent acquisitions of Asda and Morrisons by private equity firms.

3.4.3 The advent of 'women's shop work'

In terms of employment, the post-war period saw large numbers of 'lower-skilled' jobs created in retail, as changes to the shop layout and customer expectations shifted the work demands. Many of the 'personal service functions' previously central to this type of work were 'de-skilled' as stores became self-service (i.e. goods were picked off shelves by the customers themselves, rather than a greengrocer) (Wrigley and Lowe 2002). The advent of early technologies, such as the cash register, gave rise to the first of many sub-divisions of retail labour. Although cash registers were introduced during the late 1800s, the technology was not widely diffused until the 1920s (Basker 2016). During this time, the new role of a designated 'cashier' was established and separated from the responsibilities of sales assistants. Men were able to remain in the more highly 'skilled' and better-paid positions (e.g. selling goods/management roles) (Palm 2017), whereas the number of women in low-paid cashier roles grew and the work became feminised due to the nature of the work offered (Scott 1994).

The new self-service model of retailing drove the re-organisation of retail work because of the expansion of the role the customer plays in the labour process (Gregory 1991). Whilst trade unions
initially had concerns over the move to a self-service model, they eventually agreed with its adoption as it was considered to ‘release workers from servitude’ (du Gay 2004). However, this endorsement was accepted conditionally, only if there was “…no undue replacement of men by women assistants” (Usdaw, 1955 in du Gay 2004), demonstrating the extent to which women were stigmatised and associated with occupational downgrading. This view was representative of how trade unions and their members viewed women at the time, since women were often systematically excluded from ‘men's work' to prevent pay and conditions from worsening (Wajcman 1991b). However, attempts to exclude women from working in the sector did little to prevent them from entering into these roles, as several barriers to entry were lifted around the same time. Also, changes in consumption patterns reflected a slight shift from women’s unpaid domestic work to paid work which meant that women provided both the supply and demand for the new, larger retail labour force (Penn 1995; Rubery 2015). By the 1970s, just under half of the British retail workforce were women (Robinson and Wallace 1974; Bowlby 2000), as were the majority working in the food retail sub-sector (Gregory 1991). Nevertheless, pay concerns were not entirely unfounded as retail fell from being one of the highest paying sectors at the start of the century (see Winstanley 1983) to one of the lowest in the 1970s (Robinson and Wallace 1974).

3.4.4 Job gendering moving into the ‘new’ retail-era

During the second half of the twentieth century, part-time work became increasingly popular among retailers and women with domestic responsibilities (Perrons 2000; Wrigley and Lowe 2002; Rubery 2015). Some argue that the use of EPOS and the move towards multi-skilling enabled the increased use of flexible working arrangements because retailers had more information about when staff were needed and had more flexibility regarding who was available to do the work (Gregory 1991; Price 2011; Howcroft and Taylor 2014). Furthermore, a shift in working-time regulation (e.g. the use of twilight shifts/other types of part-time work and the lengthening of opening hours) offered a new way to organise retail work. This meant that retailers could purchase labour as they purchased goods from manufacturers (on a just-in-time basis) (du Gay 1996), leading to the further commodification of the retail employment relationship. By using these increasingly flexible working arrangements, retailers could minimise working hours and schedule more staff during peak times (and less when it was quieter). This also had the effect of increasing the intensity of work by cutting the ‘downtime’ experienced by staff in less busy periods (Perrons 2000; Beynon et al. 2002). Also, it was becoming more common for certain benefits such as payments for unsociable hours, twilight and overtime pay to be cut or not included within newer contracts (Freathy and Sparks 2000). Finally, it is worth noting that scheduling more staff for a fewer number of hours was also beneficial for retailers as it allowed them to avoid paying national insurance contributions (Gregory 1991; Perrons 2000).

---

10 Retailers could employ part-time employees with less favourable employment rights until European legislation equalised this in the 1990s (Freathy and Sparks 2000).

11 Today, the situation remains the same. If an employee earns under £120 per week (or approx. 13.5 hours on minimum wage), the employer can avoid paying national insurance contributions, thus incentivising hiring more workers on shorter-hours contracts (e.g. splitting a 37.5-hour full-time job between two employees).
The changes to the retail employment relationship were not equally experienced throughout the workforce. The early divisions outlined remained within the store hierarchy into the end of the twentieth century, even when there was a demand for ‘female-specific skills’ in management positions and on the shop floor (Scott 1994). However, women were still not considered as being desirable for more senior roles or promotion opportunities. More recently, it has been found that retailers hire based on perceived personal characteristics rather than actual skill, which could account for some of this job gendering as it has implications for the value attributed to the role leading to gender, race, class and age discrimination (Nickson et al. 2016). Therefore, men continued to dominate full-time and managerial positions (Scott 1994) and women were confined to low-level sales assistant and checkout operator roles which had grown 38% and 93% respectively between 1979 and 1999 (Goos and Manning 2007). Job gendering is also prevalent in terms of the nature of the retail products and the activities involved in customer service (Pettinger 2005). For example, a study of US supermarkets showed that informal gender segregation could exist between workers with the same job description because of the nature of the tasks allocated to men and women (Tolich and Briar 1999). Consequently, the influx of women into the sector, accompanied by the growing use of technologies and the sub-division of tasks in-store, led to retail work increasingly being viewed as ‘low skilled’ (Scott 1994).

3.4.5 The intensification and extension of retail working-time

Retailers have continuously reconfigured working-time arrangements to retain profitability which has in part been facilitated by a relaxed legislative framework (Freathy and Sparks 2000; Hadjisolomou et al. 2017). As it has been discussed, it is both easy and attractive for retailers to use part-time contracts as not only are they cheaper, but they also offer lower levels of employment protection and are more desirable from a ‘productivity optimisation’ perspective (Baret et al. 1999; Freathy and Sparks 2000). However, more recently the use of short-hours contracts has further intensified the precarity which can be associated with more highly flexible part-time work. Although recent data on the prevalence of these short-hours contracts is limited, retail has the highest use of overtime pay by sector, suggesting that underemployment remains a problem (Low Pay Commission 2018). The effects of underemployment are most severely reflected in the large numbers of retail workers experiencing in-work poverty (Usdaw 2018a; Gardiner and Tomlinson 2019). Furthermore, the adverse effects of these types of contractual arrangements are likely to be disproportionately experienced by women in retail who are almost twice as likely than men to work 16-hours or less, further highlighting the structural inequalities which remain within the sector (Usdaw 2018b). Store management are also not exempt from the degradation of employment conditions associated with the extension of working-time (Rubery et al. 2005), even though they may have more autonomy over their arrangements (Freathy and Sparks 2000). There is a long-hours culture among managers which has extended the use of unpaid overtime throughout store management roles (Baret et al. 1999). It is worth noting that these practices can also prevent women

12 Although the effectiveness of the use of short-hours arrangements to improve productivity is called into question when considering the longer-term impacts on the workforce, as some argue that in the long-term productivity can be undermined by these arrangements (Rubery et al. 2016).
from progressing or entering higher grades because they are more likely to have constraints on their time outside of work which again has equalities implications (Usdaw 2019).

It is not uncommon for changes in working-time to be explained by employers in terms of the need to meet changing customer demands (Rubery et al. 2005; Freathy and Sparks 2000). In the UK, temporal boundaries within food retailing have been shaped by this move towards a 24/7 economy, first introduced by the 1994 Sunday Trading Act (Freathy and Sparks 1995), which was then extended to 24-hour supermarkets and the ‘always-on’ online offering. These extended opening times have also expanded when employees are expected to be available which can be problematic when existing flexible working practices are in place (referred to as ‘forced availability’) (Hadjisolomou et al. 2017; Heyes et al. 2018). More recently, some large food retailers have retracted their 24-hour opening times, while others have extended the use of self-service technologies to allow night-shift employees to be fulfilling online orders or stacking shelves outside of daytime hours (Usdaw 2019). This has allowed retailers to continue making sales, albeit with a reduced customer service offering, allocating the human labour to tasks that require dexterity and have not yet been automated.

3.4.6 Incremental technological change and the gendering of technical skills

Technological innovations in retail have been driven by the emergence of a few key technologies (e.g. lasers, EPOS terminals, the universal product codes (UPC) and store scanning systems), some of which have had labour-saving effects (Hopping 2000; Basker 2016). After the advent of the cash register and the mass movement of women into the industry, retail innovations remained relatively stagnant (Hopping 2000). However, as history has shown, the instances of women moving into the industry and technological innovation slowing are often linked because new machinery must pay for itself in labour costs saved. Thus, with an abundance of low-cost female labour, there is less incentive to invest (Cowan 1985a). It has also been argued that male-dominated managerial roles in retail have become increasingly ‘de-skilled’ because of processes of sociotechnical change and the re-organisation of the workforce (Wrigley and Lowe 2002). EPOS systems enabled the digitalisation of management processes through the improved flow of data and simplification of certain tasks (e.g. staff scheduling, stock ordering/management) (McLaughlin 1999; Freathy and Sparks 2000). Most notably, EPOS systems widened the possibility for lean retailing, such as the ability for retailers to buy produce using just-in-time methods that draw on data from these systems (Ogbonna and Wilkinson 1998). Meanwhile, other processes were also centralised, as locally transmitted data could more easily allow for decision-making to occur elsewhere (e.g. the centralisation of buying, advertising, pricing and merchandising decisions) (Wrigley and Lowe 2002). As a result, male-dominated store management roles were subject to ‘de-skilling’ effects, facilitated in part by the implementation of new technologies. However, Scott (1994) found that men largely remained within managerial positions because of their ‘technological capabilities’ which allowed them to reconstruct their occupational identity based on a perception of up-skilling.
In contrast, when cashier roles experienced similar ‘de-skilling’ effects as new technologies were implemented, the women working in these roles were considered to be increasingly low-skilled and technologically inept (Scott 1994; McLaughlin 1999). Further to Scott’s (1994) findings regarding cashier work, McLaughlin’s (1999) study of the ‘staff organiser’ (scheduling software) also exemplifies how women had been depicted as technologically incapable within supervisory roles. She found that often software scheduling decisions were overruled by female supervisors who believed they could organise employees more effectively based on their experience and tacit knowledge. Some may have viewed the changes to scheduling as being a skilful way to integrate the new technology into practice through the use of tacit knowledge. However, the research found that the decision to re-schedule staff was seen by male managers as an act of resistance by a group of ‘less technologically-minded’ women who lacked the know-how to use the new staff organiser correctly (McLaughlin 1999). Drawing on these various examples, it can be argued that how retail work is perceived and valued is shaped by gendered stereotypes rather than objective measures of skill (Cockburn 1983).

### 3.4.7 Self-service technologies and new retail models

In terms of retail technologies, self-technology technologies are perhaps the most visible labour-saving solution that is widely used in stores today. Around the millennium, the self-service model became associated with new, lower-cost technologies and innovations (Hopping 2000). Handheld scanners used by customers were one of the first self-service solutions requiring customers to scan their own goods while moving around the store. Sainsbury’s rolled handheld scanners out in 24 stores in the mid-1990s and there were initially high hopes for the technology which was coined a ‘futuristic fantasy’ (Arthur 1998). However, there was little evidence that these handhelds were widely adopted and thus the first self-checkout was introduced in the UK in 2003 as a labour-saving alternative. For food retailers, self-checkouts offered a way to reduce labour costs at a time when margins were shrinking (Basker 2016). In the first decade of self-service checkout use, the number of people employed as cashiers fell by 17%\(^\text{13}\) (ONS 2019a), yet since the late 1970s, the number of people working in these roles had almost doubled (Goos and Manning 2007). Much like when self-service shopping was introduced, some claimed the provision of these new self-service technologies could ‘free’ retail workers from repetitive tasks and offer more scope to re-introduce the more ‘highly skilled’ human tasks which had been lost in the interim (e.g. customer service provision) (Andrews 2014). However, as it stands in food retail it has been suggested that trends have veered towards de-skilling because of how the work has been re-organised (Price 2011), as opposed to fulfilling its up-skilling potential.

Amazon is often drawn upon as an example of a retail leader in store-based technologies. In their Amazon Go stores, all checkout processes are automated/digitalised, yet staff are still required to stock

\(^{13}\) This figure should not be read as a direct example of labour-replacement by technology because, during this period, there has also been a move away from workers being contracted to work only on the checkouts as part of a wider programme of multi-skilling.
shelves and assist customers (Statt 2018). Compared to traditional retailers\textsuperscript{14}, Amazon uses computer vision, data merged from multiple sensors and deep learning to power the sensors used in stores (Frost 2019). In 2021, Amazon had twenty-three Amazon Go stores open across the US and four in London (Kelion 2021). However, although these stores attracted a lot of media attention when they first opened, their expansion has not been as wide-reaching as expected, with the company far from the 3,000-store mark projected for 2021 (Peters 2019). It has been speculated that the reasons for this could be that it is becoming hard for them to find appropriate store locations given there is a need for high ceilings to operate the sensors/cameras or that they have opted to move towards larger stores which will require more time/investment (Peters 2019). Recently, Tesco has begun trialling a similar technology in partnership with Trigo in a London store (Butler 2021b), yet when similar trials have been carried out in the past, they have been abandoned on the premise that customers have ‘not been ready’ (BBC 2019). Thus, there is little evidence to suggest that the widespread adoption of these potentially transformational self-service approaches is imminent, despite some progress occurring on the periphery. As Carré et al. (2020) note, embedding cameras into smart shelves is incredibly costly. Therefore, the likelihood that this approach will be adopted by retailers who typically take the ‘low-road’ remains an important point to consider.

Aside from these store-based technologies, the expansion of online shopping in food retailing has also been slow because of the low margins afforded to these types of operations. Thus, in the UK, the retailer Ocado is considered somewhat of a disruptor with their online-only presence and use of robotics systems to fulfil orders out of hi-tech customer fulfilment centres (Vincent 2018). These fulfilment centres use a 3D web-like structure above which robotic carts pick and pack groceries to order. However, Ocado remains an outlier in British food because it positions itself primarily as a technology company rather than a food retailer. While most of its revenue still comes from food sales (Ocado 2021), its expansion into the technological solutions and logistics market both in the UK and internationally are likely to be the primary source of growth for the business in the longer term (attracting £1 billion worth of investment in 2020 alone) (Jolly 2020). Furthermore, while Ocado has sold their warehousing technologies to US, Canadian and Japanese retailers (Davey 2021), there is yet to be another British food retailer that has adopted such a sophisticated approach to picking and packing goods. There is also reason to suggest that the centralised distribution model used by Ocado may be unsuitable for less geographically dense countries which means in-store fulfilment may remain the preferred approach in these areas (Benner et al. 2020). Therefore, although it is evident that the retail technology landscape is evolving, it is necessary to avoid overstating these changes by considering how widely innovations in the sector have been adopted.

3.5 Coronavirus pandemic: The current context of food retail work

\textsuperscript{14} Most of whom still rely on the same barcode technology integrated into tills in the 1980s through which data are represented in a linear 1D form.
Exploring the historical context of retailing serves as a helpful reminder that new technology, on its own, cannot shape an entire industry and that its failure or success is shaped by a vast array of sociotechnical processes (see also Hopping 2000; Carden 2012). Bigger supermarkets, the move to out-of-town centres, changes in consumer behaviour, innovations in complementary and labour-saving technologies (internal and external to retail), in addition to changes to legislation, household and social norms have all shaped the experiences of the broader retail workforce and will continue to do so. However, it could be argued that the Coronavirus pandemic has brought on the most destabilising shift in food retail in recent years. In the UK, the government issued a national ‘stay-at-home’ order on 23rd March 2020, almost two months after the virus had first been identified in the country. On this date, the government banned all non-essential travel, activities and work that could not be done from home. Although it is too early to make any conclusive comments about the overall impact of the pandemic on the sector, the devastating spread of Coronavirus and all that occurred in its wake has driven significant changes in food retail thus far – none of which would have figured within future of work predictions in terms of accurately identifying what has driven it. Therefore, while the historical context serves as a helpful reminder that technology alone cannot shape an industry, the pandemic provides yet another example of just how unpredictable the trajectory of retail change can be.

Food retailing, perhaps only second to the health and social care services, received significant public attention due to the essential service that it provided during the pandemic. ‘Critical’ work was identified by the government to include those involved in the ‘sale and delivery’ of ‘food and other necessary goods’ (Gov 2021). The impact of the government’s recognition of food retail workers was significant, as pre-pandemic, ‘critical’ work typically only included those in health and emergency services. However, Public Health England (2020) found supermarkets to be the location where the virus was most likely to be transmitted, making them dangerous places for customers and staff members. Not only were retail workers providing a critical service, but they were also putting their health and their families’ health at risk. In view of thanking workers for their contribution at a national level, the ‘Clap for Key Workers’ was organised weekly between March and May 2020. While such acts went some way to positively recognise work in key sectors, the question remained as to whether the shift in the narrative surrounding the value of the work was enough to foster immediate, long-lasting change (Winton and Howcroft 2020).

Panic buying began in early March 2020 across the UK which signified an almost overnight shift in the demands of food retail work. For the months that followed, essential goods were stripped from shelves and long queues to get into supermarkets were widely reported in the news (Parveen 2020). There is an argument that the media plays a part in fuelling the panic buying of goods (Beery 2020), but demand had also surged due to the closure of other food outlets during this time (e.g. restaurants, bars, cafes and takeaways). To manage this new demand, retailers limited the number of goods available for each customer to purchase and enforced queueing systems outside of stores. These were the first of a string of Coronavirus-related measures adopted by supermarkets in response to government legislation and scientific advice. These measures included a 2-meter distancing rule, the
provision of hand-sanitiser and cleaning stations, increased cleaning in-stores, limits on the number of people shopping together and in the store at any one time, the implementation of Perspex screens, the use of contactless payments and remote delivery services for vulnerable customers and encouraging the use of self-service technologies. In July 2020, the wearing of masks in-store became mandatory for customers and staff, although many retailers had brought mask-wearing in voluntarily sometime before.

The surge in demand in stores and online, alongside high absence levels among employees who were self-isolating/shielding, prompted retailers to carry out mass hiring drives to fill roles in shelf-stacking, picking and packing, cleaning, security/marshalling and delivery driving. It is estimated that supermarkets hired over 136,000 employees during the pandemic, most of whom were employed temporarily (Belger 2020). Aside from the epidemiological threat, retailers were also faced with the market volatility caused by fluctuations in demand for products in-store (e.g. due to panic buying) and the supply of certain products/lack of availability (e.g. due to demand in other industries and other supply chain changes including Brexit). Furthermore, costs increased significantly for retailers because of the need to hire new employees, cover the salaries of those who were shielding and pay for the virus prevention measures. In the case of some retailers, receiving lower profits was worn as a badge of honour and a sign that they had done what was necessary to ‘feed the nation’ (Jolly and Smithers 2020). Few food retailers made use of the governments’ furlough scheme because of their continued ability to trade successfully throughout this period. For those who chose to accept government support in the form of business rates relief, there was a swift U-turn to hand back the government support in response to public pressures15 (see Pratley 2020; Osborne 2020).

3.5.1 Online retailing during the pandemic

Before the pandemic, the uptake of online shopping was low compared to the number of people doing their shopping in-store. However, during the pandemic, the demand for online delivery services soared, growing 25.5% in 2020 (compared to the 8.5% previously anticipated) (Butler 2020c). Retailers attempted to satisfy the new demand either by expanding their existing in-house delivery/logistics infrastructure or by outsourcing delivery to third-party delivery (TPDS) and third-party logistics (TPLS) services. Traditional retailers with in-house delivery operations could expand their remote services by hiring large numbers of staff to pick and pack goods in warehouses and in-stores (Belger 2020). Although these retailers were able to increase their online delivery slot capacity significantly (from 1.3 million to 2.2 million in April 2020 among the three largest retailers), there were considerable delivery delays and many customers reported issues with accessing online slots because of the surge in demand (Onita 2020). However, unlike the traditional retailers, Ocado was unable to expand its capacity and capture additional market share during this period. This was because they rely almost entirely on their robotics infrastructure to pick and pack produce, which means they would have to build new

---

15 Sainsbury’s received £230m in business rates relief and after announced the decision to pay £232m in dividends and cut 3,500 jobs, only to make a U-turn when the media reported these decisions unfavourably (Butler 2020b).
warehouses from scratch if their capacity were to expand significantly (Ocado 2020). Consequently, Ocado had to limit new sign-ups throughout the pandemic and were only able to prioritise existing customers.

Home delivery had previously lacked appeal for some retailers (especially discounters) because of the low margins it offered. Some used TDPS and TPLS (such as Deliveroo, UberEATs and Amazon) to avoid these expansion costs before the pandemic had begun. The cost of adopting this approach may be lower because the work is outsourced to ‘bogus’ self-employed drivers who deliver the produce, allowing the retailer to avoid changing the infrastructure in stores (Winton 2021). Therefore, the use of third-party partnerships became popular during the pandemic as they allowed retailers to satisfy the surge in demand for online shopping while keeping costs low (this analysis is returned to in-depth in Chapter 5). However, whether this growth is likely to be sustained post-pandemic is less certain. By July 2021, there was already evidence to suggest that the demand for online shopping more widely had fallen somewhat since the peak of the crisis and lockdown period (Butler 2021c). Thus, despite the broader ‘technological acceleration’ rhetoric which was, in part, driven by the move towards online shopping during the pandemic, there is a need to be somewhat cautious when considering the pandemic’s impact in the longer term.

3.5.2 Looking forward post-pandemic

The short-term effects of the pandemic on food retailing have been well documented, yet the long-term effects remain unknown. Media reports have been speculating about an impending economic downturn that could be looming post-pandemic and what impact this is likely to have on shrinking household budgets and demand for grocery goods (Butler 2020a). However, there is some scope to suggest that increasing costs and lower margins from previous years may influence future investment decisions. Previous crises have led to intensified price wars and a shift in demand towards discounters (Rigby 2009). It has also been documented that previous crises have had a disproportionate impact on women and their financial security (Rubery and Rafferty 2014). Thus, concerns remain regarding the equalities impact that the pandemic and any critics/economic downturn might have. The longer-term impacts will likely depend on the extent of the economic unravelling that occurs post-pandemic and how it is managed by policymakers, as past crises have shown. Therefore, while the immediate effects of the pandemic and how it has shaped food retail work is analysed in-depth in Chapters 5 and 6, it will be some time before long-term effects become clear.

3.6 Contemporary retail ‘strategy’

Presumably, the threat of a global pandemic was not accounted for within retailers’ five-year strategic plans. With this in mind, the critical theoretical approach to employers’ ‘strategies’ has become especially relevant because of how quickly retailing was reconfigured in order to respond to the new
demands brought on by the crisis. The context of food retailing before and during the pandemic is drawn on to support the argument made in the previous chapter that the linear path that future of work commentators rely on in support of their predictions needs to be considered. As this chapter has aimed to show, employers’ decision-making processes are shaped by the wider context within which they are embedded. However, it is also worth noting that often there is an observable disjuncture between different types of strategy (e.g. labour versus product) (Carré and Tilly 2017). These observations are supported by Hyman’s (1987) remark that even if a sequence of long-term planned objectives, or a ‘strategy’, exists it is unlikely to span across all business objectives (e.g. markets, production, technology). While it would be naïve to assume that food retailers are simply muddling through16, there is some scope to suggest that contradictory approaches to the management of labour/product/technology are often adopted on the shop floor (Carré and Tilly 2017). Despite this, it is commonly assumed that labour and technology strategies are in alignment, prompting the conclusion that investment in digital and automation will cause the number of retail jobs to fall and an increased level of investment for those that remain (see British Retail Consortium 2016a). However, there is little evidence to show that retail jobs are improving in quality, despite investment in technology increasing year-on-year according to the sector commentary (Skeldon 2021). Therefore, a high/low road labour strategy might not mirror the product/service strategy, despite what some of the assumptions made in the mainstream commentary may lead one to believe.

3.6.1 Modelling potential futures in retailing

To investigate further how employers’ decision-making processes align with the wider future of retail debate, it is useful to look to The Fabian Society report on the future of retailing in the UK. This report examines the current technological, economic, social and historical context to outline how productivity and pay within the sector could be improved in relation the ongoing changes in the sector (Tait 2017). The report sets out ten policy recommendations, calling on the UK government to reconsider the future of retailing. It acknowledges that the current composition of the sector is not fit for purpose and that more needs to be done in terms of encouraging innovation and disruption to established monopolies (Tait 2017, p.29). The recommendations outlined were formed based on analysis surrounding three emerging models also presented within the report. These models do not encompass specific strategies per se. However, they do capture how retailers could be categorised in terms of their approach to managing labour, technology and the product offering, as well as how they position themselves within the market (e.g. as innovators, dominant firms, followers, niche/service providers). Figure 6 outlines the three models identified within the report: ‘automating to efficiency’, ‘competing on connectivity’ and ‘squeezing the cost base’. The first describes a high-road approach to technological change; the second, a low-road approach to technological change and the management of labour and the third, a high-road approach to technological change and labour organisation. These

---

16 As it has been discussed in Section 3.4.2 concerning the aggressive supply-chain and land acquisition strategies (Duke 1998; Sparks et al. 2008; Wood and McCarthy 2014).
models are later used in the empirical study as a heuristic device for discussing retailers’ strategies as a basis from which overarching trends can be identified. Thus, rather than providing a basis for critique, the models are included within this research as benchmarks from which the retailers decision-making processes and their outcomes could be assessed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Automating to efficiency</th>
<th>Competing on connectivity</th>
<th>Squeezing the cost base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labour costs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Invest in labour for longer-term gains</strong> (Usdaw 2019)</td>
<td><strong>Min. costs via control measures</strong> (Geppert et al. 2015; Geppert and Pastuh 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min. costs via productivity gains (Bowlby 2000; Solon 2018)</td>
<td><strong>Sustained level of hours to improve service offering</strong> (Tait 2017)</td>
<td><strong>Reduced no. of labour hrs in-store</strong> (Autor 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced no. of labour hrs in-store (Frey and Osborne 2017)</td>
<td><strong>Investments in technology</strong> (British Retail Consortium 2016a; Jolly 2020)</td>
<td><strong>Intensification of labour, restructuring/multi-skilling</strong> (Marchington and Harrison 1991; Grimshaw et al. 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Productivity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Improvements in labour (via better pay and training) and use of tech</strong> (Andrews 2014; Wallace-Stevens and Lockey 2019)</td>
<td><strong>Reduced no. of labour hrs in-store</strong> (Frey and Osborne 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-tech approach (online-focused) (Vincent 2018)</td>
<td>Where it can improve service (Grimsey 2018)</td>
<td>Low-tech approach (Moody 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Improvements in labour (via better pay and training) and use of tech</strong> (Andrews 2014; Wallace-Stevens and Lockey 2019)</td>
<td><strong>Low price (discounter)</strong> (Solon 2018; Rice 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pricing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Higher price</strong> (Tait 2017)</td>
<td><strong>Low price (discounter)</strong> (Solon 2018; Rice 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low to medium price (dynamic) (Bhattacharyya 2019)</td>
<td><strong>High quality personalised service</strong> (experience-focused) (Ogbonna 1989; Grimsey 2018)</td>
<td><strong>Low service</strong> (Wrigley 1994; Glotz 2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service</strong></td>
<td><strong>High-quality personalised service</strong> (experience-focused) (Ogbonna 1989; Grimsey 2018)</td>
<td><strong>Low price (discounter)</strong> (Solon 2018; Rice 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-speed service (convenience-focused) (Statt 2018; Nazir 2020)</td>
<td><strong>Low service</strong> (Wrigley 1994; Glotz 2020)</td>
<td><strong>Low price (discounter)</strong> (Solon 2018; Rice 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market Positioning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Innovators, product providers, disruptors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dominant firms, followers, product providers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-food examples</strong></td>
<td><strong>Niche, innovators, service providers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sports Direct</strong> (Tait 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazon (Tait 2017)</td>
<td>IKEA, Apple Stores (Tait 2017)</td>
<td><strong>Sports Direct</strong> (Tait 2017)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6 Potential models for retail (Tait 2017)*

### 3.7 Conclusion

As noted in the theoretical framework, the broader socio-political and economic context is necessary to draw upon in research adopting an SST approach to help understand how change occurs holistically. This framework will thus be applied to the discussion surrounding the empirical case studies that follow. The discussion within this chapter has attempted to bring together literature from a range of disciplines to form a political economy of food retailing. The current social and political institutions that shape the nature of work in the UK today have been outlined to indicate the broader challenges facing workers and the extent to which retail work reflects these contemporary concerns. In keeping with the approach outlined in the framework, the changes to food retailing since the post-war period were examined to provide the necessary context for the empirical analysis which follows. First, changes in the food retail product market and the move towards supermarket retailing were discussed. Then the advent of women’s work in the sector was explored, linked to broader labour-market and household
trends and to the changing contractual offering/working time arrangements within the sector. The existing and emerging models of technological innovation were also identified and their role in shaping the nature of work on offer has been highlighted. In relation to the most recent contextual shift, the devastating effects of the pandemic and the responses of retailers, employees, the general public and the government. In the final section, a model for framing the discussion surrounding food retailers’ decision-making processes within these changing contexts was presented (returned to in Chapter 5). If the mainstream future of work predictions are accurate, one would expect to observe the ‘automating to efficiency’ model becoming the dominant model within the sector. However, this idea that a universal strategy will shape the future of food retailing is subject to critical theoretical and empirical scrutiny later in the thesis.

The British Retail Consortium (2016a) has predicted that there will be ‘fewer but better’ jobs within the sector by 2025. However, others have noted that the downward pressure on labour costs in recent years has created new forms of precariousness in retail which is impacting pay, the organisation of working-time and the structural inequalities that persist with the sector (see Tait 2017; Usdaw 2018b; Wallace-Stephens and Lockey 2019; Gardiner and Tomlinson 2019; Butler and Wood 2020). Furthermore, the demands of the pandemic have called to attention the lack of basic guarantees given to food retail workers (ILO 2020). Thus, evidence suggests that the quantity and the quality of the jobs that remain within the sector will likely become a growing concern if changes to the organisation of work are not made. To investigate these issues further, there is clear need to critically analyse the empirical evidence to understand how sociotechnical change is currently shaping work. Through adopting an SST approach, the deterministic assumptions that dictate much of the ‘future of retail’ narrative are avoided and discussions surrounding new technologies are considered in conjunction with the wider social structures in which they are embedded. Therefore, the next chapter draws on SST to inform the chosen methodology and outlines how this shaped the approach taken to the empirical data collection and analysis that follows.
4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The objective of this research is to apply the SST approach to demonstrate how sociotechnical change and the broader context are shaping the nature of work in food retailing. This objective is investigated in two parts: first, by analysing how processes of sociotechnical change are shaping work in the food retail sector in relation to employers’ decision-making processes and second, by understanding the extent to which the pandemic brought about a revaluing of labour in the sector. So that these objectives could be met, a case study approach was adopted in order to help investigate how retail work is changing within the broader sociotechnical context, by applying the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2. The aim of using the methods discussed within this chapter was to generate empirical data which could be used to conduct a much-needed (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011) in-depth sectoral case study of food retailing in the UK. The practical methods chosen to achieve these research objectives are philosophically and theoretically (see framework in Chapter 2) informed and are outlined in the following discussion.

This chapter begins by exploring the debates on the philosophy of social science within which the research is embedded. Then the ontological positioning of the research is discussed in relation to the wider debate between those with opposing perceptions of reality, followed by its epistemological positioning. The use of SST as the theoretical lens is drawn upon to justify why interpretivism is the chosen epistemological positioning which also informs how issues regarding the root of human nature should be considered. The research philosophy is then linked to its practical implications and how it has shaped the research design. The research process is then outlined, including issues regarding access, the research setting and the chosen sampling methods. Before moving onto the data collection process, a detailed summary of the participant characteristics and demographics is also given. The interview process and use of documents are both discussed in terms of how the data was collected (using semi-structured interviews and a systematic newspaper search) and the analytical tools that were used. Finally, the critically reflexive approach that has been adopted is discussed in-depth, drawing most notably on the work of Martinez-Dy (2015) and England (1994). To conclude, the discussion summarises some of the initial research limitations before the discussion can move on to the empirical chapters.

4.2 Philosophical approach

Research philosophies are wide-ranging and can exist at different levels of abstraction. Thus the first part of this chapter discusses the philosophical approach to the methodology, which ultimately informs the research design and analysis. The nature of social science is briefly outlined and this research is positioned with regard to its ontology and epistemology. It is acknowledged that the theoretical lens through which the research is viewed plays a significant role in the shaping of the
philosophical methodology. Therefore, the following discussion takes this as its starting point. Then issues related to human nature and how these are linked to the practical methods are finally addressed.

4.2.1 Nature of social science

The assumptions that underpin the nature of social science are a useful starting point for exploring research philosophies. Burrell and Morgan’s (1967) approach to categorising these assumptions is widely drawn upon in organisational research as it provides an ‘intellectual map’ on which researchers can position their studies. Burrell and Morgan (1967) identify four dichotomised categories based on subjective/objective perceptions of reality, the root of knowledge, human nature and how it should be investigated (see Figure 7). The subjective view sees reality as something which exists only in our heads, whereas the objective view sees reality as something waiting to be discovered. For example, in research on organisations, a subjectivist considers the organisation to be a socially constructed artefact that can be understood only from the viewpoint of those involved with its activities. In contrast, an objectivist would believe that there is an external viewpoint from which the organisation can be studied and knowledge about it can be extracted (Bryman and Bell 2011). This explanation may be guilty of a partial oversimplification, as some researchers may claim to take a subjectivist approach to ontology but an objectivist approach to epistemology (or vice versa). Thus the following discussion will also aim to cover some of these complexities.

![Figure 7 Scheme for analysing assumptions about social science (Burrell and Morgan 1979)](image)

Burrell and Morgan (1967) also present a second dichotomy that describes assumptions about society (‘the sociology of regulation’ and the ‘sociology of radical change’). The difference between the regulation and radical research lies in its sociology as described by Bryman and Bell (2011, p.24). When combined with the subjectivity/objectivity dimensions, a four-paradigm matrix is formed (see Figure 8). It is suggested that all social science research falls within one of the four paradigms (see x on Figure 8 for approximate positioning of this research). Although multi-paradigm research is not without its
problems, some believe it can produce diverse outcomes and that there is no one best way to investigate a research problem (see Hassard 1991; Marchington 1996). Therefore, it is suggested that a multi-paradigm approach allows for different levels of analysis, but it can also enrich the basis from which methods are critiqued and findings are re-interpreted (Hassard 1991). Although this project does not adopt a multi-paradigm approach, some reflection is needed on whether it neatly falls within the boundaries of a single paradigm.

The Sociology of Radical Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjectivity</th>
<th>Objectivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radical Humanist</td>
<td>Radical Structuralist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreative</td>
<td>Functionalist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8 Four paradigms for analysing social theory (Burrell and Morgan 1979)

4.2.2 Ontological issues and current debate

The issue of ontology considers whether ‘reality’ is of an objective nature, given ‘out there’ in the world (realism) or a subjective nature, given as a product of one’s mind (nominalism) (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Burrell and Morgan 1967). However, in social sciences, ontology has been largely overlooked in favour of turning to epistemology to inform methodological concerns. Critical realists have replaced a renewed focus on ontology, arguing that an objective, realist ontology and subjective epistemology could be combined to carve a middle ground between positivism and social constructivism/post-modernism (McCall 2005). Thus, its appeal has been derived from its answerability to both extremes (McLachlan and Garcia 2015). However, Brown (2014) argues that CR is ‘seductive’ to anyone who is not an extreme positivist or social constructivist. The term ‘critical’ also reinforces this appeal as it can be a “…beguiling tagline due to its suitably radical undertones” (McLachlan and Garcia 2015, p.198). Therefore, it is easy to see how a researcher may find CR hard to resist, particularly at the doctoral level.17 (see McLachlan and Garcia 2015).

17 It is argued that a change in epistemology is a move all too common among doctoral researchers and is what Shotter (1999, p.372) calls ‘after-the-fact’ justification.
Considerable thought was put into whether CR would be an appropriate approach to inform this research because it appears to allow for both subjectivity where needed and the belief that there is a truth/reality which can give the research greater meaning. However, it became clear that there were issues regarding the compatibility between CR and SST. While it remains disputed, some argue that CR is incompatible with Marxist, or class-based, theories because of the stratification of social structures and separation that CR places between the organisation and the wider capitalist system in terms of levels of analysis (Brown 2014). Thus, CR could be deemed incompatible with the works of some social shaping theorists (e.g. Noble). The same critique also applies to feminist theories, despite the use of CR in intersectional research. Benton (2011, p.215) highlights the work of Harding (1999) and Peter (2003) and suggests that CR fails to capture the mutual reinforcement and inextricable link between the wider patriarchal/capitalist systems that oppress women and create inequality with lower-level experiences. The link between the individuals’ experience and capitalism/patriarchy is central to the thesis of socialist feminist SST researchers such as Cockburn and Wajcman which informs the framing of this study. The social structures that exist within the capitalist system and how they shape the nature of work are central to this thesis. Therefore, a subjective ontology was retained.

