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The Stressors Faced by Retail Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, brick-and-mortar retail workers have been hailed as heroic frontline employees. No matter where a retail store is located or the severity of the lockdown, retail workers have many new regulations and guidelines to follow and implement in order to protect both themselves and their customers. Using a qualitative research methodology, this exploratory research focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting drastic changes in the retail sector are affecting the workers in North America. Four main stressors are identified: fear of the unknown, fear of infection, mistreatment by consumers, and the role of the powerless enforcer. The paper concludes with research implications and venues for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, was first detected in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province, China (CDC, 2020a). Spreading from one person to another, the outbreak has since spread to every country, with a rising death toll and health concerns (Rae, 2020) and severe socio-economic impacts. The economic implications of the global coronavirus pandemic are detrimental not only to public health systems, but also to various market types (i.e. perfect competition, monopoly, oligopoly, monopolistic competition and monopsony market systems) and retail chains (Culp, 2020; O. Evans, 2020). At the time of writing, countries around the world are in different stages of partial economic lockdown in an attempt to reduce the number of deaths. However, it is still too early to estimate the negative economic effects of the pandemic on national economies, businesses and individual jobs (Pantano, Pizzi, Scarpì, & Dennis, 2020).

Given the life-changing impact of COVID-19, this research aims to shed light on and advance our understanding of how frontline retail workers in North America are coping with the pandemic, identifying some of the major stressors they face as a first step towards alleviating those stressors. Moreover, by interviewing retail workers and consumers during the pandemic, the authors want to go beyond equating the challenges faced by workers to statistical numbers, giving workers the voice to tell their own narratives. The authors have decided to use the word “stressor” because it indicates an environmental input due to an “extraordinary” event, focusing

at the individual level of experience (Green, 1990). While researchers have been already using the word “stressor” in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in general (for example, Rutherford et al., 2020 and Whitehead, 2020), we use the word to describe the different stimuli that causes stress (“Stressor,” n.d.) during the pandemic.

This paper is divided into four main sections. First, the authors provide a brief outline of how the retail sector and retail workers are faring in a world trapped in a pandemic spiral. Second, the qualitative methodology for this empirical study is introduced. The authors collected primary data by conducting 37 semi-structured interviews and supplementing this data with an MTurk survey. Third, the authors discuss the findings pertaining to the type of stressors faced by retail workers. Fourth, the paper ends with a conclusion, expected implications and avenues for future research.

RETAILING DURING COVID-19

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, retailers are now faced with an unprecedented situation that is causing disruptions in the short- and mid-term to which businesses have to adapt, radically rethink their customer journey, and pay more attention to Gen Z—who are typically between the ages of 18 and 22—whose shopping habits shape buying behaviour (O. Evans, 2020; Toneguzzi, 2020b). Retailers are constantly urged to vigilantly monitor their staff and incoming guests to identify any sick person, in order to avoid further spread of the coronavirus, and to report to concerned health authorities if anyone’s symptoms match with those of COVID-19 (Shahbaz, Bilal, Moiz, Zubair, & Iqbal, 2020).

Driven by the loss of everyday consumer spending, a “service recession” (i.e., a sudden and dramatic job loss in the service industries) has started (Chaganti et al., 2020). Fittingly, the situation has been described as a “retail apocalypse” (Dohmen, 2020). Amid an unprecedented spike in retail insolvencies in Canada (Toneguzzi, 2020c), some retailers were forced to close while others are faced with challenges such as those related to health and safety, disrupted supply chains, the workforce (e.g., reskilling workers; their safety), cash flow, changing consumer demand (which can either spike or drop for some of the products), sales and marketing (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Statistics Canada reported that about 40 percent of Canadian retailers had to literally close their doors in March 2020 when government lockdowns and physical distancing requirements set in (P. Evans, 2020). However, even when the lockdown was eased, retailers could not rebound easily. Among those hit hardest by the changes in the consumption habits that were brought about by the pandemic are luxury retailers (Pantano et al., 2020, p. 211). In Canada over the Summer of 2020, after their brands have been hit hard in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many stores (independent, medium and larger chains) started filing for bankruptcy protection or simply shutting amid financial turmoil. Some of those stores were already struggling with debt prior to the pandemic, and the pandemic led to speeding up the process by creating further financial challenges (e.g., ALDO and Victoria’s Secret). According to De Brabant (2020),

In business, especially in retail, leaders were already being seriously challenged before the coronavirus crisis hit. Retail was already going through a period of unparalleled change and transformation, putting even the most successful retailers in some form of “survival” mode.

Other local and international retailers, who are still open, are reconsidering their operations altogether, their plans include focusing on online sales (e.g., Microsoft), operating with fewer store locations, implementing layoffs (e.g., Nordstrom) and seeking creditor protection (Patterson, 2020; Toneguzzi, 2020a). In an attempt to support small businesses, the Canadian government started providing rent and extended wage support as well as loans (Department of Finance Canada, 2020; Trudeau, 2020). A similar situation can be traced in the U.S. retail market, which has been hit hard by the “coronavirus Tsunami” (Petro, 2020), with more than 6,000 store closures expected by the end of 2020, including Men's Wearhouse, PVH Corp, Microsoft, GNC, JCPenney, Victoria's Secret, Nordstrom, and Sears (Peterson, 2020).

With the growing competition from online stores, some retailers will have to permanently close all, or a high proportion of, their physical stores (which ultimately means that consumers will have to change their former shopping habits). On the other hand, retailers like grocery stores and health and personal care stores have seen a surge in their operations (P. Evans, 2020). Online grocery has skyrocketed during the COVID-19 emergency since consumers, even the older and less digitally-savvy ones, have started welcoming the safety offered by technology (Pantano et al., 2020, p. 210). Consequently, some retailers are planning major future investments, for example, Walmart Canada has accelerated its \$3.5 billion dollar investment (to be spent over the next five years) to strengthen the business and enhance both their online and physical stores (Toneguzzi, 2020a). In August 2020, an upgraded Costco Wholesale opened its second-largest Canadian location at Shoppers City East, Ottawa (OBJ, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in different versions of lockdowns and social distancing mandates, has disrupted consumers' habits of buying as well as shopping. The new regulations—for example, imposing a 2-metre physical distance, having a maximum number of people allowed in the store, wearing masks, allocating opening hours specifically for the elderly, and cancelling product sampling stations (“EDITORIAL: Business world bracing for COVID-19,” 2020)—have a vast, and varied, impact on consumers who are asked to be “responsible citizens” by complying with those new regulations and retail practices. And while consumers may go back to their old habits post pandemic, “it is likely that they will be modified by new regulations and procedures” (Sheth, 2020). Whether consumers will go back to or modify their pre-pandemic shopping habits, or even create new habits, is yet to be seen.

Retail workers

When it comes to the retail work force, in 2019, it was estimated that 2,841,000 worked in the Canadian wholesale and retail trade sector (Statistics Canada, 2020) and 19,742,000 were employed in the whole trade and retail trade in the United States (Statista, 2020). Unfortunately, COVID-19 has created an unprecedented worker supply and demand mismatch, for while some retailers have been forced to shut their doors, furloughing or laying off their workers, others are faced with an unprecedented demand that current hiring processes cannot meet (RCC, 2020b). Retailers, therefore, need to capture organizational changes made necessary by the pandemic, for example, by reallocating employees' roles (Pantano et al., 2020, p. 211), transitioning workers from the store into remote support staff (e.g., Apple), temporarily hiring employees from other businesses to help meet unexpected peaks in demand, and/or laying off their workers when they close down. In Canada, although most grocery stores and distribution centres paid employees

extra at the beginning of the pandemic, most of them dropped wages back to pre-COVID levels in July 2020 (Charlebois, 2020).