4.2.3 Epistemological positioning

Epistemology concerns the root of knowledge and whether it takes on objective (positivism) or subjective (anti-positivism/interpretivism) shape. A positivist may view knowledge as something that can be acquired and that it is hard, real and capable of being transmitted in tangible form (Burrell and Morgan 1967, p.1). In contrast, anti-positivists or interpretivists view knowledge as being individually experienced and as softer, spiritual or even transcendental by nature (ibid.). Some may disagree with the description of interpretivism as ‘soft’. However, it is possible to see how it might be viewed in this way when being compared to positivism which commands that research is ‘value-free’, derives explanations from testable hypotheses and creates the perception of generating data which is deemed more ‘valid’, ‘reliable’ or ‘robust’ (Bryman and Bell 2011). Positivists reject interpretivism on the grounds that it would not produce robust data, as not only is it immeasurable research, it is ‘contaminated’ by bias (in the form of human judgement, opinions, perceptions, experiences and personal reflection) (England 1994). In contrast, interpretivism finds greater importance in the empathetic understanding of human action rather than seeking to identify and explain the forces that are deemed to act on it (Bryman and Bell 2011, p.16).

Matters of human nature are grouped with ontology, whereas methodological considerations are grouped with epistemology (Morgan and Smircich 1980). As a result, the ideographic approach to social science (see Figure 7) emphasises the subjective accounts generated by ‘getting inside’ the phenomena being studied and thus would be suited to a subjective epistemology (Burrell and Morgan 1967). This approach would thus command an immersive exploration (as opposed to acquisition) of knowledge, hence the strong tradition of qualitative studies within this paradigm. In contrast, quantitative research is most commonly associated with nomothetic theory. Nomothetic theory demands research
that is characteristically ‘arms-length’ and can be used to uncover ‘reality’ through ‘scientific rigour’ commanded by an objective epistemology (Burrell and Morgan 1967). As Hassard (1991) and Cunliffe (2011) have argued, neither approach is mutually exclusive. In fact, as mentioned before, they suggest that more heterodoxy is needed between the approaches as subjective/objective assumptions tend to dictate the typical characteristics of the research process at either end of the dichotomy. A tradition of fierce critique of either side has further widened this gap and has perhaps augmented the reluctance of researchers to make a paradigmatical leap.

The time-old critique that qualitative research is inadequate in its robustness is strongly refuted by Morgan and Smircich (1980) in their paper *The Case for Qualitative Research*. While immeasurability and contamination of the research would be considered a critique to some, others believe that when researching the ‘social’ it becomes the core of the research process itself and thus cannot be removed (Morgan and Smircich 1980). Therefore, many believe that it is not possible to ‘asocialise’ social science research methods. However, although the diversification and strengthening of the understanding of interpretivist research methods in social science have broadened its use, positivist notions of reliability and validity are still consistently used to evaluate qualitative analysis in certain areas (Cassell and Symon 2004). As an alternative to positivist measure, Yardley (2000, p.219) suggests that qualitative research should be evaluated by the following dimensions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitivity to context</th>
<th>Theoretical; relevant literature; sociocultural setting; ethical issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment and rigour</td>
<td>In-depth engagement with topic; breadth of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency and coherence</td>
<td>Clarity of description; transparent methods; reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact and importance</td>
<td>Theoretical (enriching understanding); sociocultural (or empirical)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9 Characteristics of (good) quality qualitative research (Yardley 2000)*

The dimensions presented in Figure 9 are discussed in relation to the wider research process outlined with this chapter and will be referred to throughout with regards to the steps taken to ensure the research is of the highest possible quality.

### 4.2.4 Research philosophy of an SST approach

Methodologically speaking, this research was informed by the epistemology and ontology addressed so far in this section. Nevertheless, the question of human nature is also particularly relevant when outlining the philosophical underpinnings of the SST lens. As discussed in Chapter 2, SST was first developed as a critique of technological determinism, categorised as an objectivist approach (see Figure 10). ‘Hard’ or ‘true’ technological determinism adheres to the belief that technological change occurs along a fixed path pre-determined by technology (Bimber 1990). However, social shaping theorists believe that technology shapes, and is shaped by, social processes, structures and contexts...
Central to SST is the concept that there are ‘choices’ to be made regarding the design, development and use of artefacts and systems depending upon the sociotechnical context, making it epistemologically compatible with social constructivism (Williams and Edge 1996). Furthermore, given the radical underpinnings of the first edition of *The Social Shaping of Technology* and the more localised approach taken in the second, it is possible to suggest that SST research could fall in either the interpretivist or radical humanist paradigms. Nevertheless, as a ‘broad church’ of theories (Williams and Edge 1996), the methodological approach adopted is likely to differ between researchers. However, although the subjective approach to human nature adopted in SST is thus reflected in this research, it must be noted that the belief that human nature is *purely* subjective (or voluntarist) would be more in keeping with a radical social constructivist approach rather than SST – thus reiterating the importance of viewing these theories along a continuum (see Figure 10).

In keeping with the philosophical underpinnings that inform SST, the approach adopted within this project draws on a range of qualitative research methods. While the use of qualitative methods is reflective of the work of many social shaping theorists, some have chosen to use mixed methods approaches that also draw on quantitative data. For example, Cockburn and Ormrod’s (1993) study of the microwave included the use of a wide range of methods and materials, ranging from participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photographic evidence, company documents, in addition to survey data. The methods used in this study were exhaustive and collected a range of different types of data. The philosophical approach which they adopted shaped their research objectives, which was to tell the story that they were able to capture, rather than provide a definitive account of the phenomenon in question (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993, p.4), thus aligning it to an interpretivist philosophy, despite the use of quantitative data. This project takes inspiration from this approach and recognises that the data collected, and analysis that follows, may contribute a unique perspective to the broader narrative surrounding sociotechnical change.

### 4.3 Research design

The reasons for taking an interpretivist approach have been explained, yet it is useful first to give an overview of what this means for the practical methodology before discussing the steps in more depth (see Figure 11). Qualitative research methods were deployed using an inductive and iterative process to fulfil the aims of understanding how sociotechnical change and the broader context are shaping food retail work. A qualitative approach was chosen to fulfil these aims because of the subjectivist assumptions made meaning there is an implied belief that the only way to understand more about the chosen phenomena from the perspective of the person who experiences it (Lee 1992).
is done by socially interacting with them (e.g. through interviews, observation, focus groups). Furthermore, the choice to use an inductive approach is informed by the anti-positivist epistemology, whereby observations and findings produce theory (as opposed to the hypothesis-testing deductive approach favoured by positivists) (Bryman and Bell 2011). However, some also argue that deduction is also possible in anti-positivist research as it can link an understanding of existing theory to the focus of the empirical investigation (Anderson 2013). Moving between the two is a process of iteration and was adopted within this research as it allows for movement between data and theory (Bryman and Bell 2011).

Interviews and documentary analysis were chosen as the most appropriate forms of data collection for addressing the research objective. Much of the current research that feeds into the future of work debate is based on quantitative modelling that views skills and, more broadly the nature of work and sociotechnical (or technological) change, as objective and quantifiable concepts. In contrast, this research chose to use semi-structured interviews. This allows respondents to construct their own subjective realities, instead of relying on ‘objective’ measures of the experience of work which are restricted by pre-defined boundaries/categorisations. Therefore, the purpose of choosing interviews is so that the participants experiences and beliefs surrounding certain topics can be explored, giving a
‘deeper’ understanding of social phenomena for this reason (Gill et al. 2008). Furthermore, combining interviews with extensive documentary analysis contributed towards gathering a wider array of narratives. With this outline in mind, the following section will discuss the steps in-depth to ensure the process is transparent at each stage (Yardley 2000) (see Figure 11 for overview).

4.3.1 Case study research and access

This research aimed to explore processes of sociotechnical change within food retail work in the UK by adopting a case study approach. The decision was made to conduct three cases across retailers in order to capture the different store formats which would be most reflective of the sub-sector as a whole (one traditional medium to large mid-range supermarket retailers, a convenience retailer and a discount retailer). Hartley (2012, p.344) suggests that one of the defining characteristics of the case study approach is that the aim is to “…understand how [organisational] behaviour and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context”. The appropriateness of this approach for research adopting an SST lens is evident, as the context in which the case study is embedded is also key from an SST perspective as the theoretical framework showed. Yardley (2000) also identifies sensitivity to context as central to carrying out research to a high standard. Furthermore, a case study approach was adopted because it allows for a combination of methods and for researchers to be sensitive to opportunities throughout the data collection process (Hartley 2012). Hartley (2012) also acknowledges that data collection does not occur along a linear trajectory and that an approach that recognises this by being flexible is necessary (hence the use of iteration).

In particular, a flexible approach may be necessary to respond to challenges when trying to negotiate access. Within this project, the level of access granted across the three cases varied. When access was granted, it was typically on the basis that participants and their employing organisations would remain anonymous (see Figure 12 for overview). Therefore, certain details had to be withheld in the descriptions of the respective retailers and in the presentation of the results thereafter. In the case of Retailer A, management interviews were carried out in the head office and other evidence was drawn on to build the case from interviews with union officials and newspaper analysis. In the case of Retailer B, store management and employee interviews were carried out in store, supplemented with interviews with union officials and the newspaper analysis. In the case of Retailer C, no access was granted which meant that data collection had to be carried out via union officials, ex-employees and newspaper articles.

Retailer A is a food retailer that operates primarily out of small to medium-size stores. It is UK-based and has a long history of convenience retailing. During the fieldwork, the head offices of Retailer A were visited on two different occasions. A gatekeeper (LD_1a) was contacted through LinkedIn and they agreed to organise a series of interviews to take place on the same day with colleagues in HR and operations. In this case, the challenge with access came when attempts were made to set up interviews in stores with shop floor colleagues. It was suggested by the gatekeeper that, because of the small size
of the stores, it would be difficult to interview people during their shifts or on breaks. In one conversation, the gatekeeper also suggested that they were struggling to think of an ‘appropriate’ store manager to contact. This reluctant approach differed significantly from their willingness to organise interviews among head office colleagues, even though they regularly worked with store managers. Eventually, one area manager was interviewed but this was after extensive searches and failed attempts at contacting store managers via Twitter/LinkedIn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Store size</th>
<th>Retailer visits</th>
<th>No. Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Small-to-medium size (Traditional/Convenience)</td>
<td>Head office, floor (informal)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Medium to large (Traditional)</td>
<td>Back-office/floor (formal tour)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer C</td>
<td>Medium (Discounter)</td>
<td>Floor (informal)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12 Overview of anonymised case studies

Retailer B is a food retailer operating primarily out of traditional format medium to large-size supermarkets. They are also UK-based and have a small number of convenience stores, operating out of petrol stations and city-centre locations. Employees working at the head office of Retailer B in various roles ranging from operations to human resources to technology management were contacted, first by sending letters, then via LinkedIn and Twitter. However, none of these attempts had any success. Eventually, access was secured to a store in the North-West of England via a regional HR manager (HR_1b) through LinkedIn. This store was a large traditional format supermarket employing around 210 staff. It was situated on a small retail park and had a café, several food counters (including a butcher, fishmonger and bakery), a clothing concession, a dry-cleaning service, a travel agent and a petrol station on-site. As well as the interviews, the regional HR manager did a tour around the shop floor and introductions were made to staff. The store manager arranged the remaining interviews in this store. They allowed two customer assistants to be interviewed during work time and the rest of the respondents in this store were managers who were interviewed after their shifts had finished. It is also important to note that all of the interviews were conducted in the store managers’ office which was somewhat problematic because there were frequent interruptions for them during the interviews. While this will have inevitably impacted the data collected, I was conscious to avoid jeopardising the access by suggesting that it was inappropriate for the store manager to come in during the discussion.

Another Retailer B store in the North-West was visited the week before lockdown (12th March 2020) and one interview was conducted. Immediately after, the interview process was put on hold for some time. During the lockdown, four follow-up interviews were carried out over the phone with Retailer

---

18 One senior technology manager expressed some interest in the project yet became suspicious about the ‘intentions’ of the project after an initial phone call and was keen reiterate that they were not trying to replace jobs with robots. Thus, after running the participant information paperwork via their PR team, this exchange went cold.
B store managers and several interviews were carried out with customer assistants working in a third store. The locations of the three stores varied considerably. The first was in a suburban out-of-town retail park in a predominately white, working-class area with a large elderly population. The second was located in a white, middle-class borough within the greater metropolitan area. The third was located in an ethnically diverse inner-city borough, located between (upper) middle and working-class areas. This range of locations was useful to corroborate the differences in experience across stores, yet an equal distribution of interviews across the three stores would have been preferred.

Retailer C is a ‘hard discounter’ that typically operates out of medium-sized stores. Although it is based in Europe, it also has a head office in the UK. Frequent attempts were made to contact people working at head office at this organisation via LinkedIn and Twitter, but no replies were received. Similar attempts were made to contact people working in stores, but there was also a lack of responses. This experience echoed Geppert and Pastuh’s (2017, p.258) claims that “…hard discounters are known for having highly secretive communication approaches…” acknowledging “…their efforts to hinder empirical research on managerial control, work and employment”. Although no access was secured, it was possible to do research using the newspaper analysis, interviews with union officials who had represented Retailer C members (and attempted to organise in these stores) and two of the respondents (SM_2b and CA_1b) who had worked at Retailer C in their previous roles. Both of these respondents chose to draw comparisons between their work at Retailer B and C within the interviews and provided data which could help develop this case.

The cases were built by speaking to people who worked directly for the retailers and through interviews with union officials who work closely with employees in this sector. Union D is a British trade union that has collective bargaining agreements with several major UK food retailers, including Retailers A and B. At first, attempts were made to access retailers via the union. However, after an initial meeting, it was suggested that it was the unions’ responsibility to ‘protect’ their members from too many research requests. Therefore, they declined to discuss the project in any more depth and advised other employees against taking part in the research. Despite this, I continued to contact officials directly through Twitter which proved to be more effective and led to several interviews. These discussions covered issues related to work in the sector overall. However, many also had direct experience working with Retailers A/B/C and their employees, so they were encouraged to draw upon specific examples where possible to build these cases further. During the lockdown, follow-up interviews were also carried out with union officials which added one of the two longitudinal elements to the dataset. Finally, several additional interviews were also carried out with people from other organisations/retailers. While these did not fit into the cases per se they did contribute to the overall understanding of how the sector was organised and what the challenges were that workers faced more broadly.

---

19 Even when informal conversations were had between myself and staff in my local store, I felt a sense that the staff were not happy speaking about their work when I had asked questions about their day. Although this is anecdotal it is hard to ignore this feeling as a researcher.

20 SM_2b as a store manager for 14-years and CA_1b as a customer assistant for 2-years.
4.3.2 Sampling process and criteria

Although securing access was challenging, considerations also had to be made regarding the sampling method adopted. Bryman and Bell (2011) identify three main types of non-probability sampling: quota, snowballing and convenience. In keeping with interpretivism, non-probability sampling was chosen for this research. The aim was not to create generalisable results but rather to capture in-depth accounts of individuals’ perceptions of the changing nature of the sector and their experiences within the given context. In the interest of transparency, convenience sampling was used as it allows participants to be chosen ‘by virtue of their accessibility’ (Bryman and Bell 2011). Despite its name, this method of sampling participants and negotiating access was by no means ‘convenient’ in terms of its practical reality. To describe it as such would inaccurately represent the time and effort it took to get the research started. Although accessibility is important, the sampling also method needed to be purposeful (Patton 2002). Purposeful sampling is used on the basis that potential respondents were “…knowledgeable of a particular subject and are identified by virtue of their specific knowledge” (Döringer 2020, p.1). When respondents were successfully contacted, snowballing was also used when colleagues were introduced informally or through gatekeepers setting up interviews on my behalf (Bryman and Bell 2011). Thus, while the inclusion criteria were broad21 many of those included within the research were considered retail ‘experts’. In particular, this included retail managers and trade union officials who understood the higher-level organisation of the respective organisation/retail sector. However, although these managers and officials are considered ‘experts’ in their respective areas, customer assistants should be considered the real ‘experts’ when it came to the day-to-day workings on the shop floor.

The ‘experts’ who were interviewed often took a cautionary approach to their involvement in the research and how open they were. In spite of this, interviews with store managers were typically the easiest to organise (compared to interviews with customer assistants) for several reasons. Firstly, it was evident that some managers agreed to be interviewed on the basis that they could closely control the information which was being shared. Secondly, although anonymity was offered, some customer assistants suggested that their colleagues would be less inclined to take part in the research because of the fear of being ‘found out’. Lastly, in the age of social media, it is common practice for individuals to be active on Twitter (and also LinkedIn) in a ‘professional’ capacity, often including their organisation/job role in their biography. In the case of Retailer A, store managers had a strong Twitter presence which was encouraged by management. This online presence made it much easier to identify these potential participants, whereas it was rare for customer assistants to advertise their employer on their personal (and often private) social media accounts, making them harder to identify. I also interviewed four University students who worked in Retailer B on low-hours contracts during the

---

21 Specifying that respondents only needed to: (1) be currently employed by a food retailer and/or a trade union (organising food retail workers); (2) work in-store and/or in a human resources/retail operational role.
pandemic. At first, a cautionary approach was taken towards including students in the research based on the vague assumptions that their experience may vary significantly from other more 'typical' workers. However, on further reflection, it was clear that this group of workers play a significant role within the sector and could be considered 'experts' in navigating the atypical retail working experience. Therefore, it would be wrong to dismiss their experiences working on the shop floor as they also provide a valuable contribution to the narrative surrounding supermarket work.

4.3.3 Participant characteristics and demographics

In total, thirty-seven interviews were carried out with twenty-nine individual participants (see Appendix 1), each of which was assigned a unique identifier code to preserve their anonymity (see Figure 13). A slightly larger proportion of the participants identified as female. Thus the sample is relatively representative of the sector as a whole based on gender (ONS 2021d). In terms of ethnicity, the participants included within the research (see Figure 14) were broadly representative of the population in the North-West where the research was primarily carried out (ONS 2020c). Only three participants were located outside of the North-West and all were distributed across large urban to small suburban areas. Twelve people interviewed had childcare responsibilities, two of whom were single parents and another two were grandparents who took on additional caring roles. Although younger workers were relatively underrepresented within the sample, given their disproportional representation among retail workers, care was taken to ensure a level of representation across all ages and career stages. Two participants referred to a disability which they had in the context of how this impacted their work, but this information was not collected in the demographic information sheets. In hindsight, a more diverse range of respondents working in different roles within the sector would have been preferred, yet when relying on gatekeepers, it can be challenging to direct them towards certain groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper-case letters</td>
<td>Job title</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Learning &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Interview sequence</td>
<td>RO</td>
<td>Retail Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-case letter *</td>
<td>Organisation affiliation</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Senior/Store Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(T) (F) (V)</td>
<td>Interviewed during Covid</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telephone, face-to-face, video-call interview</td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>Team Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Customer Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DD</td>
<td>Delivery Driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EO</td>
<td>Equalities Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AO</td>
<td>Area Official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>National Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>KI</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22 Before conducting the research, ethical approval was requested and granted by the Alliance Manchester Business School Ethics Committee at the University of Manchester.

23 Ethnicity demographics in the North-West: Asian: 6.2%, Black: 1.4% and White: 90.2% (ONS 2020c) (NB: this census data is 10-years out-of-date)
4.3.4 Interview process

King (2012) identifies two extreme approaches to interviewing – ‘realist’ and ‘constructivist’. The realist approach assumes that participants’ accounts are factually accurate, measurable against their lived experiences and can be uncovered using a structured interaction. In contrast, the constructivist approach assumes that interview data is to be analysed in terms of the discursive strategies employed by the interviewee, rather than its content. In taking a constructivist approach to interviewing, the aim is to prioritise the interactional element, allowing for a reflexive exchange between the interviewer and the research participant (developed through co-constructive, collaborative and meaning-making interactions) (Cunliffe 2011). The use of semi-structured interviews (instead of (un)structured interviews) is suitable for researchers who adopt the middle ground between these two perspectives and believe that both the interaction and the content of the interviews are important. Semi-structured interviews allow for the in-depth exploration of a topic while also enabling a more natural conversational pattern to develop between the researcher and participant.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research design, as they allow the researcher, and the respondent, to veer off-topic, follow up and respond genuinely to points of interest. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were encouraged to tell their personal stories and experiences by sharing their employment history before asking a series of topic-focused questions. This technique is taken from the literature on ‘expert’ interviews and provides a basis for understanding the preconditions that shape participants’ opinions (Döringer 2020). As noted by Döringer (2020), it is useful to include questions that prompt participants to reflect on their work history in order to understand their motives, resources and intentions. These opening discussions were followed by a series of questions that covered thematic areas such as the participants’ perceptions of technological change, the employment relationship and the future of work within the sector (see Appendix 2-4). After the pandemic had begun, a fourth topic was included covering employees’ reflections on work throughout the pandemic (see Appendix 5-7). Therefore, responding to changing contexts, time periods and research
interests demanded an iterative process when developing the interview guides. Often preliminary findings informed new topics of interest which were then added to the guides as the fieldwork progressed. Other topics were removed if they were no longer deemed relevant or yielded the same results in each interview.

It is important to note that different interviews had different purposes. For the first set of research questions (discussed in Chapter 5), retail managers (including operations, human resources, area and store managers) were interviewed to investigate how they understood organisational 'strategy' and what informed their decision-making processes. For the second set of research questions (discussed in Chapter 6), employees were interviewed to capture their lived experiences of retail work and trade union officials were interviewed for their perceptions of sector-wide and retailer-specific issues. While similar structures were adopted in the interview guides (i.e. initial opening narratives, followed by questions based around similar thematic areas), the questions had to be adapted depending on the participant and their role. The interviews were carried out between August 2019 and February 2021, during which there were approximately six months where interviews were suspended because of the pandemic (see ‘Coronavirus Impact Statement’). The interviews lasted between thirty-four minutes and one-hour twenty-nine minutes, but most interviews lasted just under an hour.

During the pandemic, supermarkets (as with most workplaces) limited external visitors which meant remote interviewing was relied upon, providing an opportunity to continue the research when face-to-face was not possible. In total, eighteen interviews were conducted face-to-face (the locations of which have already been described), fifteen over the phone (only three of these were before the pandemic) and four using video conference software. Initially, face-to-face interviews were preferred as telephone interviewing can present a series of additional issues, such as losing ‘social cues’, conversation breaks, gestures and facial expressions (Christmann 2009). The use of video conferencing software can mitigate some of these issues, but the choice was presented to participants and most preferred to speak over the phone. Face-to-face interviews can also allow for additional access to parts of the workplace that are not usually accessible to the general public (such as staff rooms and employee canteens). These contribute to the broader contextualisation of the cases and can generate rich field notes. However, there is little evidence that the data collected over the phone is of lower quality (Novick 2008). Novick (2008) argues that the anonymity offered by conducting the interviews over the phone can allow respondents to open up more and talk about certain topics more freely. In contrast, many of the face-to-face interviews were carried out in a store manager’s office or in a canteen which meant the participants had less privacy than they might have done if they were being interviewed at home.

While the analytical method is discussed in Section 4.3, some believe that analysis begins during the fieldwork stages (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Charmaz 2006). Based on these principles, memo writing was used during the fieldwork to capture initial thoughts, feelings and questions from which further questions and directions for the research can be identified. The process of memo writing
was used throughout the research process and drew heavily on the field notes previously mentioned and the research diary. A research diary was kept throughout the process in which each interview was summarised once it had been transcribed. This became an integral chronological reference point that could be returned to throughout the iterative process of analysis (Symon 2012). Another way of developing these memos is by discussing interviews with a trusted colleague or someone on the research team, allowing for further reflection on points of interest. I found this to be central for me to develop and challenge my ideas as it encouraged me to consider nuances that I might not have otherwise. This step also feeds into the critically reflexive approach discussed further in Section 4.4.

Finally, whilst some suggest there is not a ‘desirable’ number of interviews in qualitative research, others believe that anything from 15 to 60 interviews can be deemed appropriate depending on the research questions and nature of the data collected (Saunders and Townsend 2016). An open-ended approach was taken to data collection which meant that the interviews continued until no new themes emerged and a level of saturation had been reached (Morse 1994). However, the aim was never to reach what has been described as ‘full’ saturation as this implies a ‘completeness’ to the research (Bowen 2008; O’Reilly and Parker 2013) as this would not be in keeping with the research philosophy previously described. As Cockburn and Ormrod (1993) note, the aim should not be to provide a definitive account but to tell the story that can be captured given the researchers’ positionality and resources. Therefore, the decision was made to complete the interview process once there was a substantial repetition of answers and themes which was considered appropriate given the resource boundaries of the project.

### 4.3.5 Documentary data collection

Documentary evidence has been vastly under-utilised in favour of interviews within organisation research (Lee 2012). However, the Coronavirus pandemic has had the effect of forcing researchers to do research in different ways due to the restrictions it has placed on their ability to get out into the field. Thus the initial limitations brought on by the pandemic prompted the use of documentary evidence as a secondary data set which proved to be a source of rich commentary. While it is typical for interviews to be supplemented with documentary evidence, a decision was made to include newspaper articles as a key data source in this study because of the vast amount of coverage food retailing was receiving in the media (and the challenges faced with conducting in-person research). It goes without saying that the media has played a significant role in shaping public opinion throughout the pandemic – not only was it used as a mouthpiece for retailers, but it also played a part in fuelling the empty shelves, long queues and customer outrage narratives at the start of the lockdown (Beery 2020). Furthermore, the media reported heavily on the virus prevention measures brought in by the government and retailers, and on the abuse of employees in stores. Therefore, a year-long newspaper analysis was conducted to map the course of the first year of the pandemic and the media narrative that subsumed it. The newspaper analysis provided the national-level narrative surrounding the changing nature of food retailing and new demands during the pandemic. Additional documentary evidence was also analysed,
including employee contracts; collective bargaining agreements; communications with retailers via third parties; company annual reports; internal trade union documents and unpublished research. This evidence contributed toward the construction of a multi-tiered narrative to avoid a one-dimensional approach that may come from interviewing a single group. The use of this data aimed to provide an additional basis from which comparisons could be drawn between these national/company narratives and employees' lived experiences. The findings from the documentary analysis also informed some of the new/revised interview questions in the second round of interviews as part of the iterative research process. This method was particularly effective in helping understand how the media narrative was perceived by employees and how it may shape the way people constructed their own identities as a ‘key worker’ throughout the pandemic.

The case study approach typically draws on multiple sources (Hartley 2012), such as documentary evidence, to seek corroboration between the key issues identified (Bowen 2009). This was the method chosen for the newspaper analysis whereby 277 documents were gathered for analysis (235 once duplicate articles were removed) (see Figure 15) and covered the 12-months from the day the Coronavirus was first identified in the UK (31st January 2020 to 31st January 2021). The data was collected from the nine most widely read weekly newspapers in the UK and the leading industry publication ‘The Grocer’. The Factiva database was used to search for articles that contained information on ‘General Labour Issues’, ‘Labour/Personnel’ ‘Digitalization’ or ‘Information Technology’ to refine the search and identify relevant articles (see Figure 15). The top ten UK supermarkets by market share (Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, Asda, the Co-op, Aldi, Lidl, Iceland, Waitrose and Ocado) were included within the study to examine the overarching trends among the largest employers within the sector, accounting for approximately 95.1% of all sales in the sector (Kantar 2020). Each article was given a unique identifier code (see Figure 16) so they can be referenced as evidence concerning the case study findings but still provide anonymity for the retailers as per the ethical approval. The analytical tools used were the same as those adopted to analyse the interviews, as is explained in more depth in the section that follows.

24 While the newspapers chosen fall across the political spectrum it is argued that they are largely centre/right-leaning, with some exceptions (e.g. The Guardian and The Mirror) (Smith 2017).
### Search Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TM</td>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>Article No.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GR</td>
<td>The Grocer</td>
<td>Month</td>
<td>JAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>GU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GU</td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td></td>
<td>1JAN_GU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>The Sun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>The Mirror</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG</td>
<td>The Telegraph</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Financial Times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 16 Newspaper identifier code key**

### 4.4 Analytical process and coding

Data analysis begins during the fieldwork process by recording memos\(^{25}\), fieldwork notes, research diaries and discussions with the research team. The early stages of note-making were central to the analysis to ensure the project made sense and that the interviews covered the correct topics (Rubin and Rubin 2012). The thematic approach to analysis was used for all of the qualitative data sets (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach was adopted because of how flexibly it can be used and its usefulness for understanding how participants ‘think, feel and do’ (Clarke and Braun 2017, p.297). Most notably, thematic analysis can be adopted within critical research to allow for the questioning of patterns and social meaning around a theme (Clarke and Braun 2017) (i.e. what this research aims to do with regard to the broader notion of sociotechnical change). The analytical process adopted the six-step thematic approach outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006) (summary based on own use):

1. **Familiarising yourself with your data:** this included collecting field notes, memos and other discussion notes alongside the interview audio. I transcribed the interviews within

---

\(^{25}\) The extensive use of memos, note-taking and the iterative process adopted all come from grounded theory (GT) (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and were central to the research process overall. However, although inspiration was drawn from GT a thematic approach to analysis was adopted as this section discusses.
a few days of the interviews taking place and wrote a summary of each interview based on the transcription

(2) Generating initial codes: these were generated based on the transcription process, as well as the first read-through of the full transcript to identify broad codes based on concepts and themes derived from the interviews and the literature

(3) Searching for themes: the transcription data was imported into NVivo and the first round of coding was carried out based on broad themes identified in step (2)

(4) Reviewing themes: a second round of more detailed line-by-line coding was carried out to identify more detailed themes and to corroborate broader codes, after which themes could be reviewed and decisions were made as to whether data could suitably answer the research questions

(5) Defining and naming themes: based again on both the interview data itself, as well as the literature

(6) Producing the report: all steps (including this one) were conducted iteratively to ensure the interpretations were correctly represented within the report.

For step (1), all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although this is a time-consuming method, and is often underrepresented within the literature (Riessman 1993; Davidson 2009), it presents an additional opportunity to reflect and create memos. It also allows the researcher to take the time needed to listen to the data and remember how\textsuperscript{26} it is said before it is analysed in NVivo (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Transcribing the data also allowed for initial stand-out passages, quotes and themes to be captured. After each transcription was complete, a summary of the interview was written in the research diary, highlighting thoughts about what was said and the key topics that were covered. This research diary became especially useful as a reference point once all of the interviews were completed.

Before coding individual interviews, Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that it is necessary to recognise the broad concepts, themes and events in the interviews as part of step (2). This process occurs throughout the transcription stage and when reading through the completed transcripts for the first time. The choice of codes is often embedded in the literature, even if the connection is not made consciously, hence why a grounded theory approach was deemed incompatible with this theoretically informed project. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p.86) suggest, data is not analysed in an vacuum and that the research direction is almost always informed by some sort of theoretical interest in the area. Once all of the transcriptions had been completed, the newspaper and the interview data were imported into NVivo and were coded in the same project file to allow for a constant comparison. It was possible to begin identifying codes from this stage, whereby relationships could be found within the overall coding structure (Rubin and Rubin 2012). This was the process adopted for steps (3) and (4) (for coding examples see Figure 17).

\textsuperscript{26} Yet, whether the how is considered of greater significance than the what or the content of the interview depends on the research philosophy (King 2012).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data extract</th>
<th>Broad code</th>
<th>Detailed code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“…they were losing out on premium rates and holidays etc. So, although they may not have lost overall financially, they were still losing terms and conditions that were very dear to them.” (NO_1)</td>
<td>Minimised labour costs</td>
<td>Retracted T&amp;Cs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The way they get treated in [Retailer C] is absolutely appalling, so they use a Bradford point scheme when someone is off sick. It's really quite ruthless. You can find yourself dismissed quite easily.” (AO_4d)</td>
<td>Poor treatment</td>
<td>Discimssals (high turnover)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…people think oh they offer a lot more pay than the usual retail industry, yeah on average but they'll want their pound of flesh, don’t be fooled by the riches…!!” (AO_2b)</td>
<td>Extreme intensification</td>
<td>Higher rate of pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Technology is protecting jobs as well, if you look at it like that. If we can’t afford to operate the shops, then no one has a job” (SM_3a)</td>
<td>Investment in technology</td>
<td>Complementary/substitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It's actually trying to not just keep up with what other people are doing, so we are actually now looking at people like [Retailer C] all that, see what they’re doing, so if we can take some of that can replicate it into our stores.” (RO_1a)</td>
<td>Job losses (tech)</td>
<td>Justifying use of tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…because property is so sought after, it's really hard to expand the number of shops now because there's not that many branches that are available, so we've got to kind of diversify…” (RO_2a)</td>
<td>Diversifying offering</td>
<td>Planning/site restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expanding store portfolio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 17 Examples of broad and detailed interview coding

Moving between the stages iteratively allowed for the constant comparison and development of codes and themes. This was necessary to understand how the perception of issues compared across the different participants and also how the issues were presented before and after the pandemic (for comparison see Figure 18). Furthermore, the longitudinal dimension captured in the repeat interviews demonstrated how participants ‘realities’ and meanings that they gave to certain concepts changed over time. Therefore, this also demands a philosophy of science that recognises how individual constructions of reality can evolve (i.e. a subjective ontology and epistemology) (McLachlan and Garcia 2015). The themes generated across the interviews and the newspaper articles allowed for a comparison of the media, employer, customer assistant and union narratives (see Figure 18). Once these themes had been consolidated, it was possible to complete step (5) and move on to write the report – yet even at this stage the process of iteration was used.
**Data extract**

(1) “And online shopping, that’s only gunna grow so hopefully jobs will grow with it. So, you’re always going to need someone to pick for the online shopping and to get the product from A to B. I just worry that the quality of those jobs just isn’t going to be there.” (AO_3d)

(2) “…we don’t want online shopping to take over. I think last time I spoke to you I was saying, ‘I hate online shopping it takes jobs, and self-serve and stuff like that’ but in these times I think we needed it. That’s berating for me to say.” (AO_3d)*

(3) “Our highly valued colleagues have stood tall amidst the coronavirus pandemic, playing their full part in feeding the nation. We want to thank every single one of them for their continued hard work during these unprecedented times by paying a much higher guaranteed bonus for the whole year in recognition of their effort.” (19APR_M)

(4) “…you can do all the other piecemeal things to make yourself look good but if you don’t wanna pay for staff then… and also when people talk about ‘response to Covid’ they think of it in terms of the community and the supermarket and the shoppers, but what about us? How have Retailer B responded to its staff? Have they given us any security? No, they are just hiring and firing and taking people on really dodgy contracts. Have they given us any security?” (CA_4b*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad code</th>
<th>Detailed code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investment in technology</td>
<td>Move online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job creation (quality)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandemic-related</td>
<td>Job creation (move online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employment changes</td>
<td>Suspicious of online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment in technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of work</td>
<td>CEO values employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Feeding the nation’</td>
<td>Good publicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of work</td>
<td>Good publicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-facing response</td>
<td>Insecure work (Covid)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 18 Examples of side-by-side comparative coding*

### 4.5 Critical researcher reflexivity

A final connection between the abstract philosophical discussion and the practical empirical description needs to be made. This relates to the need for the research process to be critically reflexive which is widely articulated among feminist scholars (Haraway 1988; England 1994; Martinez-Dy 2015). Yardley (2000) also identifies reflexivity as one of the necessary dimensions for ensuring research is carried out to a high standard. Therefore, the following discussion seeks to justify why reflexivity is necessary within critical feminist research and how it has shaped this project. Firstly, it is argued that critical reflexivity provides a necessary antithesis to neo-positivist empiricism within which the researcher is constructed as the ‘mysterious, impartial outsider’ who views themself as free of personality or bias (England 1994). England (1994) argues that retreating into ones ‘professional armour’ to ‘achieve objectivity’ would seem plausible only if the researcher embodies a specific type of...
amour. Similarly, Haraway (1988, p.581) points to the ‘tones’ which underpin these assumptions of ‘objectivity’ as all too often they signify the “…gaze of the un-marked positions of Man and White”. Haraway’s assertions have been echoed by researchers who argue that gender, age, race, sexuality, disability and experience all shape a researchers’ positionality. It is believed that this means no researcher would be able to produce the same results as another (Warren 1988). Thus, not only do our preconceived epistemological assumptions shape the collection and analysis of the data, but our biographies also play a central role in this (England 1994).

Martinez-Dy (2015) presents her positionality in a way that allows the reader to begin to discern what shapes her experiences as a researcher. While it is not possible to view the world exactly from her vantage point, the description of her background informs how she constructs knowledge and perceives reality (Martinez-Dy 2015). I was keen to mimic her attempt to explain her situatedness as the lens through which her research was carried out, as my thought processes as a researcher was transformed on reading this account. I am a white cis-gendered, heterosexual woman in my mid-twenties. Both of my parents came from working-class backgrounds, yet my sister and I were brought up in the South-West of England in an (upper) middle-class household. Our father worked in banking and our mother quit her job as a marketing assistant to take care of my sister and I, eventually returning to work (first in retail, then in hospitality) around the time my parents divorced. As teenagers, we were encouraged to work and held various jobs in retail and hospitality. Although I was the first person in my family to attend university to do a bachelors, my father had completed an MBA through his work. Therefore, quite evidently, I have been in a privileged position throughout my life which inevitably shapes the ‘vantage point’ from which I conduct my research. My experience of ‘otherness’ has been minimal, yet by nature of being a young woman, this will shape interactions that I have in a research setting and are worth reflecting on.

My interest in gender equality and employment relations stemmed from my experiences working in retail and hospitality as a young person. At the time, I was studying for a degree in a business school, but my experiences at work seemed far removed from the mainstream course content that I was studying. At work, I was low paid, had fluctuating hours and was not particularly well treated by a handful of misogynistic colleagues and customers. Based on this, I felt my work was not particularly valued. However, I was also keenly aware that things could have been worse, as they were for gay, Black and non-English colleagues of mine (especially when working in hospitality where abusive customers/members of staff were fuelled by alcohol and drugs). Seeing colleagues also being treated badly and facing the daily struggles of working in an industry that did not care about them contributed to this ‘vantage point’ and have motivated me to do the work that I opted to do. Alongside my work, I was later able to take more critical courses as part of my degree which further shaped my worldview and helped me understand why the work was so terrible. Prior to entering the labour market, my understanding of work was limited only to the experiences and thoughts passed on to me by my parents. Therefore, my experiences at work, my studies and my background have all contributed to my evolving positionality, as I explain further.
While not an ‘organisational insider’ in the traditional sense (see Brannick and Coghlan 2007), working in retail and other customer-facing roles gave me an understanding of the tacit processes and practices involved in the work which could have been more difficult to grasp if I had not had experience of them. Hayes (2017, p.12) describes this similar feeling of being an insider in terms of her past experience of working in care. She suggests that her familiarity with the issues being researched assisted in her efforts to secure access and communicate in a way that demonstrated the authenticity of her interest in her respondents (Hayes 2017). Although my experience in terms of access was less straightforward, I was well-versed in the vocabulary of retail work which was useful across all of the interview types. In addition to this, I could share my own experiences/perceptions of issues with customer assistants and union officials which I felt helped develop trust, empathy and a mutual understanding of my intentions. Those taking a positivist view may believe that this lack of neutrality would contaminate the data. However, England (1994) recognises that ‘contamination’ should not be viewed negatively, as she believes that it is impossible to avoid leaving an imprint on the research, no matter what positivists try to claim. In the first few interviews, I thought I was doing something wrong, or almost underhand, by contributing to the interviews in this way (especially by being overly agreeable). On further reflection, it was evident that I thought I should be ‘playing’ a particular role as a researcher which did not actually exist. As soon as I was able to come to terms with this absence of impartiality and the fact that there is no archetypal research role to fit into, I found that the quality of the interviews improved. Understandably, accepting my unique role as a researcher had the effect of putting others at ease also.

Putting participants at ease was something I continue to feel especially conscious of, particularly in instances where the power imbalance between myself and the participant feels ‘off’, such as in interviews with customer assistants that had been arranged by management. This power imbalance is well documented by social science researchers, for whom England (1994) argues ‘exploitation’ is endemic to their fieldwork process. While this does not necessarily mean that the experience will be negative for the person being researched, the relationship on face value is often one-way in terms of reciprocity. This power imbalance is best reflected on by England (1994, p.250) concerning her thought processes during certain interviews:

“...I have to admit there have been interviews when I have listened sympathetically to women telling me about the details of their lives (my role as participant) while also thinking how their words will make a great quote for my paper (my role as observer).”

I found this quote quite striking, both for its honesty and accuracy, as I had experienced similar thoughts without being able to articulate them in this way. In one interview, a woman shared an account with me in which a customer, evading security after trying to steal some alcohol, had bitten one of her colleagues. Although I was awestruck by how horrific the story was, my thoughts drifted to how this would be a compelling example of employee abuse to include in my thesis. This reinforced to me how
great the inequality between researcher and participant can be and how the researcher can at times view the relationship in a transactional sense. Furthermore, at times I found myself forgetting that there is a power imbalance, particularly when interviewing female participants of a similar age to be given our closeness in perceptions and experience. Thus, being reflexive throughout the process is necessary if this is sometimes lost in situ. However, it is important to acknowledge that although this asymmetrical relationship can be countered by certain strategies (reflexivity being one of these), it cannot be removed entirely (England 1994).

There were also times when I felt that my participants had more power than me. In part, I felt that being a young woman steered the exchanges I was having with participants in some of the interviews. On reflection, I assume these interactions were shaped by a presumption that I was inexperienced or unknowledgeable about the field by older male ‘experts’ (Abels and Behrens 2009). For example, after explaining to one participant several times (on email and in-person) what my objectives were for the interviews, they proceeded to tell their colleagues that I was an undergraduate student there to learn from him ‘how to be a retail manager’. There were other encounters where I felt I was being patronised or had things over-explained to me which is commonly experienced by young women in the social sciences (known as the ‘paternalism-effect’) (Abels and Behrens 2009). However, like others, I felt embarrassed to correct them and cautious that if I clarified again what I was there to do, I would risk jeopardising the access I had worked so hard to organise or the quality of data that I could collect.

Despite this power imbalance, I soon realised that this power asymmetry did also give me a unique advantage because I was deemed ‘unthreatening’ and ‘not official’ (McDowell 1988) when speaking to managers. It could also be argued that it is also easier to gain information more readily when the issue is fully-articulated (England 1994) (even if the point does get made with patronising undertones). Soon, it became clear that wearing my normal clothes and rucksack contributed further to my ability to ask questions and elicit answers which I might not be able to otherwise. England (1994) speaks of managers almost bragging about questionable employment practices which mirrored my own experience. Contributing to this was my status as a ‘business school’ student. To an outsider, it might seem as though I was interested in learning the tricks of the trade, instead of critically analysing the role that retailers played in the degradation of the work in question. I remained honest about what I was there for, but I allowed people to interpret me in the way that they deemed appropriate.

When speaking to customer assistants and union officials, I typically felt more at ease as I was typically able to relate to their experiences more easily having worked in retail roles myself. However, as mentioned previously, the power imbalances were not eliminated entirely. Martinez-Dy (2015) describes her ‘educational privilege’ as a doctoral student that can have the effect of re-introducing these inequalities. Also, I have a Somerset accent which would immediately position me, by some (including family and friends of mine) in the north as posh. It may also reaffirm assumptions that I am a middle-class academic type who may not understand their perspective, experiences and struggles at
work, despite me thinking we had a mutual understanding. Furthermore, coming from a ‘business school’ may have incited some suspicion among union organisers who are unfamiliar with the critical industrial relations tradition at the University of Manchester. Therefore, while these characteristics by no means define me as a total ‘outsider’, they will have shaped my positionality as a researcher and thus need to be reflected on alongside the philosophical and practical considerations.

4.6 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has aimed to give an overview of the methodological approach adopted within this project. It began with outlining the philosophical methodology and summarising the potential approaches adopted within social science research. Then the ontological issues were discussed, concerning whether a realist or nominalist ontology is deemed more suited to this research. The thought process behind the chosen ontology was also discussed for transparency and to demonstrate the complexities involved with defining the chosen philosophical approach. The interpretivist epistemology was then explained in terms of the root of knowledge and how it was informed by the SST lens outlined in Chapter 2. From the philosophical underpinnings, the empirical research design was described, starting with the case study approach taken. Then the sampling method and interview process were discussed in-depth, justifying the use of the methods adopted. The use of documentary data was also outlined, before discussing the thematic approach adopted to analyse the two qualitative datasets. The final section of this chapter discusses critical research reflexivity, both in terms of the need for it within feminist research and how I view myself as a researcher in relation to the participants. It is argued that it is necessary to be reflexive throughout the process as a researchers positionality will ultimately shape the research at each step.

Although the limitations are discussed in-depth in Chapter 7, it is worth briefly acknowledging some of the attempts made to address certain methodological areas of concern before moving on to the empirical discussion. Throughout this chapter, efforts have been taken to uncover the bias that has shaped the form which this research has taken. Some understand bias as being the greatest weakness of qualitative research, yet it is not considered a limitation of the project. Rather, a critically reflexive approach has been adopted to acknowledge these concerns and mitigate the power imbalances inbuilt into the research relationship. Attempts have also been made to illuminate areas in which my own experiences and social positionality are likely to affect how the data is collected, analysed and shared. It seemed particularly important to note that the extent to which it is possible to understand people’s ‘truths’ during the interview process will always be limited to an extent (Martinez-Dy 2015). Yet by nature of the research philosophy, uncovering full ‘truths’ is not the ultimate aim of the project (or any interpretivist research for that matter). Furthermore, the nature of interviews means that they tend only to capture a specific point in time. While I was able to collect some longitudinal data (i.e. the two sets of interviews and the newspaper analysis), understanding the participants experience and broader changes post-pandemic would be necessary to apprehend the wider impact of the pandemic. Finally, it is important to reiterate that this research was not intended to be ‘representative’ of the sector as a
whole, nor did it need to be. Instead, it aimed to capture the experiences of the people whom I was fortunate to interview to contribute further to our shared understanding of food retail work and sociotechnical change.
5 A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF EMPLOYERS' STRATEGIES IN FOOD RETAILING

"...the big change has been that we've had a really clear strategy... everybody has anchored to that so it means that you make more informed decisions. Everybody is focused on it, so you've got that narrative that you can hang back to all of the time. I feel that has steered us into a much more positive direction. And yeah, we are trialling all of these new things, but these are about getting us into to the future, rather than keeping a hold on things that we know that we cannot make work. So, I think having that strategic direction and being courageous with it as well is important..." (RO_2a)

5.1 Introduction

The question as to what ‘strategy’ is, what purpose it has, and what impact it can have, has been critically debated within the academic literature. However, this notion of ‘strategy’ retains a stronghold over organisational language. Management consultancies have been relatively influential in shaping the current future of work debate and continue to sell a vision that businesses can be leaders in the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ and shape the future with the right ‘strategy’. Adopting a similar logic, future of work predictions have focused on potential or hypothetical plans for the future (e.g. how susceptible jobs are to automation) that rely heavily on assumptions regarding organisational behaviour. From these predictions, some believe that, in the near future, the quantity of work will significantly decline and will in some cases be eliminated (see Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Ford 2015; Frey and Osborne 2017). However, although a particular ‘strategy’ might appear to be in keeping with the dominant 'trend' of the moment (e.g. the ‘fourth industrial revolution’), there is no guarantee that it will be widely adopted despite what these predictions lead one to believe. As it stands, it remains ‘cheaper to employ people than to deploy technology’ (Fleming 2019) because of the widespread availability of low-cost labour. It is argued that investment in automation has remained low in some sectors (such as food retailing) and that this is because decision-making is dictated by the conditions of real capitalist competition, which places investment in technology as secondary to other potentially more profitable applications (Moody 2018).

The data analysis presented within this chapter shows that often the role that 'strategy' plays in shaping organisational change is overstated and, as the theoretical framework suggests, it is necessary to look to the wider context to understand what may be pervasive in shaping change in the future. Thus rather than add to the large number of predictions that already exist, the analysis presented in this chapter seeks to encourage a more cautious way of thinking about the future of retail work, based on what currently occurring as opposed to what could happen in the future. The following discussion aims to investigate what shapes employers’ decision-making processes and the outcomes of these decisions by drawing on three potential models which could shape the future of work in retail as identified by the Fabian Society (FS): ‘squeezing the cost-base’, ‘automating to efficiency' and 'competing on connectivity' (Tait 2017). Each of the three models is analysed in relation to the existing literature and the empirical findings, drawing on interviews with retail operations and HR managers, area/store
management and documentary evidence. Given the longitudinal element captured within the data collection, each model is analysed at two intervals, before and during the pandemic, to investigate whether the pandemic prompted retailers to alter their 'strategic approach'. The chapter then concludes by identifying whether any of the three models appear dominant in their alignment with the case studies or whether any other patterns arise from the analysis.

In practice, it is found that there is a great deal of overlap between the three models and how different retailers adopt them which becomes apparent throughout this discussion. Based on current future of work predictions, one would expect to observe the ‘automating to efficiency’ model becoming the dominant approach in the sector. If there is more variety, the future may be more diverse than current predictions suggest. Figure 19 provides an overview of the technologies observed in-stores or mentioned in the interview process. This is used a basis from which examples are drawn throughout this empirical chapter. Many of the technologies observed in the case studies presented in Figure 19 have been in use for several years and are part of a relatively slow, incremental process of technological upgrading that has occurred within the sector for several decades (as outlined in Chapter 3). Therefore, as the findings within this chapter highlight, there is little evidence that would support the idea held in the future of work literature that a transformative programme of capital-intensive automation is underway across all part of the retail sector. Rather, the findings depict food retail employer strategies as being opportunistic regarding technology and work, since they lack the longer-term productivity focus that would be needed for if any transformational shift to the quantity of work available within the sector is to occur.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Added</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>Additional comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal communications app used for e-learning and publishing rotas</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>Soon to be integrated with ‘PeopleSoft’ accessed on smartphone/PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HHT stock management and task allocation</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>Not enough to share around the store as some require them all-day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPOS Pegasus</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2011 (?)</td>
<td>Customers/ emp.</td>
<td>Gives suggested employee numbers on checkouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AST self-service checkouts (with scales)</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Customers/ emp.</td>
<td>Require employee interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People management system (creates payroll/rotas)</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Managers/supervisors</td>
<td>Replaced 25-year old HR system organising on basis of training/availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership with TPLS for logistics on online shopping</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Employees in-store pick for delivery in two-hours window – small rollout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales-based JIT ordering system</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>Previously stock ordered by manager on phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AST self-service checkouts (w/o scales)</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Customers/ emp.</td>
<td>Require less interventions than AST with scales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App which displays rotas through which changes can be made</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>Can be accessed on smartphone/PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Rhythm and routine programme’ allocating daily tasks and comms via tablet</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headsets used to improve safety and efficiency in-store</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>Inspired by Retailer C and efficiency measures by steps (pedometer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership with TPLS/TPDS for logistics on online shopping</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Delivered on bike with short time window</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epos in-control system integrated (touchscreen)</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Customer assistants</td>
<td>Sells their in-house developed system commercially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App-based self-service payment method</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Abandoned after trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual EPOS requires codes to be manual input for items w/o barcode</td>
<td>Retailer C</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Customer assistants/ deputy managers</td>
<td>Employees must remember 100s of codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDT used for stock management and ordering</td>
<td>Retailer C</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Senior managers</td>
<td>Only deputy/store managers allowed to use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headsets used to improve efficiency in-store</td>
<td>Retailer C</td>
<td>Employee-facing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>First grocer to implement these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership with TPDS</td>
<td>Retailer C</td>
<td>Customer-facing</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Delivered on bike with short time window</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key = AST: Assisted Serve Tills; HHT: Handheld Terminal; EPOS: Electronic Point of Sale; MDT: Mobile Data Terminal
5.2 ‘Squeezing the cost-base’

A ‘squeezing the cost-base’ approach would cover those retailers that are pursuing low-prices, by cutting costs at the detriment of job quality. The business model relies on the ability to pass on financial risks to employees and suppliers (e.g. through flexible contractual arrangements) and avoids costly long-term investments (e.g. in technology). The biggest retailers have typically strived towards what they believe to be a ‘good price, good service’ strategy. However, competition from discounters over the past three decades has eroded the level of investment in customer service across the sector (Wrigley 1994). Consequently, cost-minimising approaches have been widely deployed across retail, including “...outsourcing core business functions, aggressively squeezing supply chains and viewing labour as a cost to be minimised” (Tait 2017, p.5). For retailers, this means sitting as close to minimum legal standards as possible, resulting in ‘low-price, low-service’, all-around low-road approach. The use of technology in stores and warehouses tends to be minimal with regards to ‘big ticket’ automation, trading online and the even use of smaller devices by non-managerial staff on the shop floor (e.g. handheld devices) (see Figure 19). Rather, retailers might aim to drive productivity by intensifying work. This can have the effect of suppressing investment in technology because humans can “…in effect do what robots were supposed to do but at a much lower cost to capital” (Moody 2018, p.21).

Some predict a reduction in the number of people working in retail (such as Frey and Osborne 2017). However, the spread of ‘squeezing the cost-base’ could prevent this from taking place because costs would be minimised in ways other than gaining efficiencies from investing in labour-saving technologies (e.g. drawing on a large pool of low-cost workers) (Tait 2017). The FS report notes that insecure working arrangements are central to ‘squeezing the cost-base’ as it grants the employer flexibility and allows them to optimise the returns gained from taking such an approach to the organisation of labour. If comprehensively adopted, we would expect to see jobs falling in quality while (potentially) increasing in quantity because of the nature of the contracts offered. The FS report does mention that there is room for retailers taking this approach to be ‘outmanoeuvred’ by competitors aiming to adopt a high-road approach. However, changes in employment legislation and customer preferences may be required to alter behaviour.

To put the model into context, in food retailing, ‘squeezing the cost-base’ is broadly synonymous with the European ‘hard discount’ model, yet it could also apply to many other retailers, as the analysis in the is chapter goes on to argue. Aside from the limited use of technology in-store, other cost-cutting approaches might be used, such as global standardisation, centralised decision-making processes, punitive control measures, asymmetric power relations and the widespread use of ‘precarious’ employment arrangements (Geppert et al. 2015; Geppert and Pastuh 2017). However, unsurprisingly no retailers claim to adopt this approach as part of their overarching strategy. Also, as with other models, retailers may fluctuate between the approach adopted depending on the broader context. For example,
although Retailer C is typically associated most closely with this model in terms of how employees and technologies are managed, the demands of the Coronavirus pandemic prompted them to change their approach towards trading online. Like other retailers, Retailer C began selling their goods online via a TPDP, which is arguably more closely associated with the ‘automating to efficiency’ model.

The context of the pandemic is particularly important to consider because retailers adopting a ‘squeezing the cost-base’ approach to the management of labour, with a highly flexible and fragmented workforce, were able to adjust labour to meet the fluctuations in demand. Therefore, this model may become more desirable to retailers during times when economic uncertainty is high due to the challenges in forecasting future sales and customer preferences for lower-priced goods. However, rather than following a specific ‘strategic vision’, these responses are what Moody (2018) considers as being typical of any employer operating within the constraints of capitalism, as decisions remain based on a desire to maximise profit. These complexities are explored further concerning the empirical findings and the extent to which they reflect the ‘squeezing the cost-base’.

5.2.1 Pre-pandemic context

5.2.1.1 Pay, hours and contractual arrangements

As competition in the food retailing sector has fiercely intensified, labour cost reduction has been key for retailers who remain reluctant to pass on the increased costs to consumers (Farrell 2015). Therefore, pay within the food retail sector remains low, at £9.72 median (81p above the minimum wage for employees 23 and over) (ONS 2020a) and levels of pay vary between the major retailers. However, the employment relations behind these headline figures of pay vary more substantially. It is well-known within the sector that pay increases (e.g. in line with the national living wage), unfavourable economic conditions and competition increases are often followed by an (indirect) contraction of terms and conditions (i.e. a reduction in hours and premia) (Rubery et al. 2005; Moore et al. 2017). In the case of supermarket retailing, cost savings can be made quickly through the use of lean management techniques, driven using employer-led flexibility arrangements, under-staffing, and endless rounds of restructuring. This approach to the management of labour can create issues including (but not limited to) the intensification of work, high employee turnover and hostile or ‘bullish’ behaviour (Geppert et al. 2015).

Employer-led flexibility arrangements exist across all parts of the sector and are not a new phenomenon in food retailing (Freathy and Sparks 2000). However, a more recent change in the historical development of part-time working is the attempt made by retailers to replace full-time or ‘good’ part-time contracts with short-hours arrangements (typically falling between 6 and 16-hours). Across the sector, the use of zero-hours contracts is relatively low (Wallace-Stephens and Lockey 2019) but these short-hours arrangements can be equally as damaging for employees as often they do not reflect
the hours worked. It was evident in the case of Retailer B that when longer-standing employees (on ‘better’ legacy contracts) left the business, they were replaced with multiple workers on contracts with far fewer hours. However, in the case of Retailer A, there was a desire to move away from this way of organising labour:

“…because of the efficiencies that we’ve been trying to realise, we employ less people than we used to, we’ve tried to increase the minimum contract of people, so we might employ less people, but they might have more meaningful contracts, so that might be 16-, 20-hours or whatever, whereas a few years ago we would’ve been offering people in like 7- or 8-hour contract which is not enough to get any commitment or engagement or that kind of stuff.” (RO_2a)

As this operations manager acknowledges, commitment and engagement are desired from an operational perspective which, they believed, could be gained through extending the number of hours offered. Therefore, there was a level of awareness from management that short-hours contracts can be problematic for employee turnover and engagement. Additionally, although ‘youth rates’ had been less widely used in food retail, managers acknowledged they preferred younger workers and students, as they were more likely to accept short-hour, highly flexible contracts. Younger workers were also perceived to work more quickly in what was viewed as ‘a younger person’s game’ by one senior manager (SM_2b). Older workers, on the other hand, were viewed by management as being slower and generally less amenable to change at the pace expected of them: “…we might have people who have worked for [Retailer A] for 20, 30 years and their ability to change at the pace that the business is changing might not be there.” (RO_2a). These employees were perceived by other managers as being generally less flexible and thus more costly to the business, which was evident in the comments of a regional HR manager:

“We’ve got a long-standing workforce that think that it is okay to work Monday to Friday 9-to-5 and they have earned that. And there’s an element that I go “…rightly so you probably have earnt it”, 25 years’ work in the businesses. But at the same time, we do have a business to run, and we need that flexibility, and that’s where its kinds of tends to stop at times.” (HR_1b).

As mentioned, within one of the stores, the average age of the workforce was relatively high\(^{27}\) in comparison to the broader demographic trends of employees working in food retail. While this HR manager claimed to appreciate the long-standing workforce they had in store, there was a clear negative sentiment among store management regarding older employees. It was believed that older workers were less malleable to flexible working than their younger colleagues due to their perceived unwillingness to work certain hours.

---

\(^{27}\) The older population was also reflected the customer base and may have been representative of the wider area in which the store was situated – i.e. out-of-town/rural store as opposed to the other store based in an inner-city location with a younger/student store population.
5.2.1.2 Multi-skilling and work intensification

In the interviews, union officials noted that multi-skilling was becoming a broader sectoral trend. Newer contracts were likely to contain clauses dictating that shop floor employees must carry out ‘any reasonable requests’ made by management regarding their day-to-day work. For example, previously, a contract would specify that a staff member would be employed to work on checkouts only, yet newer contracts typically stated that employees should be willing to move between roles if and when needed. One senior store manager felt strongly that certain workers were less willing to carry out tasks outside of their typical remit, referring specifically to longer-standing, older employees:

“…so a lot of them that have been here, again, probably 15- to 25-years, they’re coming to retirement and they are just happy to just sit there, do the till, do the same job and sometimes they can be very like, “that is not my department” which... I don’t like...” (SM_2b)

Thus, not only were older employees perceived as being inflexible in terms of hours, but they were also perceived to be inflexible in terms of the types of tasks they were willing to do. This perception was reflective of the desire among various managers for the older generation to ‘move on’.

The desire for having a multi-skilled workforce came from attempts to improve productivity. However, the effectiveness of driving productivity through multi-skilling employees has been viewed quite critically within the literature (Marchington and Harrison 1991; Price 2011). In all three cases, multi-skilling was used as a way to reduce the number of people working on the shop floor. However, the use of multi-skilling was justified by one regional HR manager (HR_1b) as being all about the “…right hours, right place, right people piece” suggesting that “…colleagues love that element because it is job variety, no day will be the same”. While this may have been true at one level, they also admitted that it allowed them to minimise staff costs by managing rotas more flexibly. Another store manager also echoed a positive perception of multi-skilling but in more practical terms:

“…if you’ve done the same job for x-number of years, that’s boring, you can become complacent. So, I think it’s good that it’s a challenge, it gives them something to work at and get involved and learning new things as well…” (SM_2b)

It is also worth noting that increasing the variety involved in retail work is likely to break the monotony that is sometimes found in food retail work (Bozkurt 2015). Therefore, it is perhaps more reasonable to suggest that the issue was not so much the multi-skilling itself but more the de-skilling and intensification effects that can arise as a result. For a multi-skilling approach to be low-cost and not require significant levels of training, de-skilling typically occurs to an extent (Price 2011). In Retailer A, management deemed multi-skilling essential to the operation of stores due to the small number of people on the shop floor at any one time. However, it was becoming increasingly common to see this approach adopted in traditional stores with fresh food counters. While some retailers have retained
some of the artisanal skills associated with counter work in supermarkets, the evidence suggests that some have cut the hours on food counters (or closed them entirely) and have de-skilled the remaining roles. For example, in the case of Retailer B, although cooking was not required on the deli counter, it was necessary for staff to be trained in health and safety to ensure food preparation was compliant with regulations. Once this training was complete, management had the flexibility to move staff between counters. Furthermore, there was a desire in Retailer B to expand the training offered to employees on the shop floor so that they could also be redeployed to work on the food counters when needed:

“… they have to be health and safety trained 2, 1 and 3, so it’s not like someone from the shop can just go onto their type thing, but we are going to start looking at that as well… as long as they’re health and safety trained, they can still serve, they just can’t cut the meat, so we have a lad on produce who will just man and serve, if it needs to be cut then he will call someone down and take the order...”

(SM_2b)

On some counters, artisanal skills were skill required. In this case, the manager suggested that the more highly trained staff would be called back from breaks to serve customers if the staff member on shift was not trained to cut the meat. Only having one fully trained employee at a time enables the retailer to avoid paying for two employees to cover breaks and further intensifies the role of the remaining ‘skilled’ worker. Downtime on a counter also meant employees would be expected to work the shop floor if needed. In sum, although Retailer B appeared to be adopting the ‘competing on connectivity’ model, in practice, cost-cutting objectives were prioritised and drove the management of the counters. This empirical evidence supports this observation that often a disjuncture exists between product and labour strategies (Carré and Tilly 2017), as their experiential product offering was not met with the same level of investment in labour.

Another practice contributing to the intensification of food retail work was the perpetual restructuring of shop floor and office-related roles. Across the sector, hierarchies have been flattened and decision making has been centralised, representing a massive shift to the organisation of labour. Consequently, middle-management roles have experienced two decades of cuts in food retail (Grimshaw et al. 2002) – the latest of which was underway during the research, in the case of Retailer B. Before the restructure, regional management (HR_1b) spoke of ‘building capabilities’ among junior members of staff, “…trying to make the team managers responsible for their own mini departments”. This was achieved by delegating responsibilities previously carried out by high-level middle managers to lower-level supervisors. However, employees in-store understood that ‘building capabilities’ signalled redundancies on the horizon and these redundancies went ahead just before the pandemic began. The HR manager in charge of ‘building capabilities’ in their region was made redundant from their previous role in another major supermarket at the hands of the same processes. It was up to this HR manager to convince team managers that taking on the additional responsibility would benefit their career progression. However, because of the flat hierarchy which now exists in stores, the opportunities for progression were relatively limited and workers would receive little to no remuneration for the additional
work. The checkout managers in charge of creating and managing the rotas were only paid 20p per hour extra than their colleagues in the lowest level roles. This re-allocation of responsibility resulted in the intensification of lower-paid roles as they had limited capacity/power to refuse the additional work.

5.2.1.3 Low-prices and low-service

When asking employees what the most significant change they had seen in their time working in the sector, a typical response was "...there is definitely a lot less people on the shop floor" (RO_1a). The view that staff numbers had fallen was also echoed by management, who were especially cautious not to portray their respective organisations negatively during the interview process. However, it was not just 'jobs' that had been cut. Instead, the reduction in employee hours available had typically been the primary focus of lowering labour costs in stores. For example, middle-managers or other full-time employees were replaced by several part-time employees on contracts specifying a lower number of hours. Not only does this mean that conditions deteriorate for the new junior employees, for senior managers, it meant that the number of their 'direct reports' multiplied. During the most recent restructure, the company had claimed that the hours lost through making managers redundant would be reinvested in the business, but this was yet to happen in practice:

"... when it was all supposed to go in place in January, they were saying, they were gonna invest those hours back in ...but I've taken on two new employees on 15-hour contracts so that's 30-hours. So, they might of... but not to the full extent to what they were saying. Because I think the managers who were on there before, they were on like, 40-, 45-hours so really, they've only replaced half or a third of that." (SM_2b)*

As this senior manager suggests, the hours lost were not reinvested in the counters at the level Retailer B had committed during the restructuring negotiations. A union officer involved in the national-level negotiations with Retailer B suggested that there had been a commitment from head office that these hours would be reinvested like-for-like. Yet despite this, it was clear from the discussions in-store that this was not being adhered to, further exemplifying how it cannot be assumed that a policy created as part of a broader strategic plan will be implemented in practice.

Furthermore, in the case of Retailer B, there was a clear strategy of cutting labour hours before productivity had the chance to increase. This intensified the work and was also responsible for a reduction in the quality of service offered on the shop floor. Retailers had accepted that the quality of service would fall with the promise of lower-priced goods to attract customers. In other instances where retailers used technologies to minimise costs, often they were relatively basic and were only implemented where improvements in productivity, rather than in service, could be instantly achieved.

In the case of Retailer C the number of handheld devices available on the floor for stock management were limited and were made available only for management use (see Figure 19). Not only did the limited roll-out of the hand helds allow the retailer to avoid the associated training costs, but it also reduced the
cost of the devices themselves. However, this increased the workload of managers who needed to tasks that were carried out my shopfloor staff within other retailers (e.g. stock checks in Retailer B). All staff members used other basic technologies, but little training was provided which could mitigate their service impact. For example, headsets were used to allow staff to communicate across the shop floor to make up for the smaller number of people working in the store. Since there was a lack of training associated with the implementation of these low-tech devices, staff would often use them for extended conversations which meant that they did not interact with customers when running the food through the till. A trainee manager who had recently left working at Retailer C recalled some of the issues with this:

“...someone wants you on the headset and you have a two-minute conversation through your headset and all of the sudden you've scanned all your customers shopping and you've not interacted with them... a lot of people perceive that as being really rude...” (CA_1b)

Evidently, there were issues with integrating these headsets, but in the case of Retailer C, it seemed that the impact on service quality was less of a concern. Retailer A had also recently brought in headsets, but more training was offered to ensure they were used correctly. An area manager (SM_3a) highlighted how the company aspired to expand the use of these headsets to improve security in stores. In the future, technologies such as these could also be used to justify a reduction in the amount of security personnel in their stores. However, any plans to do this were not explicitly raised within the interviews.

5.2.1.4 Hostile behaviour

Another well-known example in which good service was offset was the speed at which food is scanned through the checkouts in certain retailers. A senior store manager (SM_2b) had previously worked as a store manager for Retailer C for 14-years described the 'cut-throat', 'ruthlessness' at which this approach was pursued, quite literally by saying to employees "...you are shit, you are slow, there's the door..." and believed that people who were not 'quick enough' were not deemed 'good enough'.

In some cases, such a focus on meeting challenging targets meant these stores became known for hostile and ‘bully-ish’ behaviour. This manager also admitted that they did not like the person they had become working in this environment and was forced to leave when things got 'nasty'. They also claimed that intimidation tactics were used to get people out of the business when they were no longer wanted. A similar approach was taken towards union relations as Retailer C held a fierce anti-union position. Retailer C had tried to ban organisers from the premises and attempted to prevent the development of informal relations between store managers and staff to avoid solidaristic relationships from being formed. The same ex-store manager shared their experiences:

“...[Retailer C] were very aggressive with [the trade unions]. Say they'd come in to drop flyers and as staff you're told to escort them off the premises straight away, throw all the stuff, bin it all, phone
the other stores, tell them. Again, they are scared, with [Retailer C] they are very bully-ish with their tactics, the trade unions... it wouldn't sit with them.” (SM_2b)

These findings echoed Geppert and Pastuh’s (2017) research on discount retailers, particularly regarding the aggressive tactics towards trade union organisers coming into stores. However, the examples are few and far between due to issues in gaining access to head office or employees in these organisations for fear of retribution (Geppert and Pastuh 2017). Therefore, as discussed in the methods chapter, discount retailing is less widely researched due to access issues and secrecy. Furthermore, the ex-store manager claimed employment tribunal records relating to allegations filed against Retailer C gave away little about individual cases because out-of-court settlements were preferred before the dispute was allowed to progress. Therefore, this method of investigation is also limited in the information that it can provide regarding what goes on within these stores.

5.2.2 Pandemic context

The pandemic presented a range of unexpected demands which meant retailers who usually focused on minimising costs were forced to re-evaluate their approach to investing in staff and new technologies. The media spotlight that fell on food retailers and their actions throughout the pandemic which meant that there was less scope for acting in a way that the public might perceive as unfair or unhelpful regarding the treatment of their staff. For example, when it came to investing in employee virus protection measures, the common consensus among managers (as well as trade unionists) was that retailers went over and above what was legally required, which was somewhat surprising given the evidence of cost-cutting that has been presented thus far. However, it was suggested by union officials that there were several motivations for implementing these measures. Firstly, fierce competition dictates much of what goes on within the sector, and the pandemic was no exception. Therefore, retailers were keen to avoid losing customers because they felt unsafe coming into the store. Secondly, an outbreak of Coronavirus in-store would be costly, not just reputationally, but also in terms of the sick-pay pay-outs and store closures that could arise as a result (e.g. 10JAN_DM, 17JAN_M). However, although the methods of ‘squeezing the cost-base’ took on a different form throughout the pandemic, the drivers had the same intention – to minimise costs where possible, namely labour – as the empirical evidence shows.

5.2.2.1 Pandemic pay and self-isolation

During the pandemic, it was as though there was a sectoral benchmark set by the media coverage that encouraged food retailers across the sector to reward their workers for their contribution throughout the pandemic (with bonuses, extra holidays or gift vouchers) and to provide remuneration for those who were unable to work, actions which were above the statutory minimum (e.g. 15FEB_DM, 10APR_DM, 17APR_TM, 12APR_GR). However, there remained a limit on how much support retailers
were willing to offer. Long-term commitments to increase wage and improve other terms and conditions, were relatively sparse as Chapter 6 discusses in-depth. Furthermore, while pay for self-isolation and illness was set as a sectoral standard, pay for parents needing to care for children in self-isolation was non-existent. A store HR manager detailed their experiences, explaining how they felt abandoned by their employer at a time when they needed support as a single mother:

“…she can’t go to her childminder… she can’t go to family members either. So, I have to be off with her… I don’t feel that there is enough being done. I don’t think it’s just [Retailer B], I think it is across the board. I do get it, I get it for the fact of… “well, you are not in the business so we need to get someone to cover you, we cannot pay you because we have to give somebody else overtime”. But that doesn’t help me as a single parent. You know, I can’t afford to not be paid and I can’t keep using my holidays… And that will not do my sanity any good. Plus, you know one week doesn’t help because I still can’t afford to be down a week’s pay. So, again I don’t think enough has been done because at the end of the day, she is 6 years old.” (HR_2b)*

Rather than extending the provision to parents who needed to care for children in self-isolation, food retailers looking to minimise costs tended to revert back to ‘policy’ or statutory minimum for childcare (i.e. granting unpaid leave). The options this single mother had were limited to using her holiday allowance or taking unpaid leave. Therefore, limiting the extension of support can have a significant gendered impact. It also demonstrates how variable retailers’ pandemic support ‘strategies’ could be depending on the group in question.