To financially support retail workers who have temporarily or permanently lost their jobs, both the Canadian and American governments introduced a number of benefits, for example, the CERB (Canada Emergency Response Benefit) program which paid CAD500 a week for up to 28 weeks and the CESB (Canada Emergency Student Benefit) which offered students CAD1250 per month; when wound down in September 2020, both were replaced by other benefits such as the Canada Recovery Benefit, the Canada Sickness Benefit, and the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (Trudeau, 2020). In the U.S., through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, also known as the “stimulus package,” the federal government allowed the states to change their unemployment benefit laws so that they can provide unemployment benefits for situations related to the coronavirus (USA Gov., 2020); however, despite the new legislation passed by the U.S. Congress, to date many frontline workers remain under protected and under compensated (Rho, Brown, & Fremstad, 2020).

Retail workers are now considered “essential frontline workers” (Blau, Koebe, & Meyerhofer, 2020). However, Voorhees, Fombelle and Bone (2020, p. 396) refer to frontline service workers in the retail sector as “the *forgotten front line*” since they have received relatively less attention in the popular press and elsewhere in comparison to first responders and healthcare personnel. Not only do they have to cope with health risks associated with this medical crisis, but they also have to completely modify their routine to ensure their safety and that of their customers (De Felice, 2020; Ottawa Public Health, 2020). Thus, they have to conform to and enforce corresponding regulations governing previously unstructured practices, for example, allowing a limited number of consumers into the stores (according to the allowed indoor capacity in their area), social distancing, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), employee and/or customer screening, and cleaning and sanitization.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent stressors on retail workers, the authors adopted a qualitative research methodology (Deshpande, 1983; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Myers, 2013) that included conducting semi-structured interviews (Atkinson, 1998; McCracken, 1988) and a survey. Since data was collected in the throes of a public health crisis, the collection was designed to accommodate the restrictions and procedures put in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kozinets, 2020; Salmons, 2011). Standard procedures for coding and interpreting data were followed (Charmaz, 2006, 2008; Creswell, 2014; Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Spiggle, 1994).

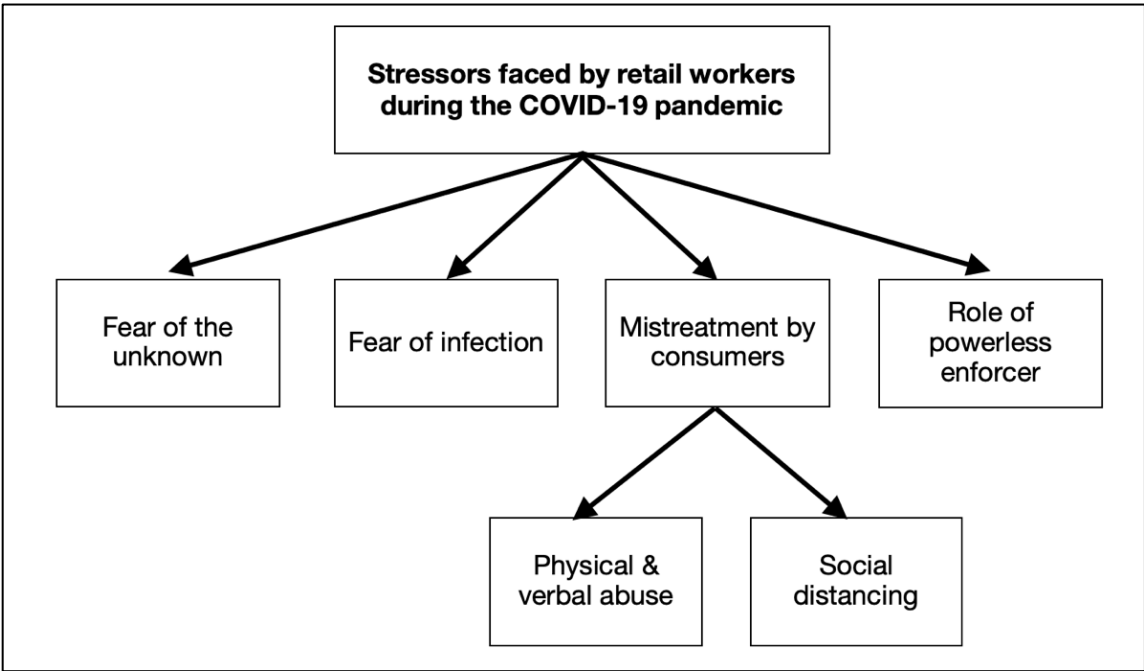
The data for this paper was extracted from a larger research study on retail. A total of 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted during Summer and Fall 2020 and participants (from both Canada and the U.S.) were recruited via the MTurk platform and Facebook: 16 retail consumers, 18 current retail workers and 3 retail managers. In addition to demographic questions, interviewees were asked about conditions in the workplace since February 2020 (when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit) and up until their interview, the impact of both the pandemic and working in retail on their mental health, the change in their working hours, how physically safe they feel from getting infected, whether customers have been treating them differently after the pandemic, and if they think they were discriminated against because of their gender, age or race.