5.2.2.2 Outsourcing home delivery services

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was an overnight shift in demand for online food retailing. Many retailers signed third-party partnerships to trade online or expand their existing online offering to take advantage of this demand (e.g. 17SEP_TG, 15SEP_TM, 9JAN_M) (see Figure 20). Although ‘squeezing the cost-base’ is not typically associated with online shopping, the use of third-party partnerships does resonate with the attempts to minimise the labour and infrastructure costs included within this model. Going through a third-party instead of developing operations in-house allows retailers to avoid committing long term to the necessary delivery infrastructure. Expanding a traditional logistics network during the pandemic could have been perceived as a risky move when the uncertainty surrounding it was high. However, through outsourcing these arrangements, delivery jobs became more precarious in food retail because of the nature of the work offered. Retailers partnered with TPDP’s (such as Deliveroo and UberEATS) and TPLS’s (such as Amazon) to make use of their vast networks of ‘independent contractors’ with self-employed status (Berg 2016; Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019). Adopting this model allowed food retailers to minimise costs by gaining access to a large pool of low-cost workers via the platform while avoiding the costs associated with directly hiring them. It also enabled retailers who previously did not trade online to quickly alter their approach as these platforms offer greater flexibility than traditional in-house operations (Winton 2021). This example shows the
significant overlap between the models, as digital platforms are also important to discuss concerning the ‘automating to efficiency’ model (see Section 5.3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aldi</th>
<th>Co-op</th>
<th>Morrisons</th>
<th>Tesco</th>
<th>Lidl</th>
<th>Asda</th>
<th>Sainsbury’s</th>
<th>Waitrose</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amazon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>During</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliveroo</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UberEATS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>During</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-House (Same-Day)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>During</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-House (Traditional)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>During</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Before</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 20 Online delivery arrangements (before and during the pandemic)*

5.3 ‘Automating to efficiency’

The second model outlined in the FS report is ‘automating to efficiency’ characterised primarily by retailers moving from brick-and-mortar stores to selling online, increasing the use of labour-saving technologies in stores/warehouses and closing expensive store sites (Tait 2017). Adopting this model is intended to enable retailers to deliver sales as quickly, efficiently and as cheaply as possible, looking to automate processes (e.g. using automated warehouses, driverless vans, drone delivery, online AI assistants) and reduce long term costs (while delivering a high quality of service). The report suggests that the widespread adoption of this model could see millions of jobs ‘stripped out’, while those which remain could be of a better quality, concentrated in head offices and would require a ‘more diverse and specialised range of skills’ (Tait 2017). This model is most closely aligned to the future of work rhetoric, whereby it is predicted that the probability of retail work being eliminated is around 92-97% (Frey and Osborne 2017). However, as it was discussed in Chapter 2, future of work commentators place too much emphasis on technology and do not give due attention to how capitalism shapes investment decisions (Moody 2018). While it is clear that there have been technological advances in retailing, the mere existence of these technologies is not sufficient to replace jobs in real-time (Moody 2018). Furthermore, a ‘spend now, gain later’ approach might be suitable for organisations in other industries where capital is abundant, but margins in the food retailing sector are traditionally very low, making high-capital investments in the short-term less desirable management (Burt and Sparks 1997).

Before moving to the empirical evidence it is first useful to consider the broader food retail landscape. Although the evidence in the cases may show little in terms of an ‘automating to efficiency’ approach, it must be recognised that this is not necessarily the case across the sector as a whole. Given current technological advances, it is impossible to rule out the emergence of new firms that rely
on automation to operate. Ocado remains an outlier as the only major online food retailer without any physical stores. However, it could be argued that barriers to accessing the capital needed for a hi-tech approach have been less obstructive to Ocado as they operate primarily as a technology platform. In 2019, Ocado became the UK’s fastest-growing grocer (Jahshan 2019) and it has also been at the forefront of robotics advances in the food warehousing sector, raising £1 billion in 2020 (through an issue of new shares and convertible bonds) to expand their portfolio of automated ‘customer fulfilment centres’ (Jolly 2020). Amazon’s ‘Fresh’ service (which allows customers to buy a selection of branded goods directly through their website) would also fall into this high-road technological category as their warehouses use their in-house Kiva systems. However, their market share within the British food retailing sector remains slim (3% compared to Ocado’s 14% – although this may change as they enter into new partnership deals with UK retailers) (Wood 2020). Among traditional retailers, semi-automated food warehouses have been used for several years but picking for online deliveries is primarily carried out by hand, in stores or more traditional warehouses. There is clear evidence to suggest that the retailers included within the case studies had not adopted technologies as sophisticated as Ocado or Amazon, despite the predictions proposing a heavily automated future (for a summary of the technologies discussed within the case studies see Appendix 8). Thus, the following discussion considers whether different ‘strategies’ could be modelled as ‘automating to efficiency’ according to the evidence from the cases and if the pandemic has altered this, as some have suggested (Nott 2020).

5.3.1 Pre-pandemic context

5.3.1.1 ‘Technology-driven’ productivity increases

‘Automating to efficiency’ is seen to be driven by the use of technology, yet it is essential to note that in reality, it is often more common to observe ‘labour-displacing’ technologies being used, as opposed to those which are fully ‘automating’ or labour-replacing. In the case of Retailers A and B, technologies were implemented on the assumption that they would deliver immediate cost-savings in terms of labour hours used, yet these were often basic in terms of technological capability. For example, although self-service checkouts are a clear example of a labour-saving technology, they still demand a human element. Consumers are required to carry out the transaction and retail workers are needed to correct the errors and verify the errors customers ages. However, self-service technologies in traditional supermarkets currently lack the sophistication of the pick-up, walk-out technology used in the Amazon Go stores.

Another example of a productivity solution are the ‘all-in-one’ handheld terminals used by employees to assist with task management, including stock monitoring, task allocation and dotcom picking. Although these technologies lack sophistication, they are widely used across the case studies. However, in some instances, when it seemed as though a company was ‘automating’, it could be as simple as ‘pen and paper to automation’ for record-keeping (Moody 2018). Despite this, in the
interviews, these technologies were discussed as though they were somewhat revolutionary and had become central to the day-to-day management of certain stores. These handholds were used as a direct feed for centralised communications, allowing task delegation to bypass store management from head office. Another key aim of digitalising these processes was to 'unchain' store managers from the back-office computer to enable some of their tasks to be carried out remotely via tablets on the shop floor. This is especially desirable from a lean perspective in a small store where there may only be one or two other staff members available. While it was not presented in this way, these systems had the effect of deskillling the role of store management since they removed the autonomy that they had in terms of the operational planning of tasks since these decisions were taken centrally. Therefore, while this software was not necessarily revolutionary (see Figure 19 for similar examples), the impact that it had on the organisation of work in-store was significant.

Another way retailers were trying to improve productivity was by digitalising the people management software (another example of 'pen and paper to automation'). In the case of Retailers A and B, management discussed implementing a new people management system when justifying why store HR managers were no longer needed. It was believed that these new systems accounted for sufficient level of labour replacement, yet employees were still required to manage the rotas, even if they did not have to personally create them. In the case of Retailer B, the task of managing the rotas was delegated to junior employees on less pay, under the guise of 'building capabilities' or 'decentralising decision-making'. However, the reduction of in-store managers was not possible because of 'automation'. Rather, it was made possible by digitalising and delegating the required tasks. The new systems reduced the range and scope of the task, enabling the employer to justify the passing of responsibility onto lower-paid employees. In this case, the task of creating rotas had become more straightforward, but there were still clear workload implications for employees taking on this responsibility (e.g. the negotiation of changes to the rotas after they have been handed out to staff). A senior store manager described the use of this new system in more detail:

“...there is a new people payroll management system... it's more accountability of payroll onto team managers, so they're given a budget. They have to put corrections in... Holiday requests will normally go to the [HR] manager, but now they'll go to the team manager... they're basically a mini-HR manager then.” (SM_2b)

The expectation was for the team leader to become 'a mini-HR manager' and still fulfil all of their pre-existing responsibilities. Furthermore, it was argued by an area manager (SM_3a) that these new online systems could encourage greater transparency through the use of online rotas. Much like the task management software, the new payroll system was not particularly sophisticated that could be used as a tool to shape work in ways that transformed the organisational structure of stores. A similar system had been implemented in Retailer A to encourage what was described as 'more positive behaviour' (SM_3a) among those creating the rotas because it was more visible when they were not publishing rotas with enough notice for staff. Since employees were able to view and change their shifts
online it could be argued that this created a more transparent process for employees giving them greater autonomy over their scheduling. However, the impact on store management was somewhat more problematic. There was a desire to eliminate the need for individual store managers and these systems had opened up opportunities for more remote forms of people management, using ‘satellite managers’ who would be responsible for multiple stores:

"...I can't say that we will do that for certain, but I reckon that is where we will end up going... you’d just have colleagues and then maybe your team leaders who then just run the shifts and then like a satellite manager to make sure that people are just following the processes." (RO_1a)

Potentially, this could lead to a change in the organisation of work and intensification of the area manager role. This provides yet another example of where relatively basic technologies enabled food retailers to ‘get more for less’ out of their remaining workforce. However, this has little to do with ‘automation’ and more to do with the reorganisation of work. Consequently, roles are intensified and the output increases, yet without further investment to support the rollout of these changes, it could be that the service provision suffers as a result.

5.3.1.2 Reducing demand for labour-hours

Another identifying characteristic of this model is reducing the demand for labour hours based on the assumption that new technologies will be labour-saving (Tait 2017). However, the likelihood that this model will be widely adopted is strongly contested by scholars who point toward the predictions of mass joblessness that have yet to materialise. Moody’s (2018) analysis has particular relevance for the retail cases as often those claiming to adopt an ‘automation-focused strategy’ are at the same time re-organising labour in a way that may lead to similar labour-saving effects (e.g. through lean management and alternative working arrangements). Therefore, there is a distinct overlap between the ‘automating to efficiency’ model and the previous model, ‘squeezing the cost-base’, as retailers may choose to use a combination of approaches to drive down labour costs. Nevertheless, there has been a significant reduction in the number of labour hours used in certain stores. A former store manager, who was seconded to work in head office and then made permanent in an operational role exemplified just how drastic these changes had been:

“...they used to get like 600-hours a week, then when I went back... when I was a store manager four-years later, then we had about 400-hours, and we are on about 300-hours now. So about fifty percent less. It's the same in the large stores I went to as well." (RO_1a)

In this case, the hours allocated to stores had been halved in less than a decade. Admittedly, technological change has significantly contributed towards the reduction of labour-hours. Another operations manager also reflected on how the use of technology had shaped the work available in stores:
“So, you know the traditional shop of having three or four people in, at some point that may become a thing of the past. You know if you think about where you might get to with self-service options and online options and all of this stuff you’ve just gotta keep all of that front of mind and not be... be anchored back with the history of [Retailer A] but not let that stop us progressing.” (RO_2a)

In the cases of Retailers A and B, a reduction in employees working on the shop floor was perceived by management as a sign that they were doing something right in terms of improving productivity elsewhere. However, employees were quick to note the negative impact on the quality of service. For example, checkouts were intentionally being staffed less, allowing waiting times to increase and service to fall. The decision to reduce the number of staff on checkouts also did not go unnoticed by customers, particularly those in Retailer B:

“...the customers in here... they are very stuck in their ways. It's like, ‘10 years ago we used to have loads of staff in here’ but we are like, no, we've got loads of competitors, we need to cut back.” (SM_2b)

As this example demonstrates, decisions to cut staff may be made based on ‘market demands’ (i.e. the strength of the competition) instead of the desire to implement new technologies. Thus technology should not always be held responsible for labour displacement/replacement. However, it is worth noting that these conclusions can only be made by taking a broader perspective that considers other influences. Additionally, other tasks have been simplified, made easier or de-skilled through the use of new technologies, whereby faster completion means fewer labour hours required. Nevertheless, given the slow technological progress that some food retailers have made, these vast reductions in labour hours seem premature, even when they have been aided by (intensity-driven) productivity gains elsewhere. In keeping with this model, tasks that do not 'add value' (HR_1b) were made redundant (such as bag packers and door-greeters) and the time-intensive repetition of certain tasks (e.g. counting change in the tills and checking the temperatures in the fridge/freezer units) has been reduced to a level where stores can be compliant and still save labour-hours. However, an operations manager explained that in their role it was necessary to pay careful consideration to how labour-hours were reduced in stores, to try and avoid some of the resistance which came from store employees when hours were cut:

“...through technology or innovation, we focus on taking tasks away from stores so that they didn't have to do things anymore. So, we are looking at how we do that in a way that colleagues adopt the change, so that they don't feel like we are just taking hours away from them, so that they understand what is being removed and how it is making their lives simpler and that kind of thing.” (RO_2a)

As suggested, there seemed to be a desire to mitigate the retaliation that the head office anticipated from store managers by 'just' taking hours away. Also, because managers were aware of the impact that the number of hours can have on service provision, the reduction of labour hours was
often referred to as a balancing act, leaving it down to operations teams to work out what they believed was the formula for the best service at the lowest cost. Convenience and speed remained central to ‘good service’, which meant that decisions to cut staff would be made so long as they did not affect the service provision. However, the extent to which any of this could be deemed ‘automation’ remains up for discussion (see Chapter 7).

5.3.1.3 Importance of convenience

As mentioned, one of the key themes that came out in the interviews was the importance of convenience and speed whether or not this is achieved via the use of technologies. In food retailing, one of the main drivers to automate is to improve the convenience offering and the speed at which customers can access their goods. For Retailer A, the speed of service was central in managing the operations in-store. This meant that operations managers were tasked to ensure that productivity-per-square metre could be ‘optimised’ by minimising the number of employees in-store and using labour-saving technologies where possible. Their chosen approach was to implement certain labour-saving technologies in-store and expand the online offering through third-party partnerships but believed that there would still be a place for physical food retailing driven by convenience. An operations manager thought that there would only become more demand for convenience retailing as people today are increasingly ‘time poor’ and are willing to pay extra for the ease of the service. In support of this, it is useful to consider the example of Amazon. Even though Amazon is a leader in online convenience shopping, they still have physical ‘Go’ food stores. Therefore, Amazon has positioned itself among those who believe that a physical presence is still necessary, particularly when convenience is involved, by opening their ‘Go’ concept stores in the US (Statt 2018). Thus, it is important to note that the focus across the cases was largely on optimising physical stores’ digital and technological capacity to pursue a product/service strategy that prioritised ‘convenience’, instead of one which aimed for a significant move online.

5.3.2 Pandemic context

During the pandemic, the use of technologies in stores did not change significantly. Perhaps the most visible change was a drive to get customers to use the self-service technologies that were already in place. However, the demands of the pandemic shifted priorities considerably as certain groups were unable/unwilling to shop in-store. Therefore, driven by an unforeseen growth in the demand for online grocery shopping, the number of customers shopping online grew by 25.5% in 2020 (compared to the 8.5% previously anticipated) (Butler 2020c). However, many retailers struggled with expanding their capacity to fulfil orders and keep up with demand (e.g. 8APR_TG, 1MAR_M, 18MAR_GR). It is still unclear whether the number of online orders will be sustained after the pandemic (Butler 2021c). However, part of the online boom can be attributed to capturing a new market – those
who may not have otherwise done their shopping online which could boost online shopping uptake in the longer term (e.g. the ‘silver surfers’) (Onita 2020).

### 5.3.2.1 New online food retailers

Many food retailers that did not have existing online infrastructures quickly expanded their online capacities to keep up with competitors who did. Expansion strategies included, but were not limited to, opening new ‘dark’ warehouses, expanding delivery radius’, partnering with third parties, out-of-hours picking, mass-recruitment drives (for temporary and permanent staff) and redeploying staff within the business from quieter food/non-food areas. While some did accelerate pre-existing plans to roll out their online offering during the pandemic (e.g. Retailer B), others seemingly had their hands forced to enter the online market (e.g. Retailer C). This shift in circumstances demonstrates how quickly established ‘strategies’ or long-term plans can change due to new contextual demands. Figure 19 also highlights the areas where retailers expanded their in-house provision of same-day delivery, further satisfying the growing expectation that same or next-day delivery is necessary to keep ahead of the competition (Nazir 2020). However, third-party partnerships were also widely rolled out throughout the pandemic in response to the excess demand online and in-stores.

This approach to outsourcing delivery has wider relevance than simply the use of technology and represents a blurring of lines between these two models. It is perhaps important to pose the question again as to whether partnering with a digital platform has anything to do with ‘automation’. Thus, it could be argued that there is an element of giving ‘automation more credit than it is actually due’ (Taylor 2018) when considering how retailers use these platforms. The technological sophistication of this approach should not be exaggerated, as its use and success relies on a large pool of low-cost ‘bogus’ self-employed workers to feasibly resource it. Similarly, those who expanded their existing in-house delivery operations were far removed from an automation-centric model since it involved an expansion of the human element for picking, packing, and delivering the produce. The extent to which online shopping can be considered synonymous with ‘automation’ thus needs to be reconsidered based on the practical realities of how this approach is conducted.

### 5.3.2.2 Surge in demand

Tens of thousands of employees were recruited in supermarkets throughout the pandemic to facilitate the move online and meet the new demands created by the epidemiological context (e.g. 7SEP_M, 17MAR_M, 5AUG_FT). In April 2020, in one of the supermarkets visited, fifty jobs were advertised which attracted almost six hundred people to the store on interview day:

“We put an advert out in the local media and we had something like six hundred people turn up which was quite hard to manage because we were all meant to be social distancing... We did it well,
the papers came out and had seen basically that we had a queue from the front of the entrance right around the back of the shop and that was like that probably up until 4, 5 o’clock in the evening, from about 8am.” (SM_2b)*

As this senior manager explains, demand for these new roles was extremely high as many people had recently been furloughed or made unemployed. In many cases, people were temporarily taken on as ‘general assistants’, hired rapidly, moved around the business where needed, and let go just as quickly when the demand settled. Adopting a similar approach, Retailer A brought in agency staff to satisfy the jump in demand, yet it was made clear that these members of staff would be confined to stacking shelves and moving stock. This was done to minimise the amount of training needed and to avoid the perceived risks associated with allowing newer employees to handle money or the more ‘sensitive’ tasks.

Aside from the move online, some existing technologies became more widely used during the pandemic to limit the rate of virus transmissions by reducing face-to-face interactions. Self-service was encouraged on a much bigger scale (once screens were constructed between the checkouts) and checkout employees were redeployed onto ‘more productive areas’ such as stacking the shelves. Eventually, new labour-saving technologies were also implemented, such as using traffic light systems outside of stores to monitor the flow of customers without having to provide a security guard or door marshal. Other technologies, such as the labour planning software which was previously considered ‘labour-saving’, were no longer fit for purpose due to the unprecedented demand in-stores. Therefore, taskforces of head office and seconded store management were deployed to make fixes on these systems. These systems relied on historical data to project and schedule labour, yet in March demand was higher than the previous Christmas rendering the algorithms that the rotas were based on almost useless:

“… a challenge was the workforce management system uses historical data to plan rotas, plan how many people you need based on that. But what we saw particularly in March was a huge increase in basket sizes and transactions. So then suddenly, all our data was skewed… We had to put in lots of fixes…” (RO_3a)*

To summarise, the reason for highlighting the changing demands of work during the pandemic is to demonstrate the complexities of technological change and how it shapes work. Too quickly, assumptions are made regarding the cause of job losses. The evidence has shown that the broader context (i.e. the pandemic) can alter demand and the outcomes of decisions made by employers in a variety of ways. Furthermore, although some retailers have articulated a desire to automate more, move more business online and increase their use of technology, there was little to show in terms of a mass exodus of employees. Instead, there was an evident deterioration in the conditions of employment, further supporting the claim that the quality of work is a more imminent concern for employees than the
number of jobs available. Therefore, although it may seem as though the pandemic prompted an acceleration toward this model, the reality that has been presented remains to be quite different.

5.4 ‘Competing on connectivity’

The ‘competing on connectivity’ model is primarily centred around providing high-quality service and technology is deployed where possible to enhance service and not detract from it. In taking such an approach, the proposition is that job quality should increase, the number of jobs should be less severely affected and there should be an established market for both brick-and-mortar stores and online retail (Tait 2017). This model is reflective of the recommendations proposed within the grey literature surrounding the topic of ‘saving our shops’ with its focus on experiential retailing (e.g. Portas 2011; British Retail Consortium 2016; Grimsey 2018). However, while other parts of the sector (e.g. department stores) might be moving towards this model, there is little evidence to show that it is widely adopted in food retail. For this model to have any chance of working in practice, it is argued that in-store operations must recognise the value of continuously investing in the workforce (e.g. high-quality training and development). It is also suggested that employee engagement may be improved through decentralised decision-making and the restructuring of command and control, giving junior staff more responsibility and paying them adequately for it (Tait 2017). Finally, such an approach should not be ‘Luddite or retrogressive’ in its technology use or non-use. Instead, technology should be carefully adopted to improve the customer experience and build connections to the wider community. This notion of community building has been crucial in the context of the pandemic and is further explored.

5.4.1 Pre-pandemic context

5.4.1.1 Retaining the ‘human touch’

Some managers had a visible desire to retain the ‘human touch’ element, which the FS identified as being central to ‘competing on connectivity’, in two distinct ways. Firstly, through nurturing the provision of face-to-face service in-store and secondly, by returning to the core values or principles on which their organisations were founded. In the case of Retailer B, this meant adopting a ‘family-like’ approach to its workforce and a ‘softer’ attitude towards people management. The aims of managing organisational culture in this way are well reported, such as to instil discipline, integration and control among employees (Casey 1999). However, one senior manager (SM_2b) strongly disapproved of how this approach had been adopted in Retailer B. In their view managers were ‘too nice’ and a ‘hug would be enough to let employees get away with anything’. For others, retaining the ‘human touch’ meant returning to their founding principles and positioning themselves as a ‘community cornerstone’.
In the case of Retailer A, this meant investing more into community outreach programmes (e.g. engaging with local charities or encouraging employees to create partnerships in the local community) and providing local convenience stores in more isolated (less profitable) areas. In this case, the service/product/labour offering all had to be carefully managed for the model to remain feasible. For example, the provision of a face-to-face element in serving customers was deemed more important in certain locations than in others, depending on the community setting (e.g. in supermarkets located in an area with a larger older population or in community convenience shops). However, while Retailer A would claim that these decisions were adopted based on a return to their core values or ‘founding principles’, it was evident that there still needed to be a demand for these services for them to be deemed financially feasible.

5.4.1.2 Enhanced training offering

In terms of training, there were instances of established programmes and routes for progression in store which offered support for those keen to progress. However, it remained rare for someone from the store to move into the head office for anything other than a temporary secondment or to work in a team of retail support staff. In a small number of cases, moving between the store and head office could be achieved through the use of apprenticeships, although these types of programmes were becoming much less common across the sector as a whole. There remained a perception that these programmes increased loyalty and lowered turnover because trainee managers tended to stay on with the company even though they were under no financial obligations to do so. However, the degree apprentice included in the first round of interviews had left the company and the course by the time of the second for reasons not shared.

When hiring employees or choosing who should be put forward for progression opportunities, the ‘suitability and fit’ of employees were assessed above all else (e.g. skills, qualifications, experience), leaving scope for favouritism and discrimination within the hiring process. Furthermore, in the case of Retailer B, older employees felt excluded from progression opportunities because they did not feel proficient enough in using new technologies in-store. This feeling of exclusion was not helped by store management (and their negative perceptions of older workers mentioned previously), as they believed that the ageing team was a concern and found solace in the knowledge that “…that generation will go eventually” (HR_1b). This implied a perception among managers that older employees were not ‘worth’ the additional investment in training. Therefore, certain groups were scapegoated when management looked for someone to blame if a new process or technology did not ‘land’ as expected, put down to their age, ‘inability’ or ‘lack of willingness to change’.

5.4.1.3 Ensuring technology is ‘future fit’
The FS report suggests that through adopting a ‘competing on connectivity’ approach, firms will only invest in new technologies when they can directly improve customer service without detracting from the human-touch element. For some retailers, this simply meant ensuring that legacy technologies were intermittently replaced with newer models, yet often ‘new’ systems were already outdated when compared to what else is on the market. One regional HR manager (HR_1b) used the term ‘future fit’ almost like a mantra to convince herself (and others) that the stores in their region were no longer ‘behind the times’ when it came to the use of technologies. Despite this, it was clear that was a lack of continuous improvement in Retailers A and B. An operations manager in Retailer A voiced their frustration that often long-term technology strategies were abandoned once the technology was implemented, although they were the person in charge of retail change management at the time:

“…we need to get better at that sustainability in terms of 12-months down the line, are people still behaving the way that they were when they got this new shiny thing? Because sometimes it’s a bit of a fad, it’s great for a few weeks and then you get a bit bored of it because something else has come along so…” (RO_2a)

Nevertheless, there were some clear, successful (albeit significantly overdue) attempts at ensuring the business was ‘future fit’ through the digitalising of bureaucracy within stores. These long-term strategies were being rolled out in Retailers A and B at the time of the first interviews to achieve various aims of making the businesses more efficient, more compliant and ‘greener’ (by decreasing the amount of paper wastage). For example, the new task management systems in Retailer A were developed to reduce the time spent on administrative tasks (e.g. digital sign-ins, task management, temperature checks). An operations manager suggested that this frees up employees so that they could spend more time assisting customers, yet one could also suggest that it allowed them to reduce the number of labour hours needed per store.

It is also worth noting that with ‘competing on connectivity’ a standardised approach to technological change is not always appropriate. For example, in a small convenience store situated within a train station, there might be several self-service checkouts without scales (to reduce the need for interventions and increase the speed of delivery) with one staff member on the kiosk. In contrast, in a convenience store run by the same retailer, located in an area where the store is the only one of its kind in the community and the local demographic is older, there may be no self-service checkouts. A ‘competing on connectivity’ approach may also include no/low technology ‘solutions’ to improve productivity without taking away from the service. In Retailer A’s case, a head office team was set up to trial these different approaches. One method discussed as being ‘revolutionary’ for one operations manager (RO_3a) was moving stock above the shelves. This improved the ease with which shelves could be replenished when needed as stock was no longer put away out the back. Having previously worked in-stores, they explained that it “…makes huge savings in terms of efficiencies…” and that although it has changed the floor aesthetic, customers “…are not bothered, if anything it makes things easier for them”. Therefore, they believed it did not take anything away from the service offering.
Another example is the move away from 24-hours opening times, instead using twilight and late-night hours to replenish shelves and clean stores. This approach was believed to be more productive than trying to do these tasks while the store was open. However, closing the stores at night could have service implications that are also worth considering.

5.4.1.4 Diversifying store services

While diversifying services could be considered a product-related matter primarily, it has implications for the organisation of labour. Expanding the offering in-store is widely discussed within the grey literature as an approach that should be adopted more broadly throughout the retail sector as a way for brick-and-mortar retailers to maintain a place on the high street (Grimsey 2018). Improving the in-store offering is also relevant for food retailers looking for ways to get shoppers into stores instead of shopping online. This is preferred because of the lower margins online food shopping still offers. In the cases explored, there were two instances where physically going into the stores was appealing for customers. The first was for convenience (including the growing trend of providing ‘food-to-go’) and the second was to view the counters and fresh produce. The success of food-to-go relies heavily on its positioning at the front of the store. However, the success of the counters relies on investment in labour and the customer demand for it as a service.

Improving the counters has been quite a contentious issue within the sector and most major food retailers have chosen to scale back their offering. However, in one of the Retailer B stores visited, management had chosen to continue to invest in counters as it was believed to have become their niche offering in the market. One particularly confident store manager (SM_1b) went as far as to claim that other retailers were giving up because they were ‘doing it so well’, which demonstrates how highly they regarded their counters within the competitive market. Investing in fresh food counters had, in part, a positive effect on employment outcomes for employees based in this store as it offered a more diverse range of roles and a different set of skills in which they could be trained. However, some scaling back and de-skilling was also taking place at the same time. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability was a concern for another manager (SM_2b) who questioned the consequences of committing to this model once “…all of those old people die”. In an attempt to justify this somewhat disturbing assertion, they claimed their store attracted a much older demographic and believed their generation was the only group sustaining the demand for the fresh food counters because it offered a more traditional ‘market-like’ experience in-store.

The non-food offering also had the effect of increasing footfall and the average spend. For small convenience stores, diversifying the store offering was more challenging as there was less floor space to expand, but online-hybrid offerings (such as providing services where parcels could be collected) needed less space, brought potential customers into the stores and reinforced their position as being central to the community. Retailers with more floor space looked to other approaches to diversify their offering, such as renting out areas to other services which were highly demanded in the local area. A
store manager (SM_1b) spoke of how they owed a lot of their success to their café that provided affordable refreshments to shoppers who met socially in-store\textsuperscript{28}. They also explained that they were expanding the floor space allocated to their clothing range and were desperate for an in-store pharmacy as customers frequently requested it. The FS report noted that decentralising decision-making would be a particularly effective way for retailers to improve employee engagement and tailor their offering to their local demographic if ‘competing on connectivity’. However, this level of decision-making was centralised, leaving the store manager little discretion over what services could be brought in. Instead, secondments of managers to head office were frequently used in Retailers A and B to transfer store knowledge to head offices, instead of delegating the responsibility outward.

5.4.2 Pandemic context

The pandemic shifted demands and created a temporary situation where only essential food shopping could be carried out. Therefore, some of the additional services offered in stores were abandoned, demonstrating how ‘strategies’ are not always followed through to fruition given the propensity for unforeseen events. The ‘experience-led’ offering (e.g. fresh counters, additional in-store services) had to be suspended, which was believed to be damaging in the case of Retailer B as it was felt that losing their counter offering would make them ‘just like any other retailer’ (SM_1b). During this time, other retailers pulled back on their counter and non-food offering, citing the need to redistribute resources to other business areas where demand was higher and, in some cases, had no plans to re-open once the situation improved (e.g. 14NOV_DM, 8NOV_DM). Many also chose to expand into new forms of convenience shopping, opening new concessions and renting floor space to other service providers (e.g. 11FEB_DM, 1OCT_DM). In place of their food counters, Retailer B placed greater focus on their community offering, alongside other major retailers who ‘downed tools’ to ‘feed the nation’. Cynics in the media questioned whether ‘keeping the nation fed’ was ‘some wholesome act of altruism’ when it was ‘literally their job’ (Marlow, 2020). However, managers discussed their actions as though they had gone over and above what was typically expected. Either way, it was a new platform on which the supermarkets could compete.

Throughout the pandemic, the demand for online shopping increased significantly, but there was still a demographic for whom this type of shopping was less easily accessible. Retailer B acknowledged that a proportion of their customer base might not have internet access, so they rolled out a doorstep delivery scheme whereby vulnerable members of the community could contact a call centre (staffed by head office members of staff who would have otherwise been furloughed) to place an order from a pre-set list of around 40 essential items. These would then be delivered to the customer’s door with no minimum spend requirement and no delivery fees. When asked about the

\textsuperscript{28} During the pandemic there was an emphasis on the importance of re-opening higher-margin services such as cafés, but they were still unable to do so by the end of 2020.
drivers for running this scheme, the responses from management were conflicting but equally telling. Unprompted, one store manager suggested that the service was a significant loss-maker:

“Do we make money off it? No. Absolutely not. We don’t make money off doorstep delivery absolutely not. But is it the right thing to do knowing that somebody could potentially be at home, who doesn’t have internet access, isn’t savvy with the computer but can ring up the phone and can say, “…can you bring me this?” 100% the right thing to do.” (SM_1b)*

By contrast, a regional HR manager (HR_1b) claimed that the ‘top dogs, the shrewd businessmen’ would not have implemented the doorstep delivery service unless it would bring in money ‘that they had never had’. This conflicting narrative suggests that not only did the programme attract new customers to use the service, but it also attracted good publicity via the media, family, friends and members of the community who knew of others benefitting from this service. Other community services had a similar effect – such as supporting local charities and food banks, giving discounts to frontline workers and opening early for vulnerable people/NHS employees – as store management pitched them as altruistic moves to prop up the community in a time of need. Although it was evident that a lot of the work done by retailers throughout the pandemic did make a valued contribution to the lives of some, there was an aim to outperform competitors in the area. Getting positive publicity from elsewhere was particularly important when other aspects of their unique selling point had been temporarily removed. Local news outlets were keen to report on the community work and social media was also widely used by Retailers A and B (both internally and externally) to publicise what they had been doing online. One store manager (SM_1b) described these activities at length and was visibly interested in demonstrating the extent of the work they had been doing in their store. While there are clear benefits of adopting a community-focused approach, it is unclear whether firstly, these practices will extend beyond the spotlight of the pandemic, and secondly, whether these additional investments will lead to cost minimisation attempts elsewhere.

5.5 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has analysed three potential models for the future of retail work concerning the empirical evidence collected from interviews with head office employees and the newspaper analysis. Despite the ‘valuing workers’ narrative (returned to in the following chapter), there was little evidence of working conditions improving during the pandemic, as issues such as the intensification of work, the use of highly precarious contracts and understaffing all worsened. There was some evidence that technologies were being adopted to improve store efficiencies in terms of the ‘automating to efficiency model’. However, the analysis finds that often, these technologies only digitalised existing manual processes and still demanded a human element. During the pandemic, it could be argued that as many new retailers turned to online shopping there was a slight acceleration of technological change. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this shift was powered by labour (often on temporary or self-employed contracts) to satisfy the new demand. Thus the extent to which it was
'automation' should not be overstated. One would assume that the empirical evidence would strongly indicate a move towards this model based on the broader job elimination rhetoric. Yet, the use of sophisticated labour-saving technologies among food retailers remains relatively limited, at least in the UK. Finally, although 'competing on connectivity' would be considered an aspirational model for retailers, the focus on cost minimisation has hindered any attempts at successfully pursuing this hybrid approach. While the emphasis on community work did show some promise, the question remains as to whether this is likely to be sustained for any length of time as the 'new normal' resumes. Therefore, based on the data analysis, it is evident that no one food retailer is fully aligned to any one of the three models outlined in the FS report.

While no overarching strategy appears to dominate that spans labour, the product offering and use of technology. The low-road approach to labour management, all three case studies were found to be adopting approaches to the management of labour that could be considered synonymous with the 'squeezing the cost-base' model. Labour is perceived as a cost to be minimised; however, the physical presence of labour remains integral to the organisation of retail today. Short-termism continued to characterise decision-making because retailers favoured the flexibility offered by labour over the perceived riskier investments in new technologies. Therefore, the imminent challenges that workers face are centred primarily on job quality instead of the number of roles available. There was little evidence to suggest that supermarkets had the capacity, nor the willingness, to minimise labour costs in the long-term by replacing labour with technology on a large scale. Consequently, the future of work will likely be much more varied than current predictions suggest. Furthermore, the uncertainties that have characterised the pandemic context and how they have shaped processes of change throughout this period also need to be considered. They pay a helpful reminder that the future is unpredictable and that contextual shifts can transform working practices in ways that cannot be accurately forecasted using algorithms. These conclusions are returned to in more depth in Chapter 7, yet the evidence presented so far has made a strong case for being cautious of organisational strategies and decision-making processes and their implications for practice.
6 A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE VALUE OF FOOD RETAIL WORK

“So, I just think on the one hand there has been more of a recognition of the value of shop work... but then it’s been managed so punitively for so many years, I don’t think it has fundamentally changed at all really” (EO_1d*)

6.1 Introduction

In food retailing, much like many other industries in which women typically make up most of the workforce, the undervaluing of labour has historical precedence. Even before the Coronavirus pandemic, 48% of retail employees reported feeling less valued by their employer in the past five-years and 27% felt less valued by society (Usdaw 2017). However, during the pandemic, there was a renewed understanding of what forms of work should be considered critical to our survival in ‘unprecedented times’ prompting a new debate over what and who is valued within society. Therefore, this chapter aims to investigate whether a shift in the value of labour during the pandemic has occurred and what role the current debate has played in the process. Retail workers proved their ‘value’ to the public in terms of ‘keeping the nation fed’ and their ‘value’ to employers by allowing them to continue trading during a time of epidemiological crisis, yet the question remains as to whether retail workers themselves experienced an uplift in the value that could be derived from their roles. The debate surrounding the value of labour has only recently entered mainstream media discourse even though it has long been a topic of discussion for work and employment scholars (Hodder and Martínez Lucio 2021). However, in terms of offering a suitable framework for analysing current issues concerning food retail work, the traditional narrative surrounding the value of labour falls short. Therefore, it is useful to look to people’s needs from work which can provide a basis from which the value of the work can be assessed.

Acknowledging the need to look beyond pay, the findings presented in this chapter adopt the SOFLQ framework (Rubery and Howcroft, forthcoming) outlined in chapter 2. This moves the discussion somewhat away from the traditional, wage-focused conceptualisation of the value of labour which fails to sufficiently capture the value of feminised work and rather highlights the significance of other employment characteristics and how these are of value to different groups. It could be argued that the use of this framework brings the discussion closer to the literature on job quality, rather than the value of labour, since the SOFLQ framework can be used to set up the trade-offs of different employment characteristics (e.g. flexibility, intensity and hours versus wages). This also has wider relevance since the analysis within this chapter is drawn on later in the thesis to provide support to the argument within the critical future of work debate that it is the quality of work, rather than the quantity that is likely to be more imminently threatened by sociotechnical change (Spencer 2018) – thus rejecting the ‘fewer but better jobs’ narrative found within the retail literature (British Retail Consortium 2016a). However, while it is important to understand how job quality is changing, it is argued that this broader notion of the value
of labour better reflects the discourse during the pandemic surrounding the societal importance of this work and how this should be reflected in terms of pay and other conditions. Therefore, by adopting this critical feminist perspective of the value of labour, the empirical analysis is sufficiently reflective of the pandemic narrative surrounding this work and captures the degradation of job quality within the sector.

With this theoretical framing in mind, the empirical study aimed to investigate whether there has been a shift in the value of labour during the pandemic. It would be expected that if a meaningful revaluation of labour were to occur, the five SOFLQ dimensions would be visibly improved. The following discussion adopts this framework as a way to organise the analysis of the empirical findings. The chapter begins by outlining the framework and how it can be applied to the broader context of the pandemic. The empirical evidence is then systematically compared against each of the dimensions, so that an assessment can be made of the extent to which workers can derive value from their roles. First, the security of income is considered in relation to hourly rates of pay and contractual arrangements. Second, access to opportunity is discussed in relation to restructuring and pseudo-progression. Third, fair treatment at work is assessed in relation to the rise in abuse and worsening customer behaviour during the pandemic. Fourth, life beyond work is explored in relation both to childcare concerns and working time arrangements. Finally, the quality of work is examined in relation to work intensification and the use of technologies in stores. The empirical evidence drawn upon for this chapter includes interview data from employees working in non-managerial roles and senior trade union officials (before and during the pandemic). These interviews are supplemented by analysis from newspaper articles February 2020 and February 2021 to capture both the narrative of those working within stores/across the sector and the public narrative (including that of senior retail figures) to address the broader impact of the pandemic.

6.2 Framing the value of retail work

During the pandemic, the narrative surrounding work in certain key sectors, such as food retail, cleaning, nursing and social care, shifted (Hebson and Martínez Lucio 2020). There was a sense, within the media (e.g. 15APR_GR, 18APR_DM, 2MAY_M), that food retail work was for the first time being given the ‘recognition’ that it deserved. The weekly ‘clap for key workers’ on a Thursday evening was marketed as a public display of appreciation for these workers and their contribution throughout the first lockdown. This ‘thanking key workers’ narrative was popular within the media and amongst government and senior retail figures who were frequently quoted pointing out how integral these employees were during the pandemic in their efforts to ‘keep the nation fed’ (see Appendix 9 for examples). Statements from retailers often coincided with bonus or pay announcements when mass recruitment drives were being carried out or in articles in which issues surrounding worker abuse/harassment were reported. Therefore, retailers were keenly aware of a shift in the public sentiment surrounding these workers and felt that they could reiterate it intermittently throughout the pandemic to bolster their own public image alongside the image of their employees. However, despite this shift in the narrative surrounding these
workers and efforts to increase pay, the question remained as to whether this was enough for a revaluing of the work to occur.

As it was discussed in Chapter 2, theorisations on the value of labour that focus on pay and wages might lead one to assume that if the pay increase is significant, then a revaluation will have occurred. This is because, traditionally, value theory covered little more than standard, waged, routinised work carried out by men. It viewed value as a financial derivative that an employer extracts by paying labour less than the value of the goods produced, whereby labour receives value from the process in the monetary form of wages (Pitts 2021). Nevertheless, it is argued within the theoretical framework that this theory is insufficient because it fails to capture the other ways value can be derived from waged labour. For some, higher wages may be of less value if work does not fall within the standard employment relationship (SER) as they may lack other desirable protections that shape the overall experience of work (Bosch 2004). Consequently, it is necessary to look to other theoretical approaches to analyse how value can be better conceptualised, particularly when non-standard arrangements make up a large proportion of retail work. It is suggested that it is necessary to acknowledge how value has different meanings for different groups by analysing non-pay elements of the employment relationship. Therefore, there is a need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to assessing changes to the value of labour which is in keeping with the SST lens and broader theoretical framing of the study.

This chapter draws on the multi-dimensional SOFL framework (Rubery et al. 2018) which includes: issues related to income security, access to opportunity, fair treatment at work and the recognition of life beyond work. The framework has more recently been extended to include a fifth dimension, the quality and meaning of work (SOFLQ), so that the framework can be more widely applied to issues related to work and employment in the context of the future of work debate (Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming). The analysis of the value of labour can be extended to work that falls beyond the SER by drawing on Bosch’s (2004) notion of de-commodification from which the SOFLQ framework was developed. It can be argued that one would expect to see at least a partial de-commodification across each of the five dimensions if a revaluation had taken place. Within this framework, the importance of wages in relation to income security is acknowledged, yet the role of pay is not overemphasised due to recognition of other parts of the employment relationship and the significance they hold for different groups. Thus, the following analysis seeks to explore each job quality indicator in relation to the empirical findings to assess the extent to which the value of retail labour has changed throughout the pandemic. These findings are also presented in Appendix 10 to show a comparison across each of the five dimensions.

6.3 Security
While pay should not be considered in isolation, money is inherently central to how value has been traditionally conceptualised. As Harvey (2018, p.1) notes in relation to waged work, “...money enters the picture as a material representation of value. Value cannot exist without its representation”. However, the weakness of this traditional conceptualisation is that it typically pays little attention to non-monetary representations of value and fails to consider how value may be subjective across groups with different perceptions of what is valuable to them. As Rubery et al. (2018, p.515) argue, security in employment requires income guarantees across work and non-work periods, but their analysis also acknowledges that levels of pay are not the only method through which security can be guaranteed. In the UK, pay is protected, in part, by minimum wage legislation, but few protections exist in relation to hours and the use of certain types of contracts that fall outside the SER. As it was found in Chapter 3, short-hours contracts are preferable for retail employers because they allow them to avoid paying national insurance contributions and give them greater scheduling flexibility (Gregory 1991; Perrons 2000). The use of these contracts is problematic as the burden of risk and uncertainty is more likely to fall on the employee who may also be limited in terms of the other benefits they can access (e.g. sick pay, training and career developments) and the insecurity they experience as a result (Findlay and Thompson 2017). Therefore, when analysing income security and the changes that might be necessary for a revaluing of labour, it is necessary to look at pay, the hours provision and the contract type, among other things.

6.3.1 Hourly rates of pay

Long-term increases in hourly pay were adopted during the pandemic in five out of the ten retailers and all three of those included as a case study (see Figure 21). In the case of Retailer B, a collective agreement on pay was reached, increasing the rate from £9.20 to £10 as a minimum for all retail employees. This increase was significant and remains one of the most notable increases in pay within food retail (on a global scale) negotiated through collective bargaining during the pandemic (Rubery et al. forthcoming). This long-term commitment to increase pay was a certain improvement regarding the necessary revaluing of this work, yet a national officer (NO_2d) explained that the £10 an hour deal had been ‘in the works’ for some time before the pandemic. Nevertheless, others involved in the negotiations felt their bargaining position was strengthened because it was the wages of the people “...who kept the business going throughout the pandemic” (AO_1d*) which were on the negotiating table. Despite this, the final deal negotiated included only an increase in pay and did not include the protection of other terms and conditions. The union representatives believed that they would have a chance to negotiate on these terms and conditions at a later date (i.e. when the agreement was up for renewal). However, in the meantime, employees were left feeling vulnerable with regard to how their wider income security might be affected as a result of the hourly pay increase (see Section 6.3.2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retailer</th>
<th>Increase to at least £9.50 (announced Sept 2020, not yet in effect) from £9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Increase to at least £10 (announced Feb 2021, in effect from April 2021) from £9.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer C</td>
<td>Increase to £9.55 (announced Jan 2021, in effect) from £9.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 21 Case study pay increases (during the pandemic)*

Although union negotiators welcomed these pay increases, there was an awareness elsewhere in the union that focusing too heavily on pay can be “…unhelpful when women’s work is concerned” (EO_2d*). Both equalities officers who were interviewed argued that although the importance of pay was evident, other aspects also shape work in a meaningful way and thus other elements might be of greater importance to different groups:

“I think unions, we rightly focus on pay but we’ve always thought that most of our women members don’t wake up and think about their pay packet, they wake up and think about how the hell am I going to juggle the fact that the kids are at home, with home-schooling and the fact that they have to go to work. So, I think… even before the pandemic, the primary issue concerning women on a day-to-day basis was juggling work and family life. I think a narrow focus on pay which unions including ourselves have had for a very long time, does not reflect the reality of everyday life for our members.” (EO_1d*)

They suggested that for those with caring responsibilities, what may be of ‘value’ may not be their hourly pay primarily, but rather genuine flexible working arrangements that enable them to fit work around the demands of the household. Without access to genuine flexibility, the work may be entirely unfeasible. This demonstrates the need for a framework through which the importance of these non-pay elements can be highlighted.

### 6.3.1.1 Protecting terms and conditions

It was suggested by union officials that greater variance could be seen across the terms and conditions offered by retailers than across the level of pay itself, supporting the need to emphasise non-pay elements within the analysis. For example, before the pandemic, Retailer C was a ‘leader’ in pay within the sector. A union official (AO_4d) believed that this higher rate of pay was in place to initially attract potential employees to apply to work for them over competitors given the density of supermarkets in some local areas. However, they offered little else in terms of enhanced terms and conditions:

“…Retailer C staff get £9.40 an hour, however, everything else is statutory minimum. Statutory minimum on holidays, statutory minimum on sick pay, statutory minimum on pension. They don’t get
anything else... so they only attract the staff because of the rate of pay. The way they get treated in Retailer C is absolutely appalling...” (AO_4d)

As this area official explained, higher rates of pay were not always viewed positively if they were provided in place of other benefits, such as sick pay, good pensions, secure hours and pay-related bonuses. In line with this trend, it was reported by union officials that there had been a weakening of the contractual offering in the four biggest supermarkets, yet at the same time, the hourly rate had increased ahead of the NLW. A national officer explained how another major food retailer (not in the cases) was issuing new contracts to long-standing employees with worse terms and conditions to reduce labour costs (including the end to paid breaks, public holiday entitlements, set shifts and night-shift premiums):

“...they were clearly doing was enhancing the rate, to stay ahead of the NLW, by cutting terms and conditions to offset what they would have to pay in the NLW. Cos" the new contract originally was voluntary and it was £1 an hour more than the minimum wage, and where it is now, it is about 46p now. This was clearly a strategy of saying that they are going to have to pay out for the NLW and they can offset what they are gonna have to pay out by cutting terms and conditions and increasing flexibility. So, that was a strategy from them.” (NO_1)

Retailers pre-empted NLW increases by making small pay concessions and cutting terms and conditions which allowed them to sustain margins. This national officer also argued that these contractual changes were made to push out long-standing employees on ‘better’ contracts that the company deemed ‘no longer viable’ (as discussed in chapter 5). In support of this, another union official (AO_2d) suggested that new employees were considered as not being ‘career minded’ and were brought in to ‘fill a gap’ which retailers used as justification for the creation of new, precarious contract-types. This was justified by retailers as though it was a supply as opposed to a demand-driven decision. As a consequence, it was often older employees on ‘better’ contracts that were being replaced by younger workers and students because they ‘enjoyed the flexibility’.

It is also worth noting that in the interviews carried out before the pandemic, issues surrounding hourly rates of pay often did not feature as a central issue raised by union officials or customer assistants. The scrapping of the loyalty bonus scheme in Retailer B was an exception to this as the decision had been made around the time of the first interviews. Employees who had been at the company for five years were no longer eligible for a yearly bonus at Christmas which left several customer assistants (CA_1b and CA_2b) and a supervisor (TL_1b) feeling as though their employer no longer valued their contribution. The link between one-off pay rewards and notions of value were also visible throughout the pandemic. Retailers A, B and C all announced pay-related bonuses to ‘thank workers’29. In all three of the cases included within this study, bonuses were paid out to all shop floor

29 Retailer A: 12-month 6% bonus, Retailer B: £100 (plus £50 store credit) and an extra day holiday; Retailer C: 10% one-month bonus
and distribution staff. However, the newspaper analysis revealed other cases in which retailers only gave bonuses to the permanent members of staff and employees who had passed probation (2MAY_M). In these cases, the decision to exclude temporary employees highlighted the contradiction between the narrative surrounding the 'valued' contribution of people 'stepping up' to work during the pandemic and the practical realities of who was perceived as being worthy of these financial rewards. Furthermore, while it is important not to downplay these bonuses in the wider revaluing debate, it could be argued that they only provide a short-term fix to what is a long-term issue regarding how the work should be valued.

6.3.2 Short-hours contracts and 'flexible' working

Warren (2015a) has argued that it is necessary to analyse hourly pay in relation to the contract and the number of hours worked. When interviewing people working on hourly-paid contracts or discussing the matter with union officials, it was not uncommon to ask questions about pay and for the response to be in terms of hours instead (suggesting that the two are considered synonymous with one another):

“...there’s a trend of low pay, insecure work... Although many don’t have zero-hour contracts, contract hours generally have become lower and then people around are having to do overtime to make up hours, but they’re not guaranteed hours. I think the issue is definitely pay, which obviously affects other sectors as well.” (NO_1)

This national officer also noted how, without enough hours, total pay is low even if considerations such as the Real Living Wage are met. While campaigns have highlighted the need for protections that ensure living hours alongside living wages (Living Wage Foundation 2019), it is arguably a less eye-catching narrative for retailers when considering their public image. A higher hourly rate may allow employers to avoid making commitments to hours, giving them additional flexibility. When speaking to union officials and other people working within the sector, it was made clear that short-hours contracts are a central issue experienced by retail employees:

“I have a problem when they’re 7.5-, 10-hour contracts. You know just use and abuse and then fill in with overtime as and when. That’s not really stability. So, what we are pushing Tesco’s and the other retailers for is more meaningful contractual hours. They should be minimum of 16-hours. Longer if we can get away with it. Just so then people aren’t stuck. 16-hours gives them a minimum base to work from. But anything less than that is not really meaningful, in my opinion. It serves a purpose and that’s all it does.” (AO_2d*)

This official believed that these contracts served a purpose for retailers seeking hyper-flexible working arrangements, so they could scale labour more closely to demand. In the case of Retailer B, it was not uncommon for employees to be contracted for less than ten-hours per week but work at least
twenty-hours on average. While all hourly paid employees had a specified number of hours written into their contracts, the hours provision was caveated with the clause: ‘The company retains the right to vary these hours/days according to the needs of the business.’ Therefore, these short-hours arrangements acted as though they were zero-hours contracts, with an additional obligation on the part of the employee to accept shifts that fell beyond the minimum hours specified (see also Incomes Data Research 2018). The use of these short-hours arrangements alongside the flexibility clause allowed the employer to “…cut down everyone’s hours to their contracted hours to save money” (CA_6b*) during quieter periods (informed by data from EPOS systems). Thus, short-hours arrangements can be valuable to an employer seeking to cut costs in the short-term (as the previous chapter addressed), yet they are less valuable for employees when compared with something more ‘meaningful’ in terms of the security they offer. However, Bosch (2004) believes that the fact that these types of contracts are more valuable to employers is a common misconception because in the long-term their use can lead to a lack of worker cooperation and poor returns on investment in human capital.

During the pandemic, Retailer B negotiated over hourly pay, but much like the equalities officers quoted previously, a customer assistant argued that a different approach should have been taken:

“…what they’ll do is put it to £10 per hour and then cut hours. You hear the people manager say that they haven’t got enough hours this week. They are tight on hours this week meaning they can’t afford to give out hours. There is actually a quota on how many hours they can have and that is always being cut, as well as how much money they can spend on staffing a week... So, there needs to be some kind of guarantee.” (CA_4b*)

Employees were concerned that the pay rise may not necessarily benefit them financially if there were no guarantees regarding the provision of hours. These employees experienced first-hand the volatility with which the allocation of hours was managed and did not feel reassured (or revalued as such) by the pay increase alone. However, a national union officer claimed that the increase in hourly pay would not affect the hours budget allocated to stores:

“People were worried that they were going to lose hours and they didn’t. History shows us that is not the case… If running the store takes 100 staff, then if today that takes 100 staff on £9.20 to do that, tomorrow if they are on £10 an hour and [Retailer B] says we are only going to have 50 staff now, they are going to lose those sales because they are not going to have the staff to put the stock on the shelves. So, it’s not logical for the business to do that. Although I fully understand why staff might worry about that…” (NO_2a*)

This belief that hours should not change was informed by a historical precedent. The officer claimed that after a previous pay increase in 2015, there was no reduction in hours allocated to stores. This was used as justification for why the union did not negotiate additional protections surrounding hours in the round of bargaining during the pandemic. However, this claim seemed inconsistent with
wider sectoral trends whereby the number of hours offered in stores had fallen in recent years (as operations and HR managers noted). Furthermore, the national officer suggested that although they understood employees’ concerns surrounding hours, stores were already operating on a very tight hourly budget because of lean management practices that had been brought in. In their view, this meant that it would not be possible for retailers to reduce the number of hours allocated to stores because of the pay increases, without the level of service suffering as a result:

“… stores don’t have the luxury of extra people now, or extra hours knocking around that they can say, “…actually we can get rid of 20-hours now”. That’s the reality, they are all run so leanly on how many hours they need and how many staff they have to meet the forecasted sales…” (NO_2a*)

This assertion fails to acknowledge that there was an ongoing trend of retailers compromising on their service offering in favour of lowering costs, as the previous chapter explored, thus rendering this justification somewhat less convincing. Despite the lack of clarity surrounding hours, Retailer B had identified some of the areas that would finance the pay increase:

“(i) Reinvesting the performance-driven Mystery Shopper bonus of £25 million*, which is worth £0.20 per hour, into base pay so payments are guaranteed and paid for every hour worked;
(ii) Investing an additional £85 million in base pay, which is worth around £0.60 per hour, so all frontline colleagues in-store receive £10 per hour as a minimum (following a probationary period)”
(Retailer B Director of HR in a letter to employees)

However, while £0.60 of the pay increase was going to be funded by the scrapping of another bonus, an additional £0.40 per hour needed to be funded from elsewhere in the business. Therefore, employees speculated that the pay increase would ultimately lead to a further reduction in hours by April 2021 when it was introduced.

6.3.3 Temporary contracts and the pandemic

The pandemic narrative in the media focused largely to on the job creation that occurred during March and April when panic buying was at its peak and demand for online shopping surged. It was acknowledged in the media that many of the jobs were temporary. However, the overarching narrative amplified the voices of food retailers and their seemingly altruistic ‘commitments’ to hire employees “…who have lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and have been left with deep concerns about their household budgets” (16MAR_M). Yet, unsurprisingly, there was little reflection as to the nature of the contracts being offered. In one of the articles in which the temporary nature of the contracts was acknowledged, a distasteful headline accompanied it which made light of how these employees were

30 34% of all the articles reviewed included comments related to job creation during the pandemic (e.g. 5AUG_FT, 11JAN_M, 22MAR_M).
treated as though they were disposable by retailers and thus were “…getting ready to checkout” (23APR_TM). Therefore, although there was some recognition at the media-level of the work that supermarket employees were doing throughout the pandemic, it cannot be assumed that it was always helpful in fostering support for them.

In the cases, it was found that there was a range of uses of temporary workers during the pandemic. In Retailer A, agency staff were hired to carry out 'less sensitive' tasks (e.g. shelf stacking and door marshalling, instead of money handling) and in Retailer B, new ‘Covid contracts’ were created for the hiring of temporary staff. In the case of the latter, these contracts were one-week rolling arrangements in which employees could be let go with one weeks’ notice when they were no longer needed. All but one of the customer assistants interviewed during the pandemic were employed on this one-week rolling (‘Covid’) contract, none of whom had been made permanent, even when ‘normal’ trading resumed a year later. Therefore, the positive job creation narrative presented within the media at times contradicted the lived realities of working in the sector (see Figure 22) and the extent to which they felt valued in their roles. For the example presented below it is possible to see how employment security is central to how some customer assistants perceive their work, which is related to the contract type offered during the pandemic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retailer B CEO</th>
<th>Retailer B Customer Assistant (CA_4b*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Our highly valued colleagues have stood tall amidst the coronavirus pandemic, playing their full part in feeding the nation. We want to thank every single one of them for their continued hard work during these unprecedented times by paying a much higher guaranteed bonus for the whole year in recognition of their effort” (19APR_M)</td>
<td>“…you can do all the other piecemeal things to make yourself look good but if you don’t wanna pay for staff… when people talk about ‘response to Covid’ they think of it in terms of the community and the shoppers, but what about us? How have they responded to their staff? Have they given us any security? No, they are just hiring and firing and taking people on really dodgy contracts… If you were working there you would feel like the company was skint. But I’m sure with Corona they’ve made loads of money.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 22 Retailer B narrative comparisons

Some argue that the pandemic opened a window for employers to justify the use of less secure contracts that previously had only been used at Christmas (Bozkurt 2015; Herman et al. 2021). This seemed to be the case in Retailers A and B as there was no suggestion that these temporary employees would be made permanent. During Christmas 2020, hiring surged for the second time and stores took on staff for the one-week leading up to the holiday. The same customer assistant (CA_4b*) compared the use of these roles as being “…like we’ve gone back to Victorian times, where people are just picked up for a week and then dropped”. This customer assistant was further critical of Retailer B’s intentions when asked about the community work which they had been carrying out throughout the pandemic, as they believed there were inconsistencies between the commitment their employer had made to their
local community and the way that they treated their staff due to the nature of the contracts that they were offering:

“…they try to push this whole sense of…we are the local supermarket, we are a community… They try to do food bank drives and that but then I’m like, well if you hired somebody that needs a full-time job with kids and then you cut their hours down to 12-hours a week, where do you think they are going to end up? They are going to end up at a food bank.” (CA_4b*)

This customer assistant felt a strong sense of injustice working within their role and they made an interesting observation regarding the hypocrisy they believed existed behind their employers charitable actions. As noted, the short-hours contracts offered in this store might not be enough for people to survive, forcing them to turn to food banks as a last resort. This quote is compelling in demonstrating how working hours and the employment contract feed directly into issues related to financial insecurity and the subjective extent to which workers feel valued. Lastly, it further demonstrates the disjuncture between the public-facing image employers aim to portray (i.e. their image in the media) and the day-to-day realities experienced by those working in-store.

6.4 Opportunity

Rubery et al. (2018, p.514) identify access to opportunity through mutual investment in training, skills, and careers as the second dimension protected within the SER. Within this, they include the need for inclusive progression and flexible working opportunities, particularly for those with caring responsibilities (Rubery et al. 2018). However, progression opportunities within food retail can be limited, exacerbated by decades of delayering (Beynon et al. 2002), the gendering of full/part-time work within the sector and the need to be fully flexible in managerial roles (Perrons 2000). Furthermore, as the previous chapter explored, assumptions based on age and lack of training have also prevented older employees from having fair access to progression opportunities. Perrons (2000) finds that space and time constraints are instrumental in impeding women's career progression in the retail sector because managerial jobs are often reserved for full-time employees. Thus, different gender expectations/stereotyped assumptions play a vital role in shaping the opportunities available to women. In support of this, the empirical evidence shows that genuine opportunities for those wanting to progress within food retailing are limited and that more needs to be done for a revaluing to occur when progression issues are considered.

6.4.1 Restructuring and pseudo-progression

In supermarket retailing, supervisors have been left highly vulnerable to successive (and at times yearly) organisational restructures in which roles such as store HR, departmental managers and other assistant managerial roles have been widely cut. The typical hierarchical structure within the
sector has transformed into one which is relatively flat at the store level, yet there remains some variation between retailers (e.g. Retailer C has a flatter structure than Retailer B). As mentioned in the previous chapter, ahead of restructuring, there tends to be a period of ‘building capabilities’ (a term used in both Retailer A and B) which ‘prepared’ junior staff to take on additional responsibilities before the role of their senior was made redundant. Often, these additional responsibilities were undertaken for little or no extra pay and were described by the union as ‘dangling the carrot of progression’ (AO_1d). The union largely discouraged agreeing to do extra work to avoid ‘legitimising the employers’ actions’ (AO_1d). However, it was acknowledged that in practice, it can be difficult for employees to refuse to carry out additional tasks because favourable treatment will be given to those members of staff most willing to ‘be a team player’ (i.e. better shifts for those willing to take on more than their fair share).

In the case of Retailer B, checkout managers were delegated the task of doing their own rotas which previously had been carried out by store HR managers who were being made redundant. However, the delegation of these rotas was supposedly facilitated by the implementation of new electronic payroll systems as the previous chapter addressed. In one store, it was widely suggested that managing rotas had become the ‘most stressful’ job in the store and had caused one of the team leaders (TL_1b) to step down from their previous role as checkout manager entirely. Not only was it challenging because supervisors were expected to cover both the traditional and self-service checkouts, but they also had the job of trying to ‘make the hours add up’ (i.e. getting people to agree to overtime). Similarly, another customer assistant (CA_2b) described how they left the company altogether (only to return later) because they lacked support as a checkout manager.

It was also noted how the remaining middle-management roles were intensified as the number of employees on the shop floor fell. Employees noted instances both before and during the pandemic in which managers would end up working on the checkouts and stacking shelves because there was not enough staff in:

“I’m like, why aren’t my managers replying to my emails?! And then I’m seeing them on the fecking checkout! I’m seeing them doing shelves, and I’m like… oh that’s why the people manager isn’t replying to my emails. It’s probably not their fault either.” (CA_4b*)

As noted, store management were frequently accused of being unresponsive to employees’ requests via email, but it was acknowledged that they were often doing tasks on the shop floor to keep the store functioning day-to-day. In support of this, a union official (AO_2d) also suggested that store managers were under immense pressure to implement head office decisions and manage the fall-out in their respective stores, thus further intensifying their work.

6.5 Fair treatment
Rubery et al. (2018, pp.518–9) define fair treatment at work to include the extension of employment rights and standards across all workers, compensation for/mitigation of additional risks and access to voice mechanisms. In the context of the pandemic, the fair treatment of food retail workers has proved to be central to how workers are valued by the public and their employers, based on the extent to which they are protected from external risks (including health, safety and financial risks). Issues surrounding dignity and respect have been especially pertinent as new fears and anxieties have been associated with day-to-day working on the ‘frontline’ during the pandemic (Martínez Lucio and McBride 2020). The poor treatment received by some food retail workers has been linked to the low financial value attributed to this work and the extent to which it is viewed as low/un-skilled (Martínez Lucio and McBride 2020). SST theorists would argue that retail work is classified as low/un-skilled because of the social construction of skills associated with ‘women’s work’ and how they are valued which has little to do with the actual demands of the work itself (Cockburn 1983). Therefore, it is also possible to identify an overlap between the treatment of workers and how they are valued socially in relation to interactions with customers and their managers. Without using this multi-dimensional framework, these 'social' interactions would not be captured within the analysis of the value of work, despite them being central to workers’ everyday experiences.

6.5.1 Coronavirus safety measures

The mainstream media coverage of food retail was filled with reports31 outlining what employers were doing to ensure their stores were 'Covid-safe' for the public (and their employees) (e.g. 8APR_TG, 20SEP_GR, 1MAR_M). These articles covered virus prevention measures such as personal protective equipment (PPE), use of contactless cards, social distancing measures, changes to opening times, the closure of counters, home delivery provisions, measures for the clinically vulnerable, key worker hours, limiting the number of customers in the store, sick and self-isolation pay and so on. In support of these measures, union officials generally agreed that there had been a ‘race to the top’ in Coronavirus prevention measures among retailers. These, they believed, were put in place to ensure that customers felt safe enough to continue coming into stores rather than turn to competitors who had comparatively better measures in place:

“At the end of the day with the supermarkets, people aren’t going to go in to shop if they don’t feel safe. People aren’t going to come to work if they don’t feel safe. So, I think they were probably forced into putting measures in.” (AO_2d*)

In the case of Retailer B, company newsletters were distributed to employees outlining the safety measures in place and the reasons why they believed their employees should continue coming into work. However, in practice on the shop floor, the rules were not always followed. According to the RSA (2020), 66% of supermarket employees felt at significant risk of catching the virus at work (higher

31 Reports that discussed virus prevention measures accounted for 25% of the articles analysed
than NHS staff) which suggests that workers felt as though the measures in-stores were not being implemented in their full (or proper) capacity, were insufficient or were unfit for purpose. In one store, it was reported that a manager persistently refused to stick to the legal guidelines around how many people should be in at one time because they thought that having queues outside the store ‘looked bad’ and led to customer complaints. As a consequence, a customer assistant working in this store explained how they had a panic attack on a weekend shift whilst working on the checkout because they felt overwhelmed by how busy the store was:

“I do consider myself to have anxiety but it’s never crippled me before. But looking around the shop on that Saturday afternoon I was like, “…oh my god what is going on”. I was sitting there in my mask and I was literally petrified. It gets to a point with people when you know, we’ve been doing this since March, there’s only so much I can tell them.” (CA_5b*)

Being crippled with anxiety was not an uncommon experience for those working during the pandemic. According to the RSA, over half of supermarket workers have found it more difficult to maintain their mental health since February 2020 (Jooshandeh 2020). Therefore, for employees, being subject to the managers’ apparent disregard of the rules will likely have a direct impact on their safety and how valued they feel.

6.5.1.1 Provision for self-isolation

The safety measure which featured most prominently in the interviews was the provisions made for people who needed to self-isolate or were advised to shield by the government because of age or pre-existing health conditions. These measures also have wider relevance for the income security dimension because, for employees who were unable to work during the height of the pandemic, payments were made by employers or the state to cover non-work periods. Food retailers largely agreed to the mandate for ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ people to stay at home on full pay and made little use of the furlough scheme overall, as discussed in Chapter 3. Support for self-isolation was important to ensure that the virus was not spread in stores. However, leave for employees who had to self-isolate due to Coronavirus-related illness (either symptoms or a positive test) or having contact with someone with the virus was frequently noted as an issue by employees and union officials. If financial support was not provided to cover employees for these periods of self-isolation, it was argued by the union that many would feel as though they had no financial option but to go into work even if they had developed symptoms.

In September 2020, the government agreed to a £500 payment for people to stay home while self-isolating for two weeks (if they were in receipt of other benefits), yet before this support was in

---

32 Retainer B, along with several others, publicly announced their decision to ‘hand back’ government support, including business rates relief and furlough payments, acknowledging that the pandemic did not negatively impact their sales.
place, food retailers had made alternative arrangements for people who needed to stay at home temporarily. Such provisions were outlined on the website of Retailer B stating the following:

“Those who are sick with the Coronavirus will receive sick pay whether or not they would normally be eligible. Colleagues who are affected either because of self-isolation or by playing their part in looking after close family members or the vulnerable in their local community will also be eligible for sick pay, alternative shifts or holiday.”

Despite this suggesting that sick pay, alternative shifts or holiday could be used, union officials suggested that Retailer B had agreed to automatically extend full sick pay to all employees self-isolating, including those who are not typically eligible in the first instance based on their weekly discussions with senior management:

“They went above and beyond in terms of… especially when it came to payments for staff that had to quarantine and self-isolate, they were very clear and in terms of what they would pay even surpassed what we thought they would do, they were way above the minimum. And as a result, it didn’t take long for other retailers to follow suit. They had no option cus’ in terms of the brand damage…” (AO_2d*)

While it was suggested that employers guaranteed these provisions at a senior level, there were clear examples locally whereby this was not followed through in practice. At the store level, some managers were choosing or claiming to offer ‘alternative shifts’ as per the policy. However, offering employees different shifts has minimal effect on workers on variable, short-hours contracts if they are in a position where they need to make up two weeks' worth of unpaid leave. Therefore, sick pay should have been provided in these cases by retailers according to the union. Despite this, there was little evidence of these payments being made in the case of Retailer B. All five of the employees (from two different Retailer B stores) working in non-managerial roles who were interviewed during the pandemic had to self-isolate, yet none were paid to do so. This presents a telling example of how ‘commitments’ might be agreed to at a national level but are not then implemented at the store level which can leave workers in a particularly vulnerable situation. It is then up to the individuals to refer to the policy or seek help from trade union representatives to support their appeal, yet it is well known within the sector that employees are often unlikely to pursue grievances if they think it might impact how they are viewed by management.

An equalities officer voiced their concerns more generally surrounding the attitude towards sickness absence within the sector, suggesting that managers often assume “…that you’re up to something, you are swinging the lead and there is very little genuine sickness” (EO_1d*). In terms of the pandemic, this disbelief surrounding sickness absence was reflected in some approaches taken by other employers. For example, in the case of another major retailer, it was agreed that they would pay for the first two-week period of self-isolation that employees had to undertake but not for any weeks that
occurred after that (26APR\_TG). This example was interpreted by union officials as suggesting that “...somehow, the fact that you had to self-isolate again was your fault and that you should have managed your life better” (EO\_1d\*). In the case of Retailer B, not only were employees not paid for their periods of self-isolation in the cases mentioned, but a couple also reported unfavourable treatment from managers after they returned to work. A sense of hostility was experienced by one customer assistant when they recounted their experience of taking time off for self-isolation:

“I had time off because I thought I had Covid and to be honest I was a bit scared to go back to work. They weren't very understanding. I know [CA\_4b] had a situation and there was gossip that they started faking it and stuff... They are meant to do a return to work if you are off sick, they never actually did that with me, but I never really brought it up with anyone. Just from the tone of everyone and they asked me for proof which is obviously understandable but just the tone that everyone came off at just wasn't very supportive...” (CA\_5b\*)

The customer assistants interviewed at Retailer B during the pandemic felt their managers distrusted them because they were younger. Several commented that they believed student workers, in particular, were not trusted by management when they had to take time off to self-isolate as there was an assumption that they were lying or had been breaking lockdown rules. In one case, a customer assistant had travelled home for a dentist appointment and felt their actions were justified, despite it being a grey area in the lockdown rules:

“I rang up my manager, the main manager, they had a massive go at me for going home. I said to him, it was for an appointment, it’s not like I have been to a party... They said, "...well we are not paying you for it because you have broken lockdown rules" and put the phone down on me.” (CA\_7b\*)

Additionally, none of the customer assistants interviewed had ‘return to work’ meetings which, according to national policy, should have been carried out after the period of self-isolation. However, a union official (EO\_1d\*) suggested that return to work meetings could, at times, constitute a ‘hostile environment’ within the sector and might not be helpful for these returning employees.

Self-isolation was also a concern for pregnant women. There were issues raised regarding the provision of paid maternity suspension for pregnant women, all of whom were considered ‘clinically vulnerable’ for shielding purposes by the government. An equalities officer noted frustration with the guidance issued by Retailer B which stated that their interpretation of the shielding measures would only cover pregnant women who raise ‘genuine concerns’. They felt this tone suggested that “…pregnant women are habitually known for making things up” (EO\_1d\*). In this case, individual risk assessments were carried out by Retailer B store managers even though there was national advice that pregnant women should shield like others in the ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ group. In some cases, pregnant women were asked to work from home in temporary call centre roles. In other cases, attempts were made to redeploy these women into ‘safer’ areas of the workplace:
“...earlier on in the pandemic, some employers' initial response was, ...okay we get that pregnant women shouldn't be in customer-facing roles so we will put them in the back room of the store... but of course then they couldn't socially distance from colleagues.” (EO_1d*)

For certain retailers, there was a clear assumption in Retailer B that redeploying pregnant workers provided them with sufficient protection, as they were offering the following:

“This risk assessment enables the colleagues and line managers/people manager to assess the level of risk and agree any mitigating action and reasonable adjustments e.g. redeployment, change of shifts etc. to ensure that the colleague can continue to follow national guidance on social distancing. Ultimately, if this was not possible, we would either explore the possibility of home working and where that's not possible, we would place the colleague on suspended paid leave until the start of her maternity leave or until the risk no longer exists.” (Head of Employee Relations via Pregnant Then Screwed)33

‘Pregnant Then Screwed’ is a charity that supports women who have faced maternity or pregnancy discrimination. From their perspective, any provision which required pregnant women to travel into the workplace was problematic. This view was supported by the union, not just because of the physical threat whilst at work, but also due to the potential risk of travelling in and the overall psychological effects which it could have. Therefore, it was found at first that the link between the protection of pregnant workers and how they are valued was less clear when compared to the other dimensions analysed. However, it is quite possible to see how employers treat their workers with regard to health and safety (and how this compares between groups) will directly shape employees sense of personal value vis-à-vis their colleagues.

6.5.2 Customer interactions

As is the case for most customer service work, daily experiences are shaped by interactions with colleagues and customers. However, over two-thirds of supermarket workers reported not feeling supported by the public during the pandemic (Jooshandeh 2020). Inevitably, this strength of feeling will have been shaped by direct interactions with customers and how they influence employees' perceptions of whether their work is ‘valued’. The pandemic provided an opportunity to shift this narrative based on the belief that “...key workers are more likely to be noticed as human beings” (EO_2d*), despite how disconcerting this may seem. The ‘Clap for Key Workers’ provided some recognition, yet even then there remained a feeling among some employees (e.g. HR_2b) that food retail workers were not viewed in the same way as other critical staff such as those working in the NHS.

---

33 Exert from a letter collected during fieldwork provided by Pregnant Then Screwed.
Furthermore, retail workers were reported as being targets of abuse during the pandemic and although this behaviour was not representative of the public as a whole, the reports were relatively widespread (Hadjisolomou 2020; USDAW 2021). These reports ranged from outright instances of physical and verbal abuse to other inconsiderate behaviour (such as rule-breaking and incorrect mask-wearing). Therefore, the threat of people behaving abusively, experienced alongside some of the more frequent micro-aggressions/acts of defiance, would have inevitably contributed to supermarket workers feeling as though their contribution was not valued. It could be argued that the media had a significant part to play in the treatment of workers as it was pushing an ‘empty shelves’ narrative which had the indirect effect of heightening tensions within stores (e.g. 29NOV_DM24 8SEP_M, 10MAR_DM, 19MAR_TM). Furthermore, the pressures of the pandemic created an environment in which customers were seemingly more anxious because of the ever-changing rules brought in by the government and the threat of infection in public spaces.