Afro-American	2	2.6%	1	7.69%	---	---	---	---	3	2.63%
Hispanic	1	1.3%	1	7.69%	---	---	---	---	2	1.39%
Asian	2	2.6%	5	31.25%	7	38.89%	---	---	14	12.28%
Middle Eastern	---	---	1	7.69%	---	---	---	---	1	0.88%
Latino	---	---	---	---	1	5.56%	---	---	1	0.88%
Indigenous/aboriginal	1	1.3%	---	---	1	5.56%	---	---	2	1.39%
With disability	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

DISCUSSION

Frontline retail workers are coping with a changing and challenging work environment. Leveraging insights from the collected data, we identify four main stressors and challenges that retail workers face which have a negative impact on their morale and mental health (Figure 1). They are: (1) fear of the unknown; (2) fear of infection; (3) mistreatment by consumers; and (4) the role of the powerless enforcer.

Figure 1. Stressors faced by retail workers during the COVID-19 pandemic



1. Fear of the unknown

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated stress and uncertainty in an unprecedented manner. In July 2020, Hannah started working as an Assistant Buyer (a managerial position) in Giant Tiger which gave her the opportunity to understand how the situation with both workers and consumers. Although their employees are feeling better (compared to at the beginning of the pandemic), things are definitely not back to normal.

Hannah: During this whole pandemic, when it comes to our employees . . . it has been getting better. Now I think because people have been learning kind of how to cope with this situation and maybe people have gotten more used to it. At the beginning, I think a lot of our workers were stressed out . . . You're not working on the front line in healthcare, but you are working kind of in the frontline in retail, so, you are exposed, or you can be exposed to this virus, and like there was a lot of uncertainties. Especially at the beginning: what stores [would be] reopening? What the safety precautions were? I think a lot of like workers and employees especially were concerned about how things were going to look [when] coming back to retail . . . After this initial lockdown happened . . . [people were] stressed out because of the unknown. So, like they weren't sure like how things were going to proceed in the future . . . Like, would they have a job? Would business be doing well? How was business going to be impacted kind of after the lockdown and even like throughout this pandemic?

Working as a part-time supervisor in Shoppers Drug Mart in Ottawa in addition to being a full-time student, Olivia talked about how, in the case of suspected COVID cases, the lack of information from both management and the other workers can lead to extreme stress:

Olivia: A lot of the time, the store management has no obligation to tell staff members that people in the store [meaning store workers] . . . [are] getting tested. And furthermore, if people get negative results, there seems to be no rush for them to tell management and employees that they had the negative results. So, a lot of the time, there's kind of just like the lack of information. So, it leads to staff members kind of just like living in fear, being like, "what's going on?" basically.

Retail workers were not just worried about getting infected or losing their jobs, they were also worried about having their working hours lowered, especially since not everyone was covered by the government financial aid programs. For example, Taiba who works at Farm Boy and who is the breadwinner of her family.

Taiba: Honestly, I really wanted to tell somebody about my experiences during COVID. On how we, the employees [were] . . . devastated about the hours. We lost hours and everybody had a lot of financial problems, especially during COVID. Not everybody were eligible for that \$2,000 or whatever the amount was. I was a full time in regular days before Corona. I used to get around 43-44 hours. My hours went down to 34. That was the maximum I was getting. And there were a lot of changes into the paychecks for sure.