6.5.3 Refusal to adhere to the rules

Not all the instances of rule-breaking were noted as intentionally malicious, but they indicated a lack of awareness and respect among some customers which fed into how workers felt the public perceived them. At times, this lack of awareness was met with employees’ frustrations surrounding the dangers at work and their lives outside of it:

“The time that I feel most unsafe is on self-checkouts because they are quite close together and there isn’t really room for social distancing... I think how many people have I been close up with, pressing on their screen? Especially if somebody isn’t wearing a mask or wearing it under their nose. And then I think like, my brother lives down the road from me and I can’t have him in my house… and I’ve been pressed up against random strangers that I don’t even know.” (CA_4b*)

Customers wearing masks incorrectly and not keeping their distance were common concerns. When speaking to union officials, most commented that the start of the pandemic was the most challenging in terms of the enforcement of government measures. At this time, it was reported in the media that retailers were not going to be held responsible for enforcing rules due to the costs and risks associated with it (e.g. 2JUL_DM). However, despite there being no legislative obligation, in the case of Retailer B, there was an expectation that staff would observe customers and encourage them to act in line with the rules where possible, designating specific ‘Covid-marshals’ to monitor mask-wearing and distancing. Unions pushed back on this, highlighting the flare-ups which occurred because of employees attempts to enforce these rules:

---

24 For example, a Daily Mail headline read “Cleaned out! Panic-buyers are faced with EMPTY shelves after customers wrestle for bargains in chiller” (29NOV_DM).
“…when the government came out saying that it was mandatory to wear a mask, the police came out straight away saying, "...we will not be policing it because we do not have the resources" and we were quick to say that our shop workers won’t be enforcing it either because they should not have to take the abuse off people.” (AO_1d*)

Therefore, employees still felt the need to enforce some boundaries (e.g. around their personal space) to protect themselves and their customers. Employees also played a role in preventing additional flare-ups between customers which was also noted as an issue. Nevertheless, repeating the same rules was draining for employees who felt they were often ignored or not taken seriously:

“I normally try and have one person at the end of the till but a lot of people crowd one after the other and there’s only so much I can tell them before I just get fed up. I just get sick of hearing my own voice. I’m like ...oh can you please make sure you’re keeping your distance... I’m not very confrontational, you can tell from the way I look.” (CA_5b*)

Understandably, the need to repeat these comments and being ignored frequently took a significant toll on workers daily experiences during the pandemic. When asked if they felt the need to ask customers to follow the rules correctly, one employee (CA_4b) explained how they made judgements on the customer's appearance but typically avoided doing so because it was not ‘worth the abuse’. Therefore, there was a fine line that employees had to manage between enforcing rules, protecting their safety and making themselves vulnerable to attacks or unnecessary confrontations.

6.5.4 Abusive customer behaviour

Bearing witness to people flaunting the rules impacted the extent to which employees felt valued by their customers, yet outright abusive behaviour characterised the extreme end of interactions with the general public. Some union officials argued that (in some instances) customers’ behaviour posed a greater threat to employees than the virus itself because of this abusive behaviour, particularly for those in the less vulnerable groups:

“There were people who wanted to go into work to help and support, but they were frightened of other people. Customers coming in and not keeping their distance. Customers coming in and fighting over stock.” (AO_3d*)

“One of the biggest concerns members have expressed in terms of their mental health which is a concern particularly among older workers is fear of contracting the virus but for younger workers, it was customer abuse and harassment… it has been a massive issue for a long time now in retail.” (EO_2d*)

The issue of abusive behaviour in retail is not new, yet the pandemic posed new ‘flashpoints’ (e.g. distancing, mask-wearing), on top of ‘flashpoints’ around which abusive behaviour already
occurred (e.g. age-restricted sales). While most stores had a small number of outsourced security guards as a deterrent, managers were responsible for dealing with conflict in stores. In some cases, staff were stationed alongside or in place of security guards to monitor behaviour, which made them more vulnerable, especially as they often lacked the appropriate training to deal with problematic customers.

Not only were there instances reported whereby customers were verbally abusive, but examples of physical abuse were also raised. In a Retailer B store, an assaulting shoplifter bit a female member of staff when they were confronted. This altercation was witnessed by other staff members, which inevitably impacted how they viewed their own personal safety. As a union officer suggested, some of these people would likely act in this way before the pandemic began. Nevertheless, it highlights how severe the levels of abuse were. Examples were also shared that were directly linked to the store/government guidelines or were specific ‘virus-related’ attacks (e.g. spitting):

“I have one store where one of the till operators had said to someone that there was a restriction on how many chickens you can buy, and it was restricted to two chickens per person and this lady tried to buy three. When they was told this, they lifted the three chickens and threw them at her. And we had things like that happen with people being spat on and the person who was doing the spitting saying, “I have Covid take that!”.” (AO_1d*)

It is perhaps not necessary to spell out the impact such a vile attack would have on how valued this worker would have felt, yet it was unfortunately not an isolated incident. A survey by Usdaw (2020) found that abuse in retail outlets had doubled since the beginning of the pandemic, prompting them to launch a national campaign to improve legislative protections surrounding the treatment of shop workers. In response to this campaign, the Scottish parliament passed a new bill, the Protection of Workers Act (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services). However, in England, calls for a new bill were rejected on the grounds that existing legislation already covers these crimes. While that may be the case, the existing legislation had been clearly insufficient in deterring this type of behaviour. However, based on the reluctance from the government in Westminster to bring in additional measures, it could also be argued that their actions (or lack of action) stand in opposition to their ‘valuing the key workers’ narrative.

In total contrast to these extreme instances of abusive behaviour, it was suggested that customers were more likely to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ than ever before, further feeding into how food retail workers perceive their roles and how others value them:

“…so you do have this abuse and harassment which has intensified because of all the new rules that have come in, in terms of social distancing and face coverings and all of those are flashpoints. But actually, you do talk to members who say that customers are more likely to now say please and
thank you and be happy to queue, so as [EO_1d] said, you've got this pool of bad behaviour amongst the customers who probably were horrible before the pandemic" (EO_2d*)

Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that customer behaviour was split, becoming more extreme at both ends of the spectrum. In sum, instances of abuse were happening twice as often than before the pandemic, which suggests that employers and the government were not doing enough. It is clear that abusive behaviour could have been avoided if retailers had been willing to allocate more staff to stores and hire more trained security. Instead, many opted to speak publicly about the issue, which made it appear as though they were taking steps to prevent this behaviour from escalating without making the necessary, more costly, changes in the stores. This inaction reinforces the argument that much of the wider rhetoric surrounding the valuing of food retail workers had much less substance than first appeared (Winton and Howcroft 2020).

6.6 Life beyond work

Rubery et al. (2018, p.519) argue that although the regular working-time associated with the SER provides a division between work/life and a degree of flexibility, it is not well meshed with other responsibilities (e.g. caring). This means that some choose to opt out of the SER but then paradoxically are subject to employee-unfriendly flexible working arrangements which do not offer regular hours or access to paid overtime, as exists within the SER. Therefore, for those who need to manage shifts alongside caring responsibilities, a job that offers genuine flexible working arrangements might be of greater value than work that is more highly paid if it means employees can manage work around their home life. Without genuine flexibility, access to paid employment might be entirely restricted. It has long been argued that caring responsibilities are a key issue in the British retail sector because of an overreliance on flexible working arrangements that are not family-friendly and a lack of affordable childcare (Perrons 2000). In the context of the pandemic, access to childcare became even more restricted because many children had to take time off school/out of nursery due to the self-isolation measures in place. Therefore, this further exemplifies the need for a multi-dimensional framework for assessing the value of work and workers’ relative experiences.

6.6.1 The allocation of shifts and organisation of working time

For people with caring responsibilities, the ability to fit work around care can be central to their choice of work, as is often the case in food retail (Perrons 2000). Two customer assistants interviewed before the pandemic were responsible for caring for their grandchildren while their daughters were at work. Both relayed how ‘grateful’ they were to work somewhere where they could organise their caring

---

35 After the fieldwork was completed, Retailer A brought in body cameras for use in inner-city stores. While this could have made positive improvements to deter abusive behaviour, the use of cameras can introduce further issues such as what the video data is used for and whether it may be used in place of physical security – thus a full assessment cannot be made without further research.
responsibilities around their shift as they worked the same hours each week. However, other employees without caring responsibilities were unable to specify days/times during which they were available to work – effectively allowing them to be scheduled at any time. One customer assistant found the use of flexible working arrangements to be particularly unfair as they were at the time caring for their unwell mother while also at university:

“I thought it was unfair because there was some people who had kiddies and that and they got to say, "...oh I can only work mornings". Because they say on the interview that you’ve got to be ‘fully flexible’. It’s 12-hours a week, it could be 6am in the morning to 11pm at night, don’t know when... so I did ask the team leader, if I can narrow this down a little bit and they said no, so I handed my notice in then." (CA_4b*)

These examples come from two different Retailer B stores, demonstrating how the implementation of national policies can vastly differ depending on the store management. The comparison between the flexibility given to grandparents and other carers attests to a clear perception of inequality between employees and how their employer valued their life beyond work.

As mentioned, the need to manage work and caring responsibilities was complicated during the pandemic by school closures and the need for children to self-isolate along with the rest of their class ‘bubbles’. As the example in the previous chapter demonstrated, a store HR manager (HR_2b) in their 40s had to take several two-week periods of absence to look after their daughter, who was sent home from school. In this case, as a single mother, she had no choice but to take unpaid leave or use her limited holidays and was unable to receive support from Retailer B or the government36. The lack of financial support was problematic, yet unsurprising for union officials who were accustomed to issues surrounding childcare being addressed to the tune of, “…let’s refer back to policy and if you need childcare it will have to be unpaid leave, that is the statutory law” (AO_3d*). In fact, the two equalities officers interviewed had both anticipated more cases from women struggling to access paid leave for childcare during the pandemic. However, it was believed that the reason for them receiving fewer complaints than expected was because often women are “…offered what feels like a solution” (EO_2d*) (e.g. to be able to use holiday or take unpaid leave) and that access to alternative childcare support is not typically expected. Perrons (2000) argues that it is unrealistic in a capitalist economy to expect firms to operate by themselves in family-friendly ways. Therefore, it could be suggested that the governments’ decision to extend the £500 payment for self-isolation to parents in February 2021 was too little too late. It should not have been assumed during the first year of the pandemic that employers would voluntarily offer these payments themselves, or that workers themselves could absorb the loss in pay incurred.

---

36 At that time, parents taking leave for childcare were not eligible for the £500 two-week payment, but this was changed in February 2021, almost a year after the pandemic had begun.
6.7 Quality of work

Rubery and Howcroft (forthcoming) argue that the quality and meaning of work is the fifth dimension that needs to be considered to assess current employment challenges against a backdrop of broader predictions surrounding the future of work. The quality of work dimension considers processes of sociotechnical change and the new challenges developing in relation to surveillance, monitoring, autonomy and the skill-level of work (Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming). If a shift in the value of labour were to occur, one would expect an increase in job quality. Instead, in the context of the pandemic and changing demands related to food retail work, the evidence finds that quite the opposite has occurred due to increased work intensification. Findlay and Thompson (2017) identify effort and intensity, among other contemporary employment issues, as a way in which employers have chosen to drive productivity through job cuts and a faster working pace to enhance the amount of surplus value that can be extracted. Therefore, the intensification of work is discussed concerning understaffing and the use of new technologies during the pandemic in order to identify whether a reduction in the quality of work has taken place amidst this wider revaluing narrative.

6.7.1 Work intensification

In the interviews, discussions surrounding the intensification of supermarket work, especially within the context of the pandemic, featured far more centrally than discussions surrounding pay. This is because, arguably, pay is dictated by the upper bounds of the market-wage competition and the lower bounds of the minimum wage within the sector which means that employers are motivated to extract surplus value from other parts of the employment relationship (Delbridge et al. 1992). However, the extent to which work has been intensified visibly varies among different food retailers. Generally, union officials are quick to mention Retailer C when asked questions about the intensification of retail work, linking it back to this issue of pay addressed previously. It was acknowledged by one union official that Retailer C presents itself as a market leader in pay, but that this comes with a catch:

“…people think oh they offer a lot more than the usual retail industry, yeah on average but they’ll want their pound of flesh, don’t be fooled by the riches…!” (AO_2d).

This official suggested that Retailer C was known for paying higher wages to entice potential employees away from the competition. Still, they typically would expect much more for their money in terms of the daily output at work. Similarly, when referring to the same retailer, another official (AO_4d) argued that there is ‘more pressure and less time’ which in their view meant that employees were more likely to make mistakes and were more vulnerable to disciplinary measures from management. Another impact of the intensification of work is the high levels of sickness absence that are endemic across the sector as a whole:
“I think I usually get absence, that’s quite high, for various reasons. And I think that goes down to low-pay, stress levels at work, all these companies restructuring now is meaning that that one person is doing five jobs.” (AO_2d)

This area official believed that stress-related illnesses were directly linked to the need for employees to do more jobs within their pre-existing, defined role. However, this was not only reported in relation to Retailer C. Work intensification appeared to be a sector-wide issue. A customer assistant for Retailer B suggested that the intensification of work had been getting incrementally worse in their store:

“It feels really awful, if you hear a bottle smash you run… because there would be nobody else to do it and you’d have to stand with that until a cleaner comes and if a cleaner didn’t come, you’d have to do that and I know it’s awful but you just haven’t got time… I really shouldn’t have said that should I?” (CA_3b)

Although they were embarrassed to admit it, the pressure that this customer assistant felt in their role meant that they felt as though they did not have time to wait for a cleaner if there was a spillage. Not only is this a health and safety concern, but it also demonstrates how employees are forced to make difficult decisions about how they manage their time to avoid falling behind on their hourly task allocations. If these demands are put in the context of the pandemic, it is easy to see how a less robust approach to health and safety (e.g. cleaning/sanitising) might be taken because of the existing workload-related challenges within the sector.

6.7.2 Understaffing of supermarkets

The understaffing of supermarkets can be considered, in part, responsible for the intensification of work and is ultimately a consequence of decisions to reduce the number of hours allocated to stores. Not only was it felt that understaffing has implications for how employees feel their labour is valued, one employee suggested that it is particularly bad for morale:

“It’s staff, get the staff in and you’ll get everybody’s morale back up, but everybody’s morale is down because you’re being pushed from pillar to post even though you don’t have time. You just don’t have the time to get things done.” (CA_2b)

This customer assistant had lost four people from their team of six because people were leaving and were not being replaced. In other areas of the same store, staff were leaving and being replaced with multiple people on smaller contracts, yet the hours specified on these contracts were less than what they were brought in to replace. The night team was also down on staff, but they were being blamed for underperforming by their colleagues working days, despite ‘getting paid a night team rate’
(CA_2b). Similarly, another employee who worked in the bakery felt management were ‘putting more on you’ and consequently noted:

“…you’re stretched so far and it’s a shame because we are losing a lot of staff… a lot of good staff.” (CA_3b)

During the pandemic, the work intensification effects were made worse. Although it appeared as though there was an abundance of labour (and hours) being pumped into stores, when speaking to employees, it was clear that understaffing persisted as an issue. Retailers claimed to be doing anything to keep people safe and the ‘nation fed’, but when it came down to the number of people on the shop floor, employees believed that budgets remained tight:

“…I think it’s just the lack of staff. I heard one customer in the queue going, “…supermarkets are making the most money they’ve ever made but they’re putting no staff on, look at all the queues are down the aisle, they should put more staff on”. I don’t just see why they don’t put more staff on. If you were working there you would feel like the company was skint.” (CA_4b)

Even customers were noticing retailers’ attempts to cut costs because of the service impact it was having. As several customer assistants explained, the fewer employees there are working on the checkouts, the longer the queues became and the more difficult it was for customers to social distance which ultimately makes the space more dangerous:

“Staff, staff, staff, that’s how you get queues down, that’s how you get people out of the shop quickly, that’s how you do social distancing. It’s staff. They know that but they just don’t want to fork out for it.” (CA_4b*)

It was felt that if Retailer B were as serious about protecting employees and customers as they claimed, more would be done to mitigate the staffing issues within stores.

A further problem was that it was not uncommon for the checkout managers to pressure staff to take on additional shifts as it was their responsibility to make up enough hours to cover the required overtime. Without it, the stores would be severely understaffed. However, as several customer assistants explained, if you turned down shifts or overtime, you would get the cold shoulder from management and may be accused of 'letting the team down'.

“I can imagine it’s stressful if the [store] manager is saying [to the checkout manager], “…you’ve got to have this many people on the checkouts or the store is going to risk being fined for breaking the Covid rules”. They need to make up 300-hours on checkouts but if you add up all the contracts it only comes up to about 100…it’s wrong but I can understand why they might be pissy with people who just won’t work any overtime. They think you are not a team player.” (CA_4b*)
Being short on contracted hours was even more problematic throughout the pandemic, as ‘Covid-marshals’ (employees who stood by the door to monitor people coming in and out) were taken out of the checkout staff rotas each day. This further intensified the role of the remaining checkout staff because they were frequently down on the number of people available to work during the day.

### 6.7.3 New technologies, new demands

In some cases, technology does have a part to play in the intensification of work processes. However, it is not the technologies themselves that have caused the intensification as the discussion so far has shown. Instead, it is the expansion in the scope of the work justified by the use of new ‘labour-saving’ technologies that are causing the problem. The use of self-checkouts is a primary example of this, as it has allowed employers to extract additional effort from employees who need to supervise multiple checkouts at once. One customer assistant (CA_6b) considered supervising self-checkouts to be like doing a ‘workout’ because of how much running around it requires. Many also reported that it was difficult to social distance on the self-checkouts in busy periods because of the small booths and regular interventions that are needed. The intensification of shop floor work was also visibly increased throughout the pandemic to meet the demands of online deliveries. In one Retailer B store, responsibility for launching a new click-and-collect department was given to a customer assistant, intensifying their role with no offer of extra pay. This customer assistant had previously worked on click-and-collect at a different store, thereby prompting management at their new store to ask this employee to help lead the launch:

“I was doing a lot of hours over the summer on click-and-collect, so obviously I just helped out quite a lot because it’s something that I knew very well. I’m not a supervisor or anything by any means but they just took advantage of something that I knew... I was left on my own at times but I kind of needed the hours anyway. So yeah, I had to do it. ” (CA_5b*)

The supervisor who was supposed to be overseeing the launch of click-and-collect was “…busy doing everyone else’s job in that department” (CA_5b*), so the necessary managerial support was not there. However, when asked if they would have agreed to take up a supervisory role if their managers offered it to them, the customer assistant replied:

“…if they offered me a supervisor position, I would go for it but at the same time, I don’t want to go for a supervisor here and then still be at university because that is my priority…. Plus a supervisor gets 20p extra an hour! What!? 20p more than us normal folk get.” (CA_5b*)

They acknowledged that the additional hourly pay they would get as a supervisor would not be worth the additional responsibility. Therefore, they were reluctant to formalise the role they were given
in helping set up this new department. This also highlights the extent to which progression opportunities lack appeal, further feeding into the opportunity dimension.

Previously, this customer assistant had also worked at another Retailer B store, fulfilling orders for a TPLS, which they described as being ‘more organised’ and generally preferable to working for the click-and-collect team. This was because orders were placed and fulfilled in real-time which meant stock shortages were less of an issue. When picking for the click-and-collect team, they noted that “…the system was not very new so there were easy ways of cheating it’ (CA_7b†). The ability to cheat the in-house system meant that a higher pick rate on average could be achieved by completing the pick and bagging all the groceries at the end. However, the pick rates associated with the TPLS delivery work were tightly monitored, reflecting other research on workers’ experiences working with this company (Mac 2012; Briken and Taylor 2018). With TPLS orders the pick had to be completed on the system and the bags had to be immediately handed over to the loading bay, which further contributed to the intensity of this work as the bagging time was also counted. While this customer assistant had less of a problem keeping up with the pick rates, it was noted by equalities officers that older or disabled workers can find these rates highly unsustainable.

The intensification of work was worsened by the expansion of online shopping during the pandemic. In one of the Retailer B stores, a new team was hired temporarily to fulfil TPDP orders. Yet, as demand eased these workers were laid off and there was no longer a designated team to pick the deliveries. Instead, it became the responsibility of checkout staff, who had to simultaneously work on the checkouts and fulfil the TPDP orders that came through to their individual handhelds. Managing the two processes was described as being “…very, very hectic at times” (CA_6b†). However, there was no official enforceable time limit on how quickly the orders needed to be fulfilled. Instead, employees were aware of an approximate thirty-minute window which began when the order was placed and felt compelled to carry out the picking quickly when the driver had arrived:

“You’ve got like 15- or 20-minutes to go and do the shopping but sometimes you can be starting one and then you get another 2 come through so you’ve got 15-minutes to do 3 lots of shopping… if you don’t complete it in 20-minutes you can just see a [TPDP] driver glaring at you, you can just see them stood there with their arms crossed.” (CA_7b†)

Informal mechanisms were pervasive in dictating the time-management of picking for this TPDP which meant one customer assistant felt they needed to work quickly to avoid making the drivers wait. In one case, this strength of feeling may have been influenced by the fact the customer assistant interviewed had previously worked in a gig delivery role:

“… when it was Covid it was really busy so they needed two people on [TPDP] at all times but now it comes in waves. You’ll get a steady amount of orders but they want you doing other stuff as well. So, they want you to be on a till and then when an order comes up you have to go and get it… you’ll be
halfway through someone’s shopping and then you will get an order which is being picked up in 10-mins so you’ll have to finish that person’s shopping and then you’ll go and do the [TPDP] order. I feel like a dickhead because I know how annoying it is for [TPDP] drivers but there’s physically nothing I can do.” (CA_4b*)

In certain cases, there were fewer people available to do the work on the shop floor. However, this was not because of the use of new technologies reducing the amount of work. Instead, it was due to management decisions to cut costs by reducing the number of hours allocated in different areas. This is in keeping with other claims that technology may have sustained or even increased the demands of work in some areas (Spencer 2018). Throughout the pandemic, online shopping allowed certain groups of vulnerable people to continue to shop when physically going into stores was not available to them, creating more work for supermarket employees as opposed to reducing it. In other cases, the implementation of new technologies (e.g. self-service checkouts) allowed employers to justify a reduction in the labour hours in certain areas, yet the effect was that the remaining roles were intensified and some of the work was passed on to the consumer. This enables the extraction of more financial value on the employer’s part, adding to this perception that the current quality of work may undermine future conditions (Spencer 2018; Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming). As it stands, employers within the sector can seek to increase the extraction of surplus value through these intensification mechanisms, which reduces job quality and the value that workers can derive from their roles. Therefore, the need for a multi-dimensional approach that allows for the analysis of these elements is clearly presented.

6.8 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has shown that there is little evidence to indicate a significant uplift in any of the SOFLQ dimensions other than hourly rates of pay. For income security, although hourly pay increased across all three of the cases, relative pay within the sector remained low. When accompanied by low contracted hours and the other highly flexible arrangements that were introduced during the pandemic, income security was impacted as additional protections were not put in place. In relation to opportunity, delayering and pseudo-progression have limited the number of genuine opportunities within the sector. Furthermore, the analysis of fair treatment showed some promise in terms of a reevaluation concerning retailers’ efforts to implement additional PPE and the national ‘clap for key workers’. However, in practice, the poor implementation of safety measures and the exacerbation of tensions in-store meant workers suffered despite the shift in public perception that occurred to an extent. The pandemic further intensified the demands of life beyond work because parents found it more challenging to access arrangements that would allow them to organise shifts around care. Finally, the demands of the pandemic, the adoption of new technologies in stores and under staffing all contributed to the intensification of working practices and a further decline in job quality overall.
While some positive changes have been made, the poor pre-pandemic working arrangements may have inflated the sense of any actual gains in ‘value’ because of how undervalued the work was previously. It is also crucial to recognise the apparent contradictions between the pandemic narrative surrounding retail workers and their lived experiences presented within this analysis. From the evidence, it is possible to suggest that little has changed that will have a substantive or a long-lasting revaluing effect. Therefore, assessing each of the five SOFLQ dimensions poses a helpful reminder that a surface-level uplift in pay is not enough to constitute a shift in the value of the labour attributed to work that falls outside the SER. These findings support the more critical view found within the future of work debate that if a structural shift in the value of labour ultimately does not occur, job quality may suffer as a result (Spencer 2018; Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming). Therefore, for any significant revaluation to take place in the future, broader structural changes are needed to recognise the new demands placed on the food retail sector in a way that offers genuine benefits for those working within it.
7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

This thesis aims to investigate the changing nature of food retail work with an SST lens to provide a more human-centred narrative. It could be argued that this work could not have been more timely given the unprecedented shift in circumstances brought on by the pandemic, as it has exemplified yet another upheaval along what is wrongly envisioned as being a linear trajectory of change. By analysing the current conditions in food retail, it is possible to gain a renewed sense of why it is useful to adopt and develop a social shaping approach in order to expand the broader critical future of work debate. No predictions have been made within this thesis for good reason. However, through understanding the challenges posed in retail work today, the necessary interventions can be identified that could steer the trajectory of change towards a better and more equal future. This final chapter is structured as follows. First, both groups of research questions are introduced in relation to the theoretical framework. This introduction is then followed by a theoretically informed discussion of the empirical results related to each thematic area linked to the research questions. After the research questions are addressed, the limitations met throughout the research process and the steps that have been taken to mitigate them are outlined. Finally, suggestions are made for future research and some reflections are shared regarding the projects wider meaning, and its importance for research and practice.

7.2 The future of work in food retailing

In part, the motivation for the first research question, which seeks to consider how processes of sociotechnical change are shaping the food retail sector, was to provide a counternarrative to the current, technologically deterministic future of work debate. It is argued that the current future of work debate is deterministic because of the assumptions it makes about how change happens and what is most pervasive in shaping it. The deterministic approach taken to ‘predicting’ future trajectories of change assumes that certain categorisations of skills will be replaced by technologies simply because they can be replaced by technologies (or it is believed that they will be able to in the near future). To avoid making these assumptions, it is argued within this thesis that it is necessary to adopt an SST approach to inform research interested in technology. As Wajcman (2017) stresses, it only takes looking at historical examples to see that technologies have never been the sole driver of change, so why should this time be any different? Adopting the SST approach reinforces the understanding that the social and the technological are ‘mutually constitutive’ hence due attention needs to be given to them both within sociological analyses (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). This approach allows for the consideration of the wider structural constraints that shape processes of change and thus the technologies embedded within this context. Therefore, SST can provide the tools needed to conduct critical research that can be used to critique mainstream assumptions about the future.
There are several reasons why SST is a useful framework to adopt when analysing employers’ strategies as part of a broader future of work critique. The first reason is that there is an assumption within the wider future of work literature that ultimately employers’ decision-making processes and their labour/technologies strategies will be the main driver of the jobless future. This assumption features widely within the management consultancy literature on the topic (e.g. Deloitte 2015; 2018; McKinsey Global Institute 2018; 2018; PwC 2017) and has fed into academic predictions. Often, these predictions model the propensity for technological adoption on the capability of technology and how it is implemented by firms, as opposed to other social phenomena. However, by adopting an SST approach, it becomes evident that ‘removing’ social phenomena is not possible given the social and the technological aspects are inextricably linked (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). This is why the current narrative on the future of work can be considered deterministic because assumes that technologies will overwrite the existing social forces that have shaped these organisational processes and outcomes in the past.

The second reason is that there is an observable disjuncture between ‘strategy’, practice and outcomes (Hyman 1987; Thompson 2003; Froud et al. 2006) which can have implications for the future of work as the theoretical framework addresses. Strategies continue to be formulated within a capitalist system, which means that they are still subject to fluctuating market forces and changing contextual demands. This critique of strategy acknowledges that decisions are not made in a static vacuum within which there can only be one linear path to ‘the future’ with one singular outcome. Therefore, it is possible to argue that this approach complements SST, as it seeks to dispel the myth that an inherent linearity characterises organisational change. When applied to the retail context, it is possible to begin to understand why, despite the myriad of technologies that are now available, food retailers choose to deploy vast amounts of labour to keep their supermarkets running. In order to investigate these issues further, it is necessary to look to the broader socio-economic, political and technological context as this allows for a greater understanding of what the consequences of these managerial decisions are for those who remain working within the sector.

7.2.1 How employers strategies shape sociotechnical change

The three case studies explored within this research were chosen because they appeared to occupy very different positions within the market: a traditional retailer with fresh food counters in medium-to-large format stores, a discount retailer in medium stores and a convenience retailer operating primarily out of smaller stores. However, the differences in terms of their overarching approaches to the management of labour and technology were less significant than anticipated when choosing the case studies. Much of this can be explained by the arguments outlined within the critical strategy literature discussed in Chapter 2. It is argued that caution needs to be exercised surrounding employers’ strategies, as it cannot be assumed that ‘strategies’ necessarily create the conditions for certain outcomes, intended or otherwise (Froud et al. 2006; Phillips and Dar 2011). These considerations will be explored in relation to the empirical findings. Yet it is important to note early on
that, while retailers’ decisions may to an extent shape change within the sector, it is not a linear cause-and-effect process as some depictions of the future of work might lead one to believe.

In Chapter 5, the empirical findings were explored in relation to retailers’ strategies before and during the pandemic. The analysis found a great deal of overlap across the three seemingly distinct cases when retailers’ actions were considered in practice. When compared with the potential models shaping the future of retailing presented in the Fabian Society (2017) report, there was little evidence to suggest that one of these models was dominating in a way that could only lead to a singular version of the future. In part, this can be attributed to the capitalist context within which these decisions are made. Moody (2018, p.20) notes that this differentiation in approaches is to be expected within capitalist competition, “…due to the prior existence of accumulated fixed capital and differential profit rates among competing firms”. Profit rates will be determined by incurred costs, such as the cost of labour, which will shape decision-making processes surrounding the organisation of labour and technology. This sustains difference between firms which may, as a result, lead to a greater variety of possibilities for the future. Therefore, this finding is at odds with current predictions surrounding the future of food retail work that would consider ‘automating to efficiency’ as the dominant model – one that will incrementally contribute towards the elimination of retail work. However, as the critical approach to strategy-making argues, it is necessary to avoid discussing these employers’ decision-making processes and their effects as though they are inevitable and can only lead to one pre-defined future (Phillips and Dar 2011).

To exemplify the disjuncture between strategy and practice, it is useful to look to the empirical evidence which exhibited a discontinuity between strategies formulated at the company level and how they were enacted in practice on the shop floor. A similar strategy may exist across retailers but how it is executed will vary because of internal/external influences. In Retailer A, it was believed by operations managers that bringing in headsets for use on the shop floor would alleviate the need for employees to move around the store to ask colleagues questions and would reduce the number of staff needed to cover the tills and decrease customer wait-times. While it may seem like a low-road technology strategy due to the simplicity involved in the technology itself, the trials and training that surrounded its implementation were comprehensive. The outcome for staff was fewer steps walked on average and results from a customer survey suggested that they did not negatively impact the customer service offered. However, when a similar strategy was deployed in Retailer C with a different implementation strategy, it quite simply had the opposite effect. As the training was not sufficient, many found that the headsets had a damaging effect on customer relations. It was reported that customers felt they were being treated rudely by members of staff using their headsets as opposed to engaging with them in conversation. Therefore, there is a need to understand the specificity of technologies within the broader sociotechnical context, as outlined within the theoretical framework. It cannot be assumed that the same technology incurs the same issues across cases and stores because these issues are shaped by how they are implemented and used in situ. Thus the disjunction between the planned strategy and the outcomes may have implications for the future and the work that is available across retailers depending on this broader context and how technology is managed in practice.
The implementation of the headsets was a centralised decision across the cases, as was the training surrounding it, which is often the case in food retailing in the UK (Price 2016). However, local store managers may sometimes have (in)formal discretion over how they choose to implement policies which may also contribute to the disjuncture between strategy and practice. For example, it was widely believed that good managers could mitigate against the damaging effects of poor company policies and vice versa. In one Retailer B store, a 'good manager' was able to ensure parents could manage shifts around childcare responsibilities, despite the employees' contract stating that the company had the right to vary hours in line with 'the needs of the business'. In a different store, a 'bad manager' chose to ignore national commitments made during the pandemic between the union and Retailer B to pay employees who were self-isolating in full. As a consequence, national 'promises' did not match the local 'outcomes' because of the managerial culture within that store. Here, we are reminded that when decisions are made at a senior level, they are shaped by the actors involved in the implementation process, at different levels (Thompson 2003), in addition to the pre-existing organisational and sociotechnical context. Again this highlights the importance of adopting the proposed theoretical framework given the lens through which it views decision-making processes and how they shape trajectories of change.

To conclude, by adopting the proposed framework it is possible to better understand that which has the potential to shape future trajectories. This has been exemplified through the analysis of strategic disjuncture, as it has been argued that the ability of 'strategies' to steer change is sometimes overstated and that additional contextual explanations may be needed. In the cases drawn upon, there was little evidence to suggest that retailers 'strategies' were a driving force for change. Instead, the decisions made were one of many components shaping work within the sector. Therefore, these findings are returned to regarding the future of work debates and the broader processes of sociotechnical change discussed in RQ1.

7.2.2 Divergence of labour 'strategies'

In Chapter 5, the case is made that no one overarching model (which covered labour/product/technology) was being exclusively adopted by retailers. In respect of product strategies, retailers adopted a diverse range of approaches: one sold a large range of goods at a 'standard' price, another sold a more limited amount of goods at a discounted price and the other sold a small number of more expensive goods focusing on convenience and 'food-on-the-go'. However, the approach taken towards the management of labour was more homogenous across the three cases and focused primarily on cost-minimisation. These findings corroborate Carré and Tilly's (2017) observations that labour and product strategies in food retailing are often misaligned. They observed a shift towards 'high-road' product strategies in US food retailing, while 'low-road' approaches to labour remained common. This was largely reflective of the three cases explored within this research. Even within the discounter (Retailer C), there had been a recent shift in their product strategy to offer a greater variety and premium branded products, and in some cases trade online via TPDP. However, ex-employees and trade union
officials suggested they continued to prioritise a low-road approach to the management of their staff. In contrast to labour and product strategies, decisions made involving the use of technologies and the level of service varied more considerably between high and low-road approaches depending on the store/area (e.g. the diversification of in-store services; the expansion of fresh food counters; the reconfiguration of store layout for greater efficiency and the restriction of the use of certain technologies to store management, *inter alia*). This was because technology and service-related decisions also changed in response to changing contextual demands, such as the pandemic. Therefore, there is little evidence to suggest that retailers exclusively commit to a single overarching model.

The evidence also showed that a high-road approach taken in one area could trigger a low-road approach in another. Work intensification occurred in part due to technology strategies being implemented as if the technology would have greater productivity-enhancing effects than they did in practice. For example, handheld devices were used for a range of shop floor administrative tasks and digitalised data recording, such as stock management. However, in Retailer B, after the new handsets were implemented, the team using these devices for gap scanning and price checking was reduced from six full-time staff to two. For the employees who remained, the work became unmanageable as they were unable to keep up with processing the volume of stock, despite having access to the new devices designed to speed up the tasks. The cuts to the staff were disproportionate to the efficiencies that could be gained through the use of the new technologies alone which intensified work and negatively impacted the service quality. Employees believed that this was leading to empty shelves and fewer customers because of the impact on the service-offering. Thus it could not be argued that it was an overarching ‘automating to efficiency’ strategy that was being pursued because, if this were the case, the efficiencies gained should also enhance the service-offering if the model is correctly followed.

A further dominant approach to the management of labour relied on the ability to scale labour in line with demand. This is by no means a new development within the sector. However, the use of technologies over the past two decades has made it easier for retail managers to ensure that there is no excess labour and that costs are minimised. Perhaps the most representative example of this occurring was retailers partnering with TPDP/TPLP during the pandemic. Partnering with these companies allowed retailers to meet the immediate logistical needs that an expansion into the online market demanded without investing in the physical infrastructure or labour normally required. It also meant that the retailers could avoid the costs associated with committing to an in-house expansion programme and mitigate the risks that could be incurred if demand was not sustained. Instead, this risk was passed onto the ‘bogus self-employed’ delivery workers who had to manage fluctuations in demand via their potential earnings. In contrast, it must be noted that technologies did not always provide the ‘perfect solution’ for retailers to facilitate this type of hyper-flexibility. In the case of Retailer A, big data was used to inform the number of staff needed in each store department based on projected sales, their skills/training log and staff availability. Yet from the beginning of the pandemic, it was not possible to rely on these predictions because of unprecedented demand. Therefore, the algorithm had to be overwritten by individual managers. The technology itself was thus not *flexible* in its ability to be
reconfigured to meet changing demands, but it could be used to facilitate labour flexibility once the new algorithms were calculated.

Adopting a hyper-flexible labour-centred approach was the preferred option for food retailers, over the use of 'big-ticket' automation which is considered too costly and inflexible. During the pandemic, human pickers were much more widely used than robotics systems for fulfilling online orders because labour remains the cheaper, more flexible option. Humans, in theory, can be available to start immediately and can be hired on small hours contracts to give retailers flexibility. These contracts allow a large number of employees to be hired to satisfy changes in demand temporarily until they are no longer needed, hence discouraging investment in mass-labour-saving automating technologies. However, in 'normal' times, the same argument could also be applied to smaller-ticket technologies, such as self-service checkouts. The expectation among retailers is that, during any downtime on the tills, staff will be expected to carry out different tasks (replenishment, fulfilling TPDP/TPLS orders and cleaning) because of the preference for multi-tasking among retailers. Self-service checkouts, on the other hand, would not be considered as flexible as labour because they cannot be used for a different purpose during quieter times. Therefore, it was clear that while technologies could be used to facilitate flexibility, as is the case with scheduling, during extraordinary times technologies could not offer the flexibility that low-cost labour could.

It is possible to argue that the lean management of labour was a dominant approach adopted across the cases which contributed significantly to the contemporary challenges faced by workers. Shift patterns were fluctuating and pre-existing working arrangements were being intensified. However, this had little to do with the implementation of technologies, as changes to shift patterns were primarily driven by retailers’ decisions to re-organise the workforce. Moody (2018) notes how, in the case of manufacturing, it was often these lean management processes, against a backdrop of economic crises and other changing conditions (such as globalisation) that was contributing more towards manufacturing job losses, as opposed to the implementation of new labour-saving technologies. In food retailing, the move to the use of third-party platforms for food delivery exemplifies this argument quite clearly. Although it may seem that in-house delivery jobs are being lost because of these new labour platforms, such a conclusion would be giving automation more credit than it is due (Taylor 2018). Instead, these new processes are adopted by retailers because it allows them to expand the pool of low-cost labour via outsourcing. Aggressive outsourcing, in addition to lean management strategies, has in recent decades been a more desirable option than automation or other investments in technology for organisations looking to cut costs and maximise profits (Harvey 2017; Howcroft and Taylor forthcoming). While outsourcing has not been particularly widespread in food retailing, in a recent case it was found that outsourced delivery drivers were being paid £12,000 less than in-house drivers (see Calnan 2020). Since the pandemic, the use of agency workers on the shop floor and the use of TPDP/TPLS has spread37. Therefore, the number of employees hired directly by retailers may appear

---

37 In the US, these platform services are more widely used in different parts of food retailing (Benner et al. 2020) — so perhaps this is worth keeping in mind in the context of the UK for the future.
in decline, yet those hired through third parties may be on the rise which could distort the employment figures somewhat.

Morgan (2019) also recognises that job losses can often be more accurately attributed to decisions relating to the re-organisation of labour, such as restructuring or delayering processes. Over the past thirty years in food retailing, successive rounds of restructuring have visibly flattened store hierarchies (Beynon et al. 2002). In Retailer B, middle management roles had been made redundant, and the work has been passed on to employees working in lower-paid roles with little to no extra remuneration for the additional responsibility. Although national-level commitments were made to re-invest hours into stores once restructures had taken place, there was little evidence of this happening in practice. Therefore, it is again important to reiterate how job losses cannot always be attributed to the implementation of new technologies and may be occurring at the hands of other management practices. In the same case, the implementation of labour planning software was used as a justification by managers to pass the task of creating rotas down from the (now redundant) store HR managers to the checkout managers. Also in Retailer B, in terms of a vertical re-allocation, there was an expectation that checkout employees would monitor TPDP orders at the same time as scanning customers shopping after the temporary TPDP pickers were laid off. Therefore, it is more accurate to consider this work as being re-distributed rather than being replaced by technology.

With these examples in mind, it is possible to conclude that retailers are in constant pursuit of wider margins and lower costs which is typically behind decisions to continuously squeeze the bottom line. This contributes to the declining quality of work which was evidenced across all of the cases within the research. This finding closely resonates with Spencer’s (2018) assertion that the erosion and expansion of low-quality work need to be the primary concern when thinking about processes of sociotechnical change and the future of work. There is little evidence to suggest that a labour-replacing ‘strategy’ (e.g. ‘automating to efficiency’) is prevailing. However, a cost-minimising approach to the management of labour has been adopted across the cases and remains a cause for concern. There are clear instances within the public discourse whereby technologies are blamed for what are, in reality, management decisions to downgrade the work offer. Therefore, the low-cost approach to labour management can more accurately be identified as the dominant approach taken across the case studies based on the evidence outlined.

7.2.3 The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the food retail sector

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a destabilising effect on the food retail sector and those who work within it. Such a phenomenon serves as a necessary reminder that trajectories of change are complex, non-linear and unpredictable (Howcroft and Taylor 2022). The extent to which the pandemic altered the trajectory of change at the time of the study has been discussed regarding the empirical evidence presented in Chapter 5. However, grandiose claims about the effect of the pandemic on the future of food retailing have already been made within the broader discourse, despite the pandemic being
far from over at the time of writing. For example, in a report titled ‘How European shoppers will buy their groceries in the new normal’, McKinsey (2020) predicted there would be a muted return to supermarkets and that the UK will see an increase of people doing their food shopping online as the new normal resumed. Yet, just half a year after this prediction was made, the uptake of online shopping had already slowed within the UK (Kantar 2021b). Evidently, the pandemic has altered the demand for online shopping but it is important to be reminded of the theoretical framework that regards trajectories of change as non-linear. Therefore, it needs also to be stressed that predicting the future is problematic given the uncertainty that inherently characterises it. This discussion will look to some examples that help demonstrate both how the trajectory has been altered and the extent to which pre-existing issues have contributed to the ongoing changes in the sector.

Although it may have appeared as though the pandemic was ‘accelerating technological change’ (see BBC 2020; Butler 2021; Geddes et al. 2021 for examples of broader discussion) it was important to consider whether this was actually the case in stores and warehouses. As noted in Q1(b), technologies can be deemed inflexible in their use during short-term surges in demand because of the costs associated with scaling them up. During the pandemic, human pickers were preferred by retailers over the use of technology to fulfil orders in-line with the new demand for online shopping. The use of temporary employees presented a cheaper option than investing in new technological infrastructures, particularly when it was unknown whether the demand would be sustained. Even in the case of Ocado, where robotics technologies are already widely used, thousands of extra staff were hired to fulfil the immediate increases in capacity. Furthermore, while some retailers encouraged customers to use self-service technologies in stores to limit the amount of face-to-face contact, there was little evidence within the cases that new technologies were being brought in (other than a few exceptions such as the traffic light door systems). Instead, technologies that had been in place for over a decade were simply being used more widely, and often it was not technologies powering the change; it was people. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid narratives that depict the pandemic as ‘accelerating’ technological change as this fails to capture the nuance of the changes that occurred and what was driving them.

The uncertainties surrounding the lockdown, the new Coronavirus rules, panic buying and the media frenzy all shaped change in food retailing, particularly with regard to the heightened tensions in stores. While emotional regulation has long been a skill attributed to customer service work (Hampson and Junor 2005), the need for it grew considerably during the pandemic. Before the crisis, it was found that the demands of the Christmas period could incite extreme work characteristics in supermarket retailing (such as work intensification, the expansion of the scope of work and worker discretion, in addition to the augmented need to be able to regulate customers emotions) (Bozkurt 2015). However, these extreme characteristics became typical of workers’ daily experiences throughout the pandemic (Hadjisolomou 2020; Cai et al. 2020). Another extreme characteristic attributed to food retail work, exacerbated during the pandemic, was the move towards multi-tasking. This included the introduction of new tasks such as new cleaning measures, door marshalling and packing for third-party digital platforms, at the same time as regulating the emotions of problematic customers. Therefore, while the
immediate effects of work intensification may ease when the epidemiological threat is no longer there, there is a clear argument to suggest that the work, in the current context, has been intensified by the new demands of the pandemic and how it has been managed by retailers.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that within the empirical chapters, several (more positive) examples are given where it appeared that food retailers were choosing to invest more in their staff in terms of health and safety (e.g. through the implementation of PPE and other virus prevention measures). For retailers, going ‘over and above to feed the nation’, in part by implementing these measures, could strengthen their competitive positions through increased market share or improved customer loyalty. Although investment in virus prevention measures was welcomed by employees and union officials, it is important to note that often, these investments were unnegotiable given the epidemiological context and were necessary for retailers if they wanted to continue operating. To conclude, the pandemic has significantly altered the trajectory of retail change which may have consequences for the future. However, the purpose of discussing this is not to make predictions about what these implications may be, but to demonstrate how unpredictable processes of change are. Furthermore, while the pandemic remains a particularly pertinent example of an exogenous crisis that has altered the trajectory of sociotechnical change in retail, it is vital to continue to frame this discussion within the broader context and social structures within which it is embedded.

7.2.4 Sociotechnical change and the shaping of food retail work

This thesis adopts an SST perspective to investigate whether there is evidence to suggest that the vision constructed within the mainstream future of work debate is materialising within the current context. If this were to be the case, one would expect to have found the ‘automating the efficiency’ model being adopted en masse by retailers. However, there was no evidence to suggest that any serious attempts were being made to automate large proportions of the remaining store-based tasks. Instead, the degradation of work within the sector remains a more pervasive trend because retailers have been able to take advantage of the flexibility offered by employment regulations in the UK at a time of great uncertainty. From this evidence, three components of the critical debate are worth considering to understand how processes of sociotechnical change are shaping the retail sector. First, ‘strategy’ cannot be assumed to look the same on paper and in practice. Second, the mere existence of technologies does not mean that they will be widely adopted. Third, as mentioned, there is no evidence of an overarching tech-centred ‘strategy’ across the cases. These three points are thus discussed to outline how current processes of sociotechnical change relate to the broader critical narrative surrounding the future of work.

The first point reiterates the argument that we cannot assume that a ‘strategy’ will achieve its intended outcomes. Therefore, analyses should consider employers’ strategies critically and should avoid drawing on them to make deterministic claims about future trajectories of change. In the cases, there were several examples of proposed strategies not meeting expectations. For example, Retailer A had released a press statement around the time of the research that outlined their plans to invest in technology to
ensure they were prepared for 'the future'. Managers were optimistic about this new approach and suggested that it would mean there would soon be considerably less staff in their stores. Despite this, when asked about the technologies that were in place to achieve these ‘strategic aims’ the examples given were limited to the recent implementation of headsets in-stores and the digitalisation of task checklists. At the time of the interviews, a smartphone self-service app was being trialled, yet this was abandoned shortly after. Therefore, these examples were far from the use of labour-saving technology that would be expected if these futuristic plans were upheld. Aside from the case studies, it is useful to consider Amazon Go and its entry into the grocery market. In their store opening strategy, Amazon had planned to open 3,000 stores by 2021 (Peters 2019), but by March 2021, the company only opened their 27th store across the US and UK (Kelion 2021). Some may argue that the pandemic created delays, but the question still remains as to how we can support claims surrounding the future of work if 'tech-leader' Amazon fails to see their store strategy through to fruition. Both Retailer A and Amazon's use of self-service technologies sparked headlines that posed the question of whether this was ‘the end of checkouts’ even though they were both failing to meet their plans for implementation. Nevertheless, these types of articles further feed into the end of work narrative, even if the reality does not add up.

The case of Amazon Go is also useful in exemplifying the second point – that the mere existence of certain technologies is not enough for them to be widely adopted. Although the AI-enabled camera technology used by Amazon in their ‘Go’ stores has huge labour-saving potential, it cannot be assumed that other retailers will also widely adopt it. In the current future of work predictions, the potential for these tasks to be automated is enough for them to be factored into task-change calculations. However, whether these technologies will become widely accessible/whether they have appeal for organisations trying to minimise costs is not included. As it stands, the aforementioned technologies do not exist outside of a small number of Amazon stores38, yet their existence may have inflated current claims about the inherent capabilities of labour-replacing automating processes. This is when the importance of adopting an SST approach needs to be reiterated, as it provides a corrective to assumptions surrounding why technologies may or may not be adopted in context. SST reminds us that the ‘best’ technology will not always be adopted (Arthur 1999) and that which shapes adoption is far wider than the existence of the technology itself. Even if the ‘best’ technologies are adopted, we need to be mindful that predicted outcomes are often not achieved because of issues with the technologies themselves, exogenous crises or other changes to the sociotechnical context in which they are embedded (Howcroft and Taylor 2022).

The third point addresses the finding that there is no evidence of one overarching ‘strategy’, even though there is evidence that a low-road approach to labour management is common. This finding prompts questions such as why checkouts still exist when self-service systems are cheaply available or why human pickers are used to fulfil online orders. Similar questions can be posed as to why hand car washes still exist when drive-throughs are widely available (see Clark 2018) or why hundreds of

38 Since writing Tesco has since begun trials of a similar technology in partnership with Trigo in a London store (Butler 2021b) but a sector-wide roll out remains far off. In 2019, Sainsbury’s trialled a similar checkout-less store using mobile technology for payment but checkouts were soon reinstated because ‘customers were not ready’ (BBC 2019)
thousands of people work for Amazon in warehouses worldwide when they have some of the most sophisticated robotics systems on the planet available in-house (see Mac 2012; Briken and Taylor 2018)? One answer is at the core of all of these questions – the availability of low-cost labour. In all cases, technologies could replace humans, but it remains cheaper to employ people than to deploy technology (Fleming 2019). The reality is if the labour market can offer a lower-cost option that can be more closely scaled to fluctuations in demand, then this will remain the preferred approach for retailers. Furthermore, although self-service checkouts remain the most visible form of labour-saving technology in food retail, there is still an element of paid labour required to verify ages and correct mistakes. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that there was minimal evidence of the use of the types of technologies that are included within the mainstream job loss predictions within the cases investigated.

Investment in automation within certain sectors, such as in food retail, has remained low because it is closely dictated by the conditions of capitalist competition which place investment in technology as secondary to other seemingly more profitable applications (Moody 2018). Thus, we need to look beyond ‘strategies’ to understand what is shaping change, as it has been argued in the theoretical framework. The reality is much more complex than other analyses might suggest. By adopting the framework outlined in Chapter 2, the discussion surrounding the future of work in the sector is open to considering the contexts and social structures that shape employers’ decision-making processes and the nature of work more broadly. Granted, there may be a visible reduction in labour hours within stores, yet it is necessary to look beyond technology to explain these changes and the challenges which it creates. Furthermore, there is also a need to look beyond the retail end, as retailers strategies do not exist only in stores/warehousing spaces. That which creates change throughout global supply chains will also be pervasive in shaping the future of work in the wider sector, despite this being beyond the scope of this particular project.

While this discussion has not aimed to provide an exhaustive list of ‘factors shaping change’, it has aimed to provide examples through which the mutual importance of the social and the technological are highlighted (e.g. the minimisation of labour costs, the disjuncture between technological strategy-making and practice, the market forces shaping decision-making and organisational outcomes, as well as that which forms the basis for technological adoption). As a matter of fact, the centrality of economics throughout these examples supports MacKenzie and Wajcman’s (1985, p.15) claim that the “…economic shaping of technology is in fact the social shaping of technology” due to the embeddedness of economic calculations and laws within modern capitalist organisations and management decision-making. Based on this discussion it is possible to conclude that only through understanding the socio-economic, political and technological causes of the degradation of work can we look to actively address it, otherwise the trap of ‘blameless inevitability’ (Howcroft and Taylor 2022) will be all that remains.
7.3 The value of food retail work and the Coronavirus pandemic

Situated within the wide-ranging debate surrounding the value of labour, the second set of sub-questions seeks to contribute toward understanding the extent to which the pandemic has brought about a revaluing of labour in the food retail sector. As it has been argued, a low-road approach to the management of labour remained prevalent during the pandemic, even when the public narrative surrounding retail work underwent a positive shift (hence the need for multi-level analysis of differing narratives). Food retail work has long been devalued due to gendered normalisations of ‘women’s work’ and received little recognition for its broader contribution to society. As the theoretical framework notes, SST and feminist employment scholars have argued that the undervaluation of women’s work can be explained by the stereotyped assumptions surrounding women’s work (Cockburn 1983; Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). The value of retail work was to an extent recognised during the pandemic by the public, for retail workers’ ability and willingness to continue working while others were ordered to stay at home. The elevated status of food retail workers was a significant improvement from before – yet it is important to consider the reason why these workers were deemed more valuable: they were considered valuable for employers as they could continue trading and valuable for the public as they could continue shopping. However, the question of whether workers themselves experienced a proportionate rise in the value they could derive from their work remained unclear. Therefore, the following discussion seeks to consider firstly, whether there has been a shift in the value of this labour and secondly, what could happen if a revaluation is not achieved. In conclusion, the case is made that a meaningful revaluation did not occur during the pandemic and that this could have a detrimental impact on the future of work and equalities within the sector.

7.3.1 The revaluing of food retail work

One of the central findings of this research was that pay increases during the pandemic did little to increase the value of food retail work because the issues related to income security, access to opportunity, fairness/dignity at work, life beyond work and job quality (all five of the SOFLQ dimensions) remained prevalent (Rubery et al. 2018). The pursuit of financial value for businesses through a reduction in the quality of work (in part facilitated by a move towards a more precarious employment relationship) remains at odds with the employers’ dependency on the cooperation, intensity and quality of their workers’ labour (Rubery 2015). However, cost minimisation remained the dominant approach to the management of labour for retailers (see Chapter 5). As it has been found, the use of non-standard working arrangements in the sector has expanded so that costs can be minimised, yet this means that workers are often not afforded basic protections. Therefore, it is argued that, for work that falls outside of the SER, analysing the five SOFLQ dimensions can give a more meaningful evaluation of the changes that are necessary for a revaluing to occur than an analysis that looks at pay alone. From the empirical evidence it is possible to suggest that, first, value is perceived/experienced in different ways by different actors within the employment relationship and second, that it is necessary to go beyond
pay to truly understand what contributes to value in a meaningful sense. Therefore, the following
discussion will approach this question in terms of what a significant revaluation might look like for those
who are selling their labour, instead of those who are otherwise benefiting from it.

As mentioned, in roles that fall beyond the SER (that is, the majority of jobs in food retailing),
several dimensions need to be analysed to consider how a meaningful revaluation might occur. The
first relates to the argument that the terms and conditions of employment need to be protected alongside
any agreements to uplift hourly pay to guarantee income (‘security’). In low-paying sectors, it has been
found that often pay increases – such as those mandated by higher legal minimum wages – can make
workers vulnerable to the retraction of other terms and conditions (Moore et al. 2017). When speaking
to workers in food retail, there was a conviction that any agreed/negotiated increases in pay must be
accompanied by the protection of other terms within the employment contract to avoid them being
retracted. For example, while Retailer B offered minimum hours contracts, these hours were often well
below what employees worked on average. This gave the employer scope to scale back hours when
they wanted to cut costs through the use of flexibility clauses. It was found that over recent years, hours
have been subject to leaner controls by managers within supermarkets. Overtime has been relied upon
more heavily and weekly rotas have become more variable. Such a trend has implications for income
security, but it can also be especially problematic for employees who need to manage their househ
old responsibilities (‘life beyond work’) alongside fluctuating rotas.

As hours were already vulnerable to fluctuations, employees felt ambivalent about pay increases
as they thought it might restrict the availability of hours within their respective stores. The union was
less concerned about these changes and believed that pay increases had not been met with a reduction
in hours in the past. Consequently, the union chose not to negotiate any extra guarantees to prevent a
retraction in hours from taking place. However, it has been found that often there is a trade-off that
workers are willing to make between hours and pay. Some employees may value jobs with better hours
more highly, even if the pay is worse, so that they can better manage their life beyond work but this will
be impacted by the costs of mobility and imperfect information about the hours offered (Altonji and
Paxson 1988; Rubery et al. 2018). Similarly, working ‘too few’ hours can lead to a financial imbalance
for those who rely on being offered enough hours to earn a real weekly living wage39 (Warren 2015a).
Therefore, the question remains as to why the union chose not to include any protections surrounding
hours within the negotiations. The equalities officers believed that looking to strengthen other parts of
the employment relationship would be more effective than trying to achieve a higher hourly rate of pay.
However, the national officers involved in the negotiations seemed more interested in making headway
in their four-year-long campaign for £10 per hour across the sector. Thus it could be suggested that for
a significant revaluing to take place, the union would also have to reprioritise and aim for changes that
are truly meaningful to employees.

---

39 This evidence also feeds into the broader campaign for Living Hours guarantees, alongside the real living wage (Felstead et
al. 2020).
It is also important to recognise that what constitutes a meaningful revaluing of labour is likely to be different for different groups of workers. Nevertheless, only through adopting a multi-dimensional framework for analysing value can such conclusions be drawn. For example, what is meaningful for employees who are already experiencing the effects of other structural forms of social disadvantage might be different from those who are not. The research found that it was not uncommon for women to value control over their working time and life beyond work more highly than they did levels of pay. Without genuine flexibility, the work would no longer be viable for those workers who need to organise their work around other household responsibilities – pay rise or not. However, this is not to downplay the importance of good levels of pay for workers, as it does have a significant role in the revaluing of labour. It could also be argued that even though there was little change in employers’ progression practices and access to opportunities (‘opportunity’) during the pandemic, issues related to childcare may further confine groups of workers to lower-level roles. It has been found that women can end up on the ‘mommy tracks’ if full-time work becomes less feasible and requests to return to full-time work were not considered (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). Moreover, it was found in the case of Retailer B that older employees were struggling to access progression opportunities because of stereotyped assumptions about their capabilities/potential future career trajectories. Therefore, it is argued that a good practice approach would look to more inclusive career development opportunities across different groups (Rubery et al. 2018) which would increase the value employees can derive from their roles.

This discussion also feeds into the wider observation that retailers seemed willing to invest in the areas where it may be most evident to the public that changes had been made (e.g. levels of pay and increased provision of PPE). Yet, in the areas where it was less publicly visible, less had been done about revaluing (e.g. investing in hours, improving contractual security and hiring trained security in stores) (in relation to ‘fair treatment’). As a consequence, although there were some positive improvements, protections were still insufficient at a time when tensions were heightened across the board in stores. While individual retailers had a part to play in terms of protecting their staff from poor customer behaviour, the government also had a central role to play in this. However, from the evidence, it is possible to argue that workers were left vulnerable because of a lack of additional legislative protections against abuse, a lack of clarity on the virus-prevention measures that were in place and who was responsible for enforcing them. Therefore, it is also possible to argue that the government’s key worker narrative failed to instil tangible improvements when it came to the fair treatment of these workers.

The last dimension against which the value of labour can be assessed is whether there were any changes to the quality of work (‘job quality’) (Rubery and Howcroft forthcoming). During the pandemic, the intensification of work in food retailing was heightened due to the epidemiological threat, increased demand for supermarket produce and use of new technologies (namely the expansion of online shopping). However, as Green et al. (2021) argue, the increased intensity of work cannot be attributed to technologies, as they are inanimate objects, but rather should be put down to ‘managerial agency’ and how technologies/labour are managed. In food retailing, work intensification is driven primarily by
management decisions to reduce the number of labour hours on the shop floor which subsequently leads to understaffing. Indeed, the issue of work intensification transcended the three empirical case studies as it has become endemic within supermarket work (Bozkurt 2015; Hadjisolomou et al. 2017) and the wider sector as a whole in recent years (Newsome et al. 2013; Moore and Newsome 2018). Furthermore, it could be argued that meaningful progression and training opportunities can be restricted when work is intensified. For example, it was found that additional responsibilities are given with little to no additional pay. This meant that workers were reluctant to apply for promotions because the opportunities offered little extra in terms of the potential for value to be added to their existing roles.

To conclude, there is a final question as to whether increasing pay in an already devalued sector is likely to result in any ‘transformational’ reform in the value attributed to the work. Any analysis that seeks to address whether a revaluation has occurred needs to consider the starting point from which any changes are being made (e.g. non-standard, undervalued, ‘women’s work’). Therefore, since there has been little observable change, it is the purpose of the final question to consider the structural issues that have prevented a revaluation from taking place and the broader equalities impact that it can have as a result.

7.3.2 Post-pandemic changes to inequalities in food retail work

One of the most notable changes to the reorganisation of work during the pandemic relates to the new pressures for staff to take on different roles or tasks. As the alternative modes of shopping expanded, demand for work on the checkout fell but grew elsewhere, such as in warehousing and logistics (including picking and self-stacking work on the shop floor). The growth of online shopping created an unprecedented demand for these roles, yet gender divides between them remained prevalent. Even before the pandemic, this had created a situation whereby inequalities were exacerbated as often female-dominated roles (e.g. checkout) were afforded worse pay and terms than male-dominated work (e.g. logistics). This was raised as an issue of Equal Pay at the Supreme Court whereby it was ruled that warehouse and logistics employees in food retail were, in fact, being paid more than people working on the shop floor despite the work being of equal value. Equal pay claims from groups of workers at Retailers A and B have been successful based on this ruling. Thus, these ongoing cases have represented an acknowledgement at a high level that the historical gendering of these roles has allowed retailers to pay employees unequally, even though it is against the law. However, as Q2(a) demonstrates, even if there is an uplift of pay on the shop floor in an attempt to equalise the value attributed to these roles, it will not be enough for inequalities within the sector to be eradicated without other changes being made to accompany it.

The equal pay claims highlight the legislative need for change within the sector in response to the changing nature of retail work. However, as this thesis has aimed to demonstrate, inequalities exist at a much deeper level than that of pay. By adopting the proposed theoretical framework, it is possible to identify how these inequalities have been created by analysing the historical context and how this
ultimately shapes the nature of work today. As the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated, the perception of skills needed to work within the sector, and other gendered assumptions, replicated other gendered patterns of social disadvantage (Cockburn 1983; Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). Consequently, this has created a situation whereby ‘women’s work’ in retail has long been undervalued, yet ‘men’s work’ in the sector has been valued and paid more highly. Regrettably, the current context has done little in terms of correcting these historical patterns of inequality and processes of sociotechnical change have continued to shape the nature of food retail work in a way that favours certain groups over others. The embedded social structures were in place long before the pandemic began, yet it is useful to draw on examples to demonstrate how inequalities have been exacerbated more recently. First, the problem of sectoral progression and career sustainability between groups; second, the patchy extension of self-isolation pay throughout the pandemic; and third, the issue of the shift to online shopping and the accessibility of certain roles.

Firstly, barriers to genuine career progression within food retailing have existed for some time. In part, this can be attributed to the widening gap between entry-level and managerial roles created by the perpetual delayering that has been ongoing for over two decades (Beynon et al. 2002). There is also a perception of a widening skills gap between those required for work on the shop floor and those for head office work, creating a situation whereby a jump between the two was rare in Retailers A and B. Furthermore, this research found that the issues surrounding career progression had distinct equalities-related connotations that needed to be addressed. The empirical evidence and analysis presented in Chapter 5 demonstrated that there is a sector-wide trend whereby older workers have been actively replaced by younger workers on worse contracts. This point was made explicitly by workers and trade unionists and implicitly by retail managers in their comments made about older workers. The reasons for this seem varied and appeared to an extent to have an ageist agenda. However, it was covered up by attempts to cut costs by adopting hyper-flexible contracts that are believed to be ‘less desirable’ for older workers. Furthermore, assumptions were made that older workers were not appropriate for progression opportunities, justified on the grounds they were less willing to use new technologies or were slow when learning. Yet there was little awareness on the part of managers of how the issue may have, in fact, been the lack of training and support offered as opposed to deficiencies of the employees themselves. On the whole, there was a tendency across the cases to assume that the older generation would soon leave the sector and that the additional technology-related training would no longer be necessary. These assumptions were also reflected in how older employees viewed their opportunities for progressing into supervisory roles. However, the research also found that younger workers experienced barriers to progression within the sector, as the assumption was made that the work was a ‘stop gap’ before they moved on to further education or a different career. Even the unions appeared to be less concerned about younger workers and their experiences of work which was problematic in itself but also perhaps reflective of their priorities as a union.

Secondly, the Coronavirus pandemic highlighted the inequalities experienced between groups regarding employment security and pay protections. While ‘extremely clinically vulnerable’ employees
(including over 65s) working for Retailer B were protected throughout the pandemic through the extension of full pay for self-isolation, other vulnerable groups of employees were found to be less worthy of the same protections. Instead of furlough or pay for self-isolation, pregnant women were offered redeployment which for many still meant travelling and working from a busy workplace even if they were away from customers. Additionally, retailers did not extend pay to parents who were self-isolating with children, nor did the government until February 2021 almost a year after the pandemic had begun. Even then, only parents who were already in receipt of other child support benefits were eligible. Inevitably, policies that punitively exclude parents from support schemes will disproportionately impact women as they are more likely to be the primary caregiver in the household. To make matters worse, there were also clear cases identified in Retailer B where payments for periods of self-isolation were withheld because of managers’ individual decisions not to offer them. There were visible inconsistencies between the national policies to protect workers and how they were implemented in practice. Therefore, this could exacerbate existing inequalities due to the prejudices that may shape decisions regarding how the policies should be implemented and whom they should protect.

The third and final point relates to the shift in the way people purchased their groceries during the pandemic, whether this was online for delivery or collection, through a third-party platform or in-store using self-service technologies. Although this may have appeared to be an acceleration of technological change and ‘automation’ (Nott 2020), in practice it had as much more to do with people (labour, management and customers) as it did technology. While the technologies were important, the change was driven primarily by a shift in customer behaviour, the epidemiological context that made face-to-face contact dangerous and government calls for people to 'stay at home', among other things that may be considered more social than technological. Consequently, this research finds that the shift towards online shopping is likely to have significant implications for equalities. This is because the expansion/contraction of old/new roles within the sector is likely to replicate existing patterns of occupational segregation. For example, women remain concentrated in shop floor work (disproportionately older and BAME women) and men in warehousing and logistics roles. This means that as shop floor roles contract (in terms of their quality/quantity) and the demand for warehousing roles grows, women are more likely to lose out if they are unable to be redeployed into other areas. However, as it stands, barriers continue to prevent women and other groups from moving into these growing parts of the sector (such as flexible working arrangements, accessibility via public transport, unachievable pick rates and proximity to childcare/schools). Therefore, employers and policymakers will need to help people transition into these roles by improving the accessibility of out-of-town retail sites via public transport (women and people in poorer areas less likely to have access to private transport), improving flexible working policies and making reasonable adjustments to address unfair expectations regarding pick rates for older/disabled workers (see Winton 2021). While these changes could improve equal access and the ability to retain these new roles, national re-training programmes will also be necessary to ensure that those with no choice but to leave the sector can find good quality employment elsewhere.
To conclude, for a meaningful revaluation to have any significance in the long-term, changes need to be made to the very systems that have allowed for the creation of these inequalities in the first instance. Howcroft and Rubery (2018) argue that the nature and quality of work that is available for women in the future will likely depend on patterns of job displacement, patterns of recruitment into different jobs and the overall patterns of work reorganisation. Therefore, incorrectly assuming that processes of technological change can overwrite pre-existing inequalities is problematic and these other social structures need to be considered. The proposed theoretical framework provides a corrective to this way of thinking as it gives equal weight to the social and the technological, thereby allowing for a more rounded analysis. By adopting this approach, it is possible to better understand the pre-existing social structures that characterise food retail work and how they may continue to exacerbate inequalities in the future because of processes of sociotechnical change. This approach informs the conclusion that without the necessary interventions, the future will likely provide opportunities for some but will leave others worse off in terms of the work they can access.

7.3.3 The pandemic as a catalyst for the revaluation of labour

This research makes the case that, despite posing as a window of opportunity to revalue food retail work in the UK, the shift in narrative during the pandemic was not enough to prompt a substantive revaluing of labour within the sector. By conducting a multi-level analysis it was found that the pandemic, and subsequent narrative surrounding the value of key workers, did little to derail the low-road approach to the management of labour that has become the relative norm across retailers. As Appendix 10 outlines, there was little positive change across any of the job quality measures. While the pay increases implied a potential break to this trend, the extent to which this signified a meaningful revaluation was limited due to how vulnerable the other characteristics within the employment relationship remained. Workers made it clear that they valued the non-pay elements offered within their roles, yet employers and trade unions failed to improve these offerings during the pandemic. Therefore, future discussions surrounding the value of labour need to be more directly informed by employees and an understanding of their preferences.

Before the pandemic, there had been a slow unravelling of the food retail employment contract which had taken place over the past decade. Non-pay provisions were retracted at the cost of small incremental pay increases alongside the NLW (e.g. a reduction in the provision of paid breaks, holiday/sick pay and the minimum number of hours contracted, changes to premium shift payments and notice periods for new shift patterns) which has allowed employers to increase the amount of surplus-value that they can extract while satisfying legislative (minimum wage) requirements. During the pandemic, 'thank you bonuses' were widely agreed upon among retailers looking to reward workers for their contribution during the peak of the lockdown. Yet while these were well received by the employees interviewed, the union was less welcoming of this form of remuneration. This was because, for workers in receipt of other benefits, bonus payments can be problematic and given the welfare system backlog, it took some time for the necessary corrections to be made to the pay packets of affected employees.
The argument was made by the union that planned continuous pay increases were needed to demonstrate a genuine, long-term revaluing of the work (as opposed to one which was limited to a select few weeks during the pandemic).

While the union was working in the interests of equalities in relation to pay discussions, they did not seem to consider the equalities impact that failing to protect other terms and conditions could have across different groups. For some, non-pay elements of the employment relationship (such as income security and access to genuine flexible working arrangements) were deemed more valuable than an increase in hourly pay, such as carers and those needing to balance hours with life beyond work. Failing to protect hours could mean that pay increases could have a downward effect on the hours available, thus it is vital to consider the equalities impacts that a partial revaluation may have. Furthermore, in the interviews, workers made clear that sufficient hours, progression and training, dignity and respect (and protection from abuse), work-life balance, work intensity, in addition to levels of pay were of value to them. While the union took issues of this kind up with the retailers during weekly informal meetings, only pay was presented as a formal issue by the union with Retailer B. Therefore, the revised bargaining offering remained, at best, a short-term superficial fix to the deep-rooted structural issues that caused the undervaluation of retail work in the first place.

Based on the evidence presented in Chapter 6, it is possible to suggest that the whole package requires due consideration if the intended effect is for a substantial long-term revaluing to take place. Despite the shift in the public narrative surrounding retail workers, there was still not enough momentum to incite any real change in the value attributed to this labour through the decisions made by retailers. Instead, the temporary praise afforded to ‘key workers’ gave the government, and retailers, a chance to appear as though they were saying the right things without necessarily working towards the substantive changes deemed necessary by retail employees. Furthermore, by casting a critical eye over the empirical evidence, it is possible to argue that a reduction in the quality of work during the pandemic was hidden behind pay increases which may, on the surface, have made it seem as though a revaluing had occurred. However, as a consequence, a low-road approach to the organisation of labour remains which can further feed into the existing challenges experienced by already disadvantaged groups within the sector. Henceforth, it can be argued that a failure to revalue labour may also disincentivise employers from further investing in labour or technologies. This may have the effect of widening the inequalities that deeply shape the nature of the work offered and may contribute to the continued degradation of the retail employment relationship. Therefore, there remains a need for future research which looks to address the revaluing of labour in certain occupations. It will be necessary for those involved (e.g. academics, trade unionists, employers) to seek out what is most meaningful for employees with different needs from work. This is necessary to avoid a situation such as the one captured within the empirical study in which labour is re-organised in a way that is of value for retailers, but not for the workers themselves.
7.4 Research contributions

The primary gap this thesis aimed to address was the lack of contemporary, in-depth research into the nature of sociotechnical change in British food retailing. Around the turn of the century, there was a much greater amount of academic interest than there is today on the topic of sociotechnical change in retail and the shaping impact it was having on skills, equalities and the quality of work available within the sector (see Scott 1994; McLaughlin 1999; Beynon et al. 2002) and in food retailing more specifically (see Penn 1995; du Gay 2004). However, research into retail work more recently has taken a different focus. Some have aimed to address current processes of sociotechnical change in the retail sector, but these studies have typically focused on supply chain processes in supermarkets (Newsome et al. 2013) or more broadly logistics and delivery within other types of retailing (e.g. general e-commerce) (see Newsome 2015; Moore and Newsome 2018; Evans and Kitchin 2018; Briken and Taylor 2018). While these studies make an important contribution to knowledge, particularly in relation to the monitoring and surveillance that are endemic to this part of the sector, they have less relevance for customer-facing work. Although monitoring and surveillance inevitably takes place in this setting (e.g. through the use of task-management software), there are other contemporary employment challenges that are of greater concern for those working on the shop floor.

This research seeks also to build on contemporary studies that have been primarily concerned with food retail work on the shop floor in the UK (see Price 2011; Grugulis et al. 2011; Bozkurt 2015; Hadjisolomou et al. 2017) and elsewhere in the global north (see Price 2016; Carré and Tilly 2017; O’Brady 2020; 2021). The project aimed to critically conceptualise this work and establish an approach that emphasises the mutual constitution of the social and the technological components shaping retail change. Every effort was made to avoid falling victim to the more fatalistic approach taken towards food retail within non-critical, tech-focused future of work commentaries. The research conducted by Price (2011) for the Retail Work collection and Carré and Tilly (2017), in their monograph Where Jobs are Better, were perhaps the closest to this project in terms of the discussion of technological change and skill in food retailing. However, Price’s study focused primarily on the masculinised ‘skilled’ roles within supermarkets (e.g. butchery and bakery) and paid less attention to the feminised roles on the shop floor that still form the majority (e.g. sale assistants and checkout workers). Similarly, Carré and Tilly’s work explored many of the issues raised within this thesis such as the decline in the quality of retail work, yet they avoided addressing the gendering of retail work and how this shaped the nature of the work offered. Also, they largely focused on cases located within North America and Central Europe. Furthermore, this project adds to the small pockets of research that have been conducted on food retail throughout the Coronavirus pandemic which look specifically to workers own stories to amplify the resurgence of issues related to extreme work (Cai et al. 2020) and employee abuse (Hadjisolomou 2020; Hadjisolomou and Simone 2021).

Finally, and perhaps more broadly, this thesis joins the research carried out by a growing number of work and employment scholars taking a critical approach to addressing issues that are likely to shape
the future (see Spencer 2018; Moody 2018; Fleming 2019; Morgan 2019; Howcroft and Rubery 2019; Rubery 2019). However, only a small number advocate for an SST framework to be adopted to better inform discussions surrounding the future of work (see Wajcman 2017; Howcroft and Taylor forthcoming). Therefore, this thesis aims to contribute in-depth research that adopts SST as a lens in order to contribute to the broader debate on work, inequalities and sociotechnical change. This positioning is far removed from the crowded realm of future of work ‘predictions’ and commentary which enables more novel contributions.

7.4.1 Theoretical Contributions

1. Demonstrates the usefulness of adopting an SST lens in research that aims to add to the broader critical future of work debate by analysing the current conditions that can be expected to help shape the uncertain future.

The central theoretical contribution that this research makes is demonstrating that SST is a necessary lens for comprehensively analysing past and present processes of sociotechnical change. It demonstrates that the use of SST can be extended to inform a greater understanding of why processes of change need to be considered as non-linear and shaped by existing social structures by drawing on complementary theoretical approaches and applying them to a contemporary case study. Through adopting this approach, this analysis within this thesis has shown that SST is congruent to much of the historical and current debate within the critical work and employment literature (including the critical strategy and the value of labour literature). Furthermore, the decision to adopt SST as the lens that informs the theoretical framework directly responds to calls for a greater need for research on the sociology of work that makes a critical contribution to reshaping the future of work debate (Howcroft and Taylor 2022). In response to these calls, this thesis has aimed to show how the critical tradition within work and employment research should be drawn upon to inform an understanding of how work is changing. This is best done through conducting robust case studies that further substantiate the much-needed alternative narrative surrounding the future of work and is hence linked to the empirical contributions that are later outlined.

The appeal of SST, as it is laid out in the first edition of The Social Shaping of Technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985), is that it is a broad church that aligns itself with other overarching meta-narratives of society and technology (as opposed to being a more narrowly defined theory such as SCOT or ANT). Therefore, the SST approach is useful both as a theoretical lens and as an umbrella under which complementary theoretical approaches can also be accommodated. This has been demonstrated within the practical applications of this framework both in relation to the discussion surrounding the future of work and employers’ strategies, as well as the value of labour. A significant contribution that this thesis makes is bringing together these bodies of literature and demonstrating how SST can be used to identify how they are linked within the theoretical framework. Through combining
these theoretical approaches, it is possible to see how labour is devalued because of gendered assumptions which have created a tradition of feminised work within food retailing. The undervaluation of these feminised roles has suppressed pay and working conditions which has hence disincentivised retailers from investing in labour-saving technologies. Instead, retailers have chosen to reorganise labour in a way that will likely mean the future will look different to one characterised only by automating technologies. The SST lens both informs the theoretical understanding of how skills and women’s work are shaped and illuminates that which is shaping employers’ decision-making practices or ‘strategies’ aside from the existence of technologies alone. Yet this understanding is further enriched by the theoretical approaches drawn on from the critical work and employment literature. Therefore, this use of SST can demonstrate how these three sociological approaches are complementary (and inextricably linked) and can more accurately highlight the immediate contemporary challenges that are shaping employment.

2. **Broadens the theoretical critique of technological determinism by demonstrating how management approaches to the organisation of labour can pose as a hindrance to the advancement of technological change.**

It is worth noting that while the research has extended SST, the empirical findings also strengthen the broader theoretical critique of technological determinism that is emerging within the critical future of work debate. The discussion within this thesis demonstrates how technological change remains incremental (despite the use of terms such as the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ signifying rapid transformation). The findings depict employer strategies as being opportunistic regarding technology and work as compared with how they are represented within the mainstream future of work literature. There lacked any tangible evidence of a longer-term strategy geared towards optimising productivity gains through capital-intensive investment in automating technologies. Rather, retailers were found to be more focused on responding to immediate customer and marketplace demands in the pursuit of short-term profit-maximisation. While retail leaders were keen to sustain these optimistic strategic narratives, even within the context of the pandemic, the cost-minimisation approach prevailed. The evidence presented demonstrates how the low value attributed to retail work, in relation to its cost to employers, is a key driver which has inhibited the level of technological change predicted within the mainstream future of work literature. This theoretical contribution helps outline how research on sociotechnical change in the workplace can be framed in a way that avoids the constraints of technological determinism by centralising that which drives employers’ decision-making processes within the analysis.

7.4.2 **Empirical Contributions**

An empirical contribution can be defined as an “…account of an empirical phenomenon that challenges existing assumptions about the world or reveals something previously undocumented…”
(Ågerfalk 2014, p.594). Hence this research also makes novel empirical contributions. The first relates to challenging existing assumptions and the second relates to revealing something previously undocumented. Since the research has contributed a case study of food retail more broadly given the similarity across the three cases, it is also worth noting that the lessons taken from these findings are relevant to food retailers in other market segments which further broadens the reach of these contributions.

1. Provides evidence to support the emergent view in the critical future of work literature that the declining quality of work may pose more of an immediate concern than the indiscriminate elimination of work.

Existing assumptions surrounding the future of work are often based on ‘predictions’ that have aimed to calculate the probability that certain occupations will disappear in the near future. Most often, these calculations have been based on an assessment of skills and the extent to which they could be replicated by technology. Through adopting the chosen theoretical framework, this research has aimed to show how that which shapes sociotechnical change is far wider than the mere existence of technologies alone. As a consequence of this, the research finds in the case of food retail that retailers have continued to predominately use human labour over technologies as they remain the cheapest option. Therefore, there is little evidence to suggest that large amounts of labour-saving technology is being deployed. As the empirical study aimed to show, often the technologies digitalised existing processes but still demanded a significant human element to operate. The more pervasive labour-saving effects appeared to be coming from retailers’ decisions to cut the number of labour-hours in stores through understaffing and processes of restructuring, rather than from the use of technology. As a consequence, the quality of jobs is declining as retailers continue to seek avenues through which margins can be widened. These findings are the evidence-base through which the first empirical contribution is made. There is a growing argument within the critical future of work literature that the decline in job quality is more of an immediate concern than the wholesale elimination of work, but many of these claims are broadly theoretical and needed further substantiation through empirical studies. Therefore, this research has contributed an empirical case study to this emerging debate, while at the same time advocating for a certain theoretical approach to be taken within future research with similar aims.

2. Provides a sectoral case study that will contribute to an understanding of how the nature of food retail work changed throughout the course of the pandemic.

The second empirical contribution this research makes relates to the demands of the pandemic and how it has shaped the nature of the data that was collected and analysed. Halfway through the planned fieldwork, the Coronavirus pandemic evoked the need to reconfigure the chosen methodological approach to accommodate for the practical implications of researching during this time.
It was also necessary to ensure that this cataclysmic event was captured sufficiently within the study. Through adapting the methodology it was possible to collect longitudinal interview data (before and during the crisis), in addition to newspaper data spanning the first year of the pandemic. This unique dataset captured a pivotal point in the retail timeline which will likely transform the future trajectory of work within the sector. Therefore, both the data and the analysis provide a critical and much-needed commentary surrounding this unprecedented time which will be an integral evidence-base from which future research can also be conducted.

7.5 Wider research process and limitations

The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on this research mirrored the impact it had on most other aspects of our (working) lives since early 2020 – it was unprecedented, unrelenting and unforgiving (particularly when matters of a short timeline were concerned). When the pandemic hit in the UK, I was halfway through the data collection process and thus the project had to be assiduously reconfigured (see ‘Coronavirus Impact Statement’). However, while this reconfiguration needs to be discussed in terms of the project limitations, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the timing of the pandemic was detrimental to the research. Choosing to do research on a sector that ultimately ended up at the epicentre of the pandemic meant that I was in a position to do research that could capture food retailing at a pivotal point – one which will likely have a long-lasting effect on the future of work in the sector – if I was able to successfully alter my approach. The timely nature of the research also meant that it benefitted greatly from being embedded within a new debate that arose during the pandemic – one that considered the effects of the crisis on key sectors and posed questions about the implications it might have for the future of work. Therefore, as I have written this thesis, the feedback that I received through the dissemination of the research within different forums certainty contributed to the strength of the analysis that has been presented within it. However, it is important to ensure that these assertions about the impact of the pandemic are not misconstrued. By no means am I trying to distract from the tragic impact of the crisis. Yet for the purpose of this discussion, it is necessary to be realistic about how it shaped this research, while also acknowledging the limitations that could be attributed to it and the decisions that were taken to overcome them.

The first issue was the extent to which the pandemic hindered my ability to collect data, as an extra layer of difficulty was added when attempting to access food retail organisations. Consequently, the interviews included were not reflective of the desired distribution across the case studies. Head office interviews were concentrated in Retailer A, shop floor interviews in Retailer B and only ex-employees/union representatives were interviewed relating to the case of Retailer C. However, negotiating access to organisations in food retail can be challenging in the perfect of circumstances (Geppert et al. 2015), so there were inevitably going to be some difficulties with access regardless of the wider epidemiological conditions. Accessing organisations was one issue, but the other was the extent to which it felt appropriate/safe/ethical to actively pursue potential individual participants working on the shop floor in what was already a highly dangerous (BMJ 2020) and stressful environment.
Therefore, the number of customer assistant interviews included within the study was limited due to the practical/moral decisions made surrounding the recruitment of participants. Despite this, I worked hard to ensure that the nature of the sample did not limit the quality of the data collected, nor the range of experiences/perceptions that were included within the final analysis.

During the peak of the lockdown when these moral/practical constraints were most severe, continued efforts were made to ensure that the project could continue, albeit drawing on different methods than first planned. I developed a survey to try and capture the experiences of employees working on the shop floor during the pandemic in order to generate an option that allowed potential participants to engage with the research in their own time. However, it was challenging to get support from organisations, including trade unions and retailers, with distributing the survey as they stressed that they were already overwhelmed by the demands of the pandemic and other requests.

I was adamant not to let these setbacks hinder my ability to do research during this time. Therefore, I set out to capture a different narrative that was also powerful in shaping our understanding of the pandemic through the use of a desk-based newspaper analysis. While the newspaper analysis posed its own challenges (e.g. how long the data collection window should be open, given the uncertainty surrounding the length of the crisis), it allowed me to continue collecting valuable data. In fact, it could be argued that the pressure for me to revise my methods steered me towards utilising a vast and rich dataset that provided a perspective that I would not have otherwise been inclined to capture. As the pandemic ran its course, I was able to conduct several further interviews with customer assistants but this relied on a couple of personal contacts to nominate themselves and carefully choose colleagues to approach on my behalf. I also chose to return to participants whom I had interviewed before the pandemic who were not working on the shop floor, had been interviewed previously and were able to conduct the interviews as part of their typical working day (e.g. in the case of store/HR managers and trade union representatives). This is why interviews with people not working on the shop floor were relied upon more heavily than I had initially hoped. However, these interviews were useful in giving an insight into the overarching throughout the sector and allowed me to capture a unique longitudinal element supported by the newspaper data.

Further to the issues related to the pandemic, it is also important to consider the limitations this research incurred, pandemic or not, due to the nature of my interpretivist epistemology and chosen research design. These challenges can be discussed in relation to three key issues: (1) the practical limitations of the chosen methodology; (2) the personal biases shaping the data collection and analytical process; and (3) the extent to which Western ethnocentric research can have wider application/value. The research process outlined in Chapter 4 allowed for the concerns related to the practical limitations of the methodology to be addressed, in addition to how my positionality as a researcher will have shaped the study. However, it did not cover the personal biases which will have inevitably shaped the analytical process. For example, my left-wing political leaning will have influenced my initial interest in the topic, the consequent critical perspective taken towards the research and how the findings have been
presented in relation to wider debates. Acknowledging this bias is necessary for transparency and the need for reflection, yet the research is also deeply grounded in the belief that it is not possible for researchers, nor their research, to be political/contextually ‘neutral’. Nevertheless, these limitations will have a much broader application, aside from this project alone. The final concern is the Western ethnocentrism that characterises this research. While it is regrettable to raise these concerns at this late stage it is important to do so because to suggest this research has wider application outside of the English-speaking global north would be inaccurate. The vast majority of the literature that informed this project has come from the UK (or in some cases from North America and/or Europe) and is representative of a socio-economic and sectoral context that is not reflective of much of the globe. Also, in taking a Western-centric approach there is a failure to consider the wider impact of the pandemic on the hidden food supply chains, and those working within them, that serve the British supermarket sector. Therefore, this research will only ever be able to claim to have analysed a small portion of supermarkets in the UK and the nature of employment that spans one part of them. While addressing this limitation does little in terms of remedying this, it is important to suggest that further comparative research needs to be conducted to contribute toward developing a more diversely contextualised research agenda for retail work.

7.6 Avenues for future research

This research has responded to decade-old calls for a greater focus on retail work (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011); yet given the current research landscape, it remains clear that more work needs to be done in the area. I suggest that future research could be approached in three different ways: by researching differing country contexts (filling the remaining gaps already mentioned); by exploring different components of the food retail supply chain (that have not already been researched) or by returning to the study once the pandemic eases. To address the first, more comparative research on food retailing is needed. While Carré and Tilly (2017) have paved the way in this contribution, their research remains centred around retail work in North America and Europe. As adopting a social shaping framework has aimed to demonstrate, analysing the broader context is essential, yet research that considers a single country context can be guilty of feeding into a critical, yet Western-ethnocentric, future of work narrative. Rather, credible critiques of the future of work narrative need to be embedded in the understanding that country contexts matter, as the future of work will look different depending on its geographical location, *inter alia*.

Secondly, this research focused specifically on shop floor operations, yet it became difficult at times to ignore other parts of the supply chain which were inevitably linked – particularly during the pandemic and the surge of online shopping. Therefore, delivery and picking on the shop floor were also included in the analysis. However, as this research highlights, vast inequalities remain between the experiences of food retail workers as roles remain segregated along the lines of gender, race and age. Inevitably, this segregation becomes starker as the scope is widened (e.g. the inclusion of shop floor, delivery, warehousing/distribution and head office work). Therefore, a larger-scale study that captures
these different segments could be necessary to better understand the changing nature of work in the sector overall. This will also be important to further feed into the argument made in this thesis that while there might be some retraction of the quantity of shop floor roles, the expansion online may prompt growth in other areas. Additionally, while the quality of shop floor work in retail might be falling, it could be that other parts of the retail supply chain are less exploitative due to the historical normalisation and/or demand for these roles. While there is also some important work that has been done in this area as the earlier discussion mentioned (see Newsome et al. 2013), the context of the pandemic will have had a lasting effect throughout the supply chain as a whole. Finally, many unanswered questions remain regarding what the future of the sector is likely to look like once the worst of the pandemic is over. It is safe to say that the effects of the crisis will be long-lasting, yet it will be essential for researchers to understand the new shape of the sector once a new normality is established in order to work towards a more equal future. The hope is that this research will provide a basis from which future meaningful research can be conducted as it provides both a framework of thinking and a longitudinal snapshot of this challenging period in time.

7.7 Final conclusion

This thesis had two clear aims. The first was to analyse the extent to which *The Social Shaping of Technology* could provide a framework for understanding the challenges faced by food retail workers in the current context. The second was to understand the extent to which the pandemic brought about a revaluing of labour in the food retail sector. In response to the first aim, there is a compelling case to suggest that future research could benefit from adopting an SST framework for understanding the current issues faced not only by food retail workers but also by workers in other sectors that are facing similar challenges. It is essential to take this approach as a corrective to future of work narratives that distract attention from the current erosion of the quality of work that is occurring in the sector today. While it would be Luddite/regressive to suggest that all retail jobs needed saving, we need to learn from past lessons to ensure that one of the largest employing sectors and the people working in it are not abandoned entirely. In response to the second aim, this thesis has argued that there has been little done to revalue this work, a finding which paints a relatively bleak picture for the future of work in the sector. The British Retail Consortium (2016a) predicted that by 2030 we would be seeing ‘fewer but better jobs’ in retailing, yet the evidence presented within this thesis has demonstrated that while there have been signs that the amount of work is declining measured by the hours that are available in stores, there is little to suggest that the work is getting any better. Therefore, it is of great necessity that policymakers start addressing the issues identified with the seriousness that they deserve to avoid a future that may end up much worse for those who remain working within food retailing.
8 BIBLIOGRAPHY


References


ONS. (2020a). Earnings and hours worked, industry by four-digit SIC: ASHE Table 16. Office for National Statistics. [online]. Available from:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Pre-Covid</th>
<th>After Covid*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LD_2a</td>
<td>HR (L&amp;D)</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RO_3a</td>
<td>Operations Senior Manager</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD_3a</td>
<td>HR (L&amp;D)</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RO_2a</td>
<td>Operations Senior Manager</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RO_1a</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD_1a</td>
<td>HR (L&amp;D) Senior Manager</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM_3a</td>
<td>Area Manager</td>
<td>Retailer A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR_1b</td>
<td>Regional HR Manager</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM_1b</td>
<td>General Store Manager</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_1b</td>
<td>Management Trainee</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM_2b</td>
<td>Senior Store Manager</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_2b</td>
<td>Customer Assistant (Counter)</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_3b</td>
<td>Customer Assistant</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL_1b</td>
<td>Team Leader (Supervisor)</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR_2b</td>
<td>Store HR Supervisor (Union Rep)</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_4b</td>
<td>Customer Assistant</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Yes (V)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_5b</td>
<td>Customer Assistant (Dotcom)</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black British</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_6b</td>
<td>Customer Assistant</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian British</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA_7b</td>
<td>Customer Assistant</td>
<td>Retailer B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO_1d</td>
<td>Area Official</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO_2d</td>
<td>Area Official</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian British</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO_3d</td>
<td>Area Official</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO_4d</td>
<td>Regional Official</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Yes (F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EO_1d</td>
<td>Equalities Officer</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Yes (V)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EO_2d</td>
<td>Equalities Officer</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Yes (V)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KI_1</td>
<td>Founding Member</td>
<td>Network Org.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD_1</td>
<td>Customer Assistant (Delivery Driver)</td>
<td>Other Retailer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White N. American</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO_1</td>
<td>National Officer</td>
<td>Other Union</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Yes (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO_2d</td>
<td>National Officer</td>
<td>Union D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Yes (V)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10 APPENDIX 2: OPERATIONS INTERVIEW GUIDE (PRE-COVID)

Start Recording – 1-hour Interview

Biographical/Work History

- Tell me about your current role
  - Did you work in the retail sector prior to this?

Managing Operations

- How is Retailer A responding to changing consumer shopping trends?
- Does the emphasis on convenience alter operations in-store?
  - How is Retailer A aiming to fulfil its goal of becoming the leading convenience grocery retailer?
- What strategies is Retailer A implementing to manage growing cost competition within the sector?
- Can you give examples of new technologies which are being implemented in-store to deliver transformation goals?
- How does the trialling processes for the implementation of a new technology work?
  - How do you decide which stores partake in the trials?
  - How is the success of these trials determined?
  - To what extent are colleagues on the shopfloor involved with decision making processes?
  - E.g. new self-service app scheme
- How is Retailer A developing its online offering?
  - Is likely to become central to their operations?
  - What are the challenges associated with this as a convenience retailer?

Future of Retail

- What are the main changes you’ve seen in the supermarket sector in recent years?
- What are the main challenges the supermarket sector faces?
- What do you perceive as being the main opportunities the supermarket sector will be presented with in the future?

Closing Questions

- What are the best and the worst aspects of working in the supermarket sector?
- Are there any comments you would like to add or feel that there are things that I’ve not covered and should have included?
- Other interviews possible?
11 APPENDIX 3: CUSTOMER ASSISTANT INTERVIEW GUIDE (PRE-COVID)

Start Recording – 1-hour Interview – Please ask for clarifications if things aren’t clear
If you can give examples at any time, please do

Re-iterate confidentiality – organisation/individuals not named – do not work for Retailer B
(independent researcher)

Biographical/Work History

Can you briefly explain your work history to me?
  - What attracted you to working in retail?

Tell me about your current role

Job Characteristics

Describe what you do in your job on a daily basis? What does everyday at work look like?
  - Do you decide which tasks should be done and in what way?

How are your shifts/rotas organised?
  - How many hours do you work? Would you prefer to work more or less hours than you are
    contracted?
    o How much notice do you get of your shifts? Do they get changed at short notice?
    o Are you ever cut short if the shop isn’t busy?
    Are the hours of work fixed? Can you change if needed?
  - How are you paid (by hour, day, fixed salary)? Do you get paid for hours worked or do you do
    unpaid overtime?

Are you a member of a trade union?
  - Why/why not?

Do you feel like you can control what you do in your job?
  - Why/why not?

Training/Skills

What kind of training have you done?
  - Who decides what training is needed or offered?
  - What has been the most useful training you have received?
    - Is all training carried out online?
    - Is training paid?

Are you aware of any programmes for career progression in Retailer B?
  - Are you interested in these programmes? Why/why not?
  - Who is eligible for these programmes? Are they open to all?
  - Is there a route available for customer assistants to be promoted to management?

Do you think formal qualifications and education are useful for retail work?

Do you see supermarket work as skilled work?
  - Is that most or just some jobs What do you consider a skilled job in retail to be? Are there
    opportunities to progress to more skilled work
  - Does this vary according to the role/level of the job?

Store Technology

Which technologies do you interact with on a daily basis at work?
  - What are these technologies used for? Are they reliable ??
  - Are there any difficulties with using these technologies?
- Do these technologies make your job easier/more enjoyable/quicker?
  - If not, could you change this?
- Do you work with self-checkouts? Can you explain how this works?
- Is training provided for working with different technologies?

What skills are needed to work with the technologies in-store? Do they reduce/enhance interactions with customers?

**Future of Retail**

In the press we see a lot about threats to the retail sector, what do you think about this?

What are the main changes you've seen in the supermarket sector in recent years?

What are the main challenges/opportunities the supermarket sector faces in your opinion?
  
  Do you think these challenges will affect some groups of workers more than others?

**Closing Questions**

What differentiates Retailer B from other employers?
  - Would you say Retailer B is a good employer to work for?

What are the worst and the best aspects of working in the supermarket sector?
  - Where do you see yourself in five years time?

Are there any comments you would like to add or feel that there are things that I’ve not covered and should have included?

Other interviews possible? More colleagues?
12  APPENDIX 4: UNION OFFICIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE (PRE-COVID)

Start Recording – 1-hour Interview – Please ask for clarifications if things aren’t clear if you can give examples at any time, please do!

Biographical/Work History

Tell me about your current role
How long have you been in this role?

Can you briefly explain your work history to me (starting with your first ever job)?
  - What effect did you families work have on these decisions?
  - When did first become a union member?
    - What led to you becoming an organiser for Union D?

General Sectoral

In the press we see a lot about the threat to the retail sector, what do you think about this?

What are the main changes you’ve seen to work in the retail sector in recent years?
  - How does organizing in the supermarket sector compare to the retail sector as a whole?
  - What are the main changes you’ve seen to work in the supermarket sector since you began organizing?

Which supermarkets do you have collective agreements with? Which do not recognise the union at all?
  - Retailer B/Retailer A/Retailer C?
    - Are there any local branches you have collective agreements with (in Retailer C)?
  - What led to these collective agreements coming about?
    - What led to collective agreements not coming about?
  - What do these collective agreements cover?
    - What do they not cover?
  - What do you think are the key differences between the organisations you have agreements with/ do not?
    - Has this changed over time?
      - Could you give me an example of this?
      - How has this effected conditions of work?
      - How has this effected your bargaining power? (or relationship with the employers)

What are the key challenges with organising in the sector?
  - How do you try and overcome these challenges? Could you give me an example?

What does your membership look like? What demographics are represented/unrepresented by the union?
  - How does this compare to the actual demographics of the workforce?
    - How does this differ by/org/area/size etc?
    - What do you think lead to your membership composition being/same different to actual workforce?
      - How does this vary regionally?
What are the main issues those you represent face?
  - What are the main concerns/disputes that members bring forward?
    - Does this vary depending on the role/age/gender?
    - How do these differ by organisation?
      - How has this changed over time?
  - Do you think certain parts of your membership are particularly vulnerable?
    - What makes more vulnerable than others?
      - How does this vary regionally?
      - How does this vary by organisation?
      - How this vary by shop type?
**Working Conditions**

How do working conditions in the supermarket sector compare with the rest of the sector?
- What do you think led to these differences?
- How do conditions vary within the supermarket sector?
  - What do you think led to these differences?

In your experience, do you think men and women experience different issues working in supermarkets?
- Why do you think that is?
- To what extent do you think this is determined also by age/race?

Do you think the supermarket sector offers progression opportunities?
- Do you think these programmes are accessible to all and are transparent/fair?
  - Do you think it is possible for supermarket workers to be promoted to senior management/head office positions?

Do you believe that supermarket work should be considered as skilled work?
- Why?

**Store Technology**

- How has retail technology in your experience changed overtime?

How is the introduction of new technologies dealt with by the union?
- To what extent do consultations take place?

Are there any specific technologies that have caused the most concern?

Do you think the use of technologies has changed work for the better/worse?

Is there a fear that automating technologies have the potential to replace supermarket jobs?
- How is this likely to impact the future for Union D and it’s membership?

**Future of Retail**

What are the main challenges/opportunities the supermarket sector faces in your opinion?
- Do you think these challenges will be experienced equally by all workers?

Best and worse things about working in the sector?

**Closing Questions**

What do you think the state of play will be in 5 years time?

Are there any comments you would like to add or feel that there are things that I’ve not covered and should have included?

Other interviews possible?
13 APPENDIX 5: UNION EQUALITIES OFFICER INTERVIEW GUIDE (COVID)

Start Recording – 1-hour Interview – Start with general then move onto Covid

Biographical/Work History

Can you briefly explain your work history to me?
- What led to you becoming an organiser for Union D?
- Tell me about your current role

General

What are the key issues facing your members working in the supermarket sector?

Do you think men and women experience different issues working in supermarkets?
- Why do you think that is?
- Is retail work still highly segregated by gender?
  - Do the contracts differ between these roles?
  - Do you think one should be considered as ‘better’ in terms of quality?
    - Thinking of some of the Equal Pay disputes between shopfloor and warehousing staff which suggest that some people do deem them as being worthy of different pay
- Does this differ across retailers?
  - Examples of policies which may mitigate against this?
- How has this changed over time? Examples?
- How about by other protected characteristics? Race, age etc?

Covid Impacts

What were the key issues caused by the crisis?

Do you think enough was done to protect people with caring responsibilities who were forced to take unpaid leave to look after children while the schools were closed?

Do you think different groups experienced these issues differently? Any examples?

The crisis has prompted a shift online, particularly in food retailing leading to the creation of a lot of new jobs in logistics and distribution
- Share your concerns about the implications this might have for the future of work within the sector (e.g. creation of male-dominated roles, while women’s roles are squeezed?)
- Is this a concern that they share?
- If so, what do they think needs to be done to mitigate the effects of this?

What do you think about the narrative surrounding the way we ‘value’ retail workers? Do you think this will change the way this work is viewed/valued in the future?

Future of Retail

What are the main changes you’ve seen to the supermarket sector?

What are the main challenges the supermarket sector face?
- Do you think this will be experienced equally by all workers?

How do you see the future of supermarkets playing out, say in 5-10 years time?

Closing Questions

Are there any comments you would like to add or feel that there are things that I’ve not covered and should have included?
14 APPENDIX 6: CUSTOMER ASSISTANT INTERVIEW GUIDE (COVID)

- Can you tell me a bit about your employment history/what led you to working for Retailer C?
- Tell me about your current role
- Generally, how has your experience been working throughout the crisis?

Job characteristics

Describe what you do in your job on a daily basis? What does every day at work look like?
- Do you decide which tasks should be done and in what way?
- How has this changed because of the crisis? What has been the effect on your day-to-day role?

What are the main employment issues facing you and your colleagues at the moment?
- How has this changed because of Covid?

Covid Changes

- What types of jobs were created during the crisis?
  o What were the nature of these roles? What types of contracts? Who were the people filling these roles? Age, gender, work status
  o Did any re-deployment occur? e.g. more from store service to delivery
- How did Retailer C the issue of staff who were shielding or had caring responsibilities?
  o What is the HR policy on this?
- How did the shift to shopping online change the way work was organised within your store?
- If someone said to you that you could stay working from Retailer C but they would need you to do just picking or work in the warehouse, would you stay there?

Covid Management

- Did you feel equipped to work safely throughout the crisis?
- What was your experience of customer hostility? What did Retailer C do in response to this?
- Retailer C were in the press a lot during the lockdown about the work they were doing ‘feeding the nation’. Do you think that the way their public facing image matches the way they treat staff behind closed doors?
  o Did Retailer C offer any additional compensation to their staff working throughout the lockdown? What did you think about the increase to £10 per hour?

Operations

- Has the move to online changed the demand for work in-store/in warehouses?
  o Were you fulfilling online orders in stores?
- Do you think Covid has accelerated the implementation/adopting/use of certain technologies within stores/warehouses? If so, give examples
  o e.g. Retailer C and TPLS was that delayed or accelerated by Covid? Was the app still used as normal? Use of handsets for picking in-store? Use of self-service? What do you think of the TPLS/Retailer C partnership?

Looking forward

- How would you evaluate Retailer C response to the crisis? (e.g. internally with staff and the response externally with customers)
- What differentiates Retailer C from other employers?
  o Would you say Retailer C is a good employer to work for?
- What are the worst and the best aspects of working at Retailer C?
  o Where do you see yourself in five years’ time?

- What do you see as the main opportunities/challenges the supermarket sector will face in the future?
  o To what extent have these arisen because of the crisis?
15 APPENDIX 7: STORE MANAGER INTERVIEW GUIDE (COVID)

- Generally, how has your experience been working throughout the crisis?
  o What has the effect been on your day-to-day role?
- Can you explain to me the effect Covid has had on daily operations at Retailer C?

Employees
- What types of jobs were created during the crisis?
  o What were the nature of these roles?
- Has the move to online changed the demand for work in-store/in warehouses?
  o Were you fulfilling online orders in stores?
- How do you think employees in-store experienced working throughout the crisis? More worried and anxious than normal?
- Do you think new skills were needed to work safely/efficiently during this time?
  o Did you hear reports regarding customer hostility towards staff during the crisis?
  o What did Retailer C do in response to this?

Covid Measures
  o Do you think Covid has accelerated the implementation/adopting/use of certain technologies within stores/warehouses? If so, give examples
    o When I was last at the Leyland store some people said the use of self-service in the store was low because of the older customer base. Do you think Covid is changing self-service adoption among older customers? (Is it being implemented regardless?)
    o e.g. Retailer C and TPLS was that delayed or accelerated by Covid? Was the app still used as normal? Use of handsets for picking in-store?

Looking forward
- How would you evaluate Retailer C response to the crisis? (e.g. internally with staff and the response externally with customers)
  o In what ways did you react differently to other retailers? (e.g. in the news about the use of their vertical supply chains)
  o Do you think the way Retailer C responded to Covid will have a lasting (positive?) impact on the way the business is viewed by your customers?
  o Which of the changes implemented during the crisis are likely to become a permanent feature in stores/warehouses?
    o Do you think current staffing levels are likely to remain the same in the future? (e.g. increased use of self-service may mean less staff)
  o What do you see as the main opportunities/challenges the supermarket sector will face in the future?
    o To what extent have these arisen because of the crisis?
## Appendix 9: Examples of retail figures pandemic quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retailer</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tesco</td>
<td>&quot;I'm so proud to be welcoming thousands of new colleagues to Tesco. Thank you to everyone offering to help as we work day and night to keep our shelves full for customers. The community spirit at Tesco is fantastic and together, we can do this.&quot;</td>
<td>Natasha Adams (Tesco Chief People Officer) (16MAR_M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sainsbury's</td>
<td>&quot;In the last 12 months our frontline colleagues have shown outstanding commitment to our customers. In recognition of everything they have achieved, we are giving them a pay rise, plus an additional one-off payment.&quot;</td>
<td>Clodagh Moriarty (Retail and Digital Director) (15FEB_DM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrison's</td>
<td>&quot;Morrison's colleagues have earned their status as key workers and this pay increase many times over.&quot;</td>
<td>David Potts (CEO) (14JAN_GU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asda</td>
<td>&quot;During the past three months our colleagues have worked round the clock in unprecedented circumstances to help keep the nation fed… I am incredibly proud of how they have risen to the challenge of this pandemic to support customers and the communities they serve, and we want to thank them again for their efforts. This week we are kicking off a range of colleague thank you activities… and, for eligible colleagues, a thank you payment of an extra week's pay to recognise all their efforts.&quot;</td>
<td>Rodger Burnley (CEO) (11JUN_GR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-op</td>
<td>&quot;Just one week ago we asked members of the British public who needed jobs to come forward and join forces with us… the response has been overwhelming as people pull together to feed the nation. All of our colleagues are heroes and are doing an amazing job under huge pressure.&quot;</td>
<td>Jo Whitfield (Head of Food) (3MAR_GR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waitrose</td>
<td>&quot;Partners have made significant sacrifices to ensure we are able to continue to serve and support our customers… the measures we have announced today are in recognition of their hard work and commitment and are part of a wider package of support available to help partners during this extraordinary time. I want to extend my continued thanks to every partner. It is a privilege to be their chairman.&quot;</td>
<td>Sharon White (JLP Chairman) (15APR_GR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldi</td>
<td>&quot;I want to express my sincere thanks to every single Aldi colleague who stepped up when it mattered and helped us succeed in our most important mission of all - feeding the nation… their outstanding efforts have ensured that our customers continue to have access to fresh affordable food, every single day. It has never been more important to ensure that our colleagues are rewarded fully for their immense contribution during a challenging period for everyone.&quot;</td>
<td>Giles Hurley (UK &amp; Ireland CEO) (9JAN_M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lidl</td>
<td>&quot;Our store colleagues are doing an incredible job at keeping our shelves stocked, and serving communities during an extremely challenging period,&quot;</td>
<td>Christian Härtnagel (GB CEO) (16MAR_M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>&quot;Our Iceland team is now well over 30,000 strong and I am exceptionally proud of the way our store and delivery colleagues have gone above and beyond during the pandemic, introducing new measures to help their local communities and offering a truly outstanding service to our customers.&quot;</td>
<td>David Devany (Customer and Digital Officer) (11JAN_M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocado</td>
<td>No quotes found</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-C19</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer A £9.00</td>
<td>Some use of self-employed workers through digital platform Compassionate leave policy (case-by-case) Paid breaks above statutory minimum Service length dependent additional sick-pay and holiday entitlement Commitment to increase min no. of hours offered</td>
<td>Mgmt. must nominate for progression programme Unpaid training/responsibility necessary to progress ‘Building capabilities’ to further delay middle management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer B £9.20</td>
<td>Two-weeks paid bereavement leave 15-min paid break and 15-min unpaid Service length dependent additional sick-pay and holiday entitlement Growing use of contracts under 10-hours with flexibility clause</td>
<td>Self-nominate (w/mgmt. permission) to get on progression programme Some feeling of unfairness ‘Building capabilities’ to further delay middle management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer C £9.40</td>
<td>Sector ‘leader’ in hourly pay All entitlements statutory minimum (holiday, sick, unpaid breaks)</td>
<td>Internal progression limited to deputy store mgmt. (senior mgmt. roles filled externally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C19</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very flat hierarchical structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retailer A</strong></td>
<td>£9.50 (+(+5.6%))</td>
<td>+ Expansion of use of 'bogus self-employed' workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ National ‘commitment’ to pay for sick/self-isolation (but + No protection of T&amp;Cs within revised collective agreement +12-month 6% bonus payment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retailer B</strong></td>
<td>£10.00 (+(+8.7%))</td>
<td>+ Use of 'bogus self-employed' workers + National ‘commitment’ to pay for sick/self-isolation (via sick pay, alternative shifts or holiday) +£100 bonus (plus £50 store credit and an additional holiday) + Covid-contracts for hiring of temporary staff (lasting over one-year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retailer C</strong></td>
<td>£9.55 (+(+1.6%))</td>
<td>+ Use of 'bogus self-employed' workers + One-month 10% bonus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>