Thus, fear of the unknown included both threats to retail workers' livelihoods and a general sense of not being informed about what was happening in the workplace.

2. Fear of infection

Workers are at a significant risk of exposure to the virus simply because they interact with more people than many other non-medical professions (UFCW, 2020) and there are cases of coronavirus-related employee deaths (Bhattarai, 2020); consequently, they have to follow new practices to help prevent their exposure to the coronavirus (CDC, 2020a; NRF, 2020). Retailers/employers, therefore, have to have a COVID-19 health and safety plan to protect their

employees (CDC, 2020a), including providing the latter with PPE in addition to notifying them when a colleague shows symptoms of the coronavirus (Burke, 2020).

In addition to the physical risk of infection, retail workers are susceptible to mental health issues. Mental illness is a challenge and failing to acknowledge an employee's mental health can hurt not just the individual, but also productivity, professional relationships and the bottom line, on the other hand, feeling authentic and open at work leads to better performance, engagement, employee retention and overall wellbeing (Aarons-Mele, 2018). For many retail workers, stocking shelves and checking out customers have become anxiety-inducing tasks since customer interaction comes with the risk of exposure to the coronavirus, hence, there is a growing need for mental health services such as therapy (Repko, 2020).

A full-time student and a part-time supervisor at a Shoppers Drug Mart in Ottawa, Olivia recounted the general atmosphere at her work:

Olivia: I think it [workers' morale] was pretty low for most of the pandemic. I think in the beginning, a lot of people weren't bothered by it because they didn't take it seriously. Like we hadn't seen any cases. Like they knew it was out there, but we didn't have any first-hand experience with it . . . Just before I had started [in April 2020], I think we had two employees leave because they thought they had COVID. So, at that point, store morale kind of hit really, really low, and it's just stayed that way. Like no one enjoys being at work. No one's happy being at work. We've had several cases where there were points . . . [when] like three or four staff members thought they had COVID. As a result, everyone in the store knew they could potentially be infected as well. So, it's been pretty bleak in the last few months.

In his last year of studies in university, Chan worked for two and a half years at Loblaws until he moved to Shoppers Drug Mart, where he became a full-time Cash Manager, in October 2020.

Talking about how he feels about the risk of infection,

Chan: When I think about how many people [I am seeing] each day, I'm doing like 500 or thousand transactions a day. I get scared too. Like, I don't get scared, I just get panic. You know, I just don't know what's gonna happen if all of us have COVID.

To Paulo, a full-time front-end supervisor at a Value Village branch in Ottawa whose responsibilities include dealing with customers, supervising exchanges and authorizing price enquiries:

Paulo: [At the beginning of the pandemic] I think 80% of people were like very afraid. Mostly the ones that have any disease or diabetes or something like that . . . They were calling sick, staying home very afraid. And before we close the stores, there were just hand sanitizer, not plexiglass, not like all the necessary PPEs, all the necessary procedures, we just start cleaning more in the beginning. So I was afraid just when I was dealing with money.

Taiba works at Farm Boy. She recounted how traumatic her working experience was during the first couple of weeks of the epidemic, between the end of March and early April 2020:

Taiba: We were very afraid. A lot of people quit jobs. There was a day where everybody at work was crying because we thought we would get it [coronavirus]. Someone at Shoppers in the same mall had a Corona, and they were taken to the hospital and Shoppers was closed for two weeks. So, a lot of our employees went

there to the pharmacy or to just grab something like a snack or something and they came back the same day. And when they heard that Shoppers is closed right away, everybody started quitting for two weeks. They left for two weeks. A lot of my co-workers left but me, I was there and I was crying because I knew that I couldn't quit the job as it was a voluntary thing. And the government wouldn't fund me if I quit and, on the other hand side, I had my husband who didn't have a job. So, I was very traumatized and very afraid.

Taiba, however, confesses that with safety measure put in place later on, she is not afraid like before.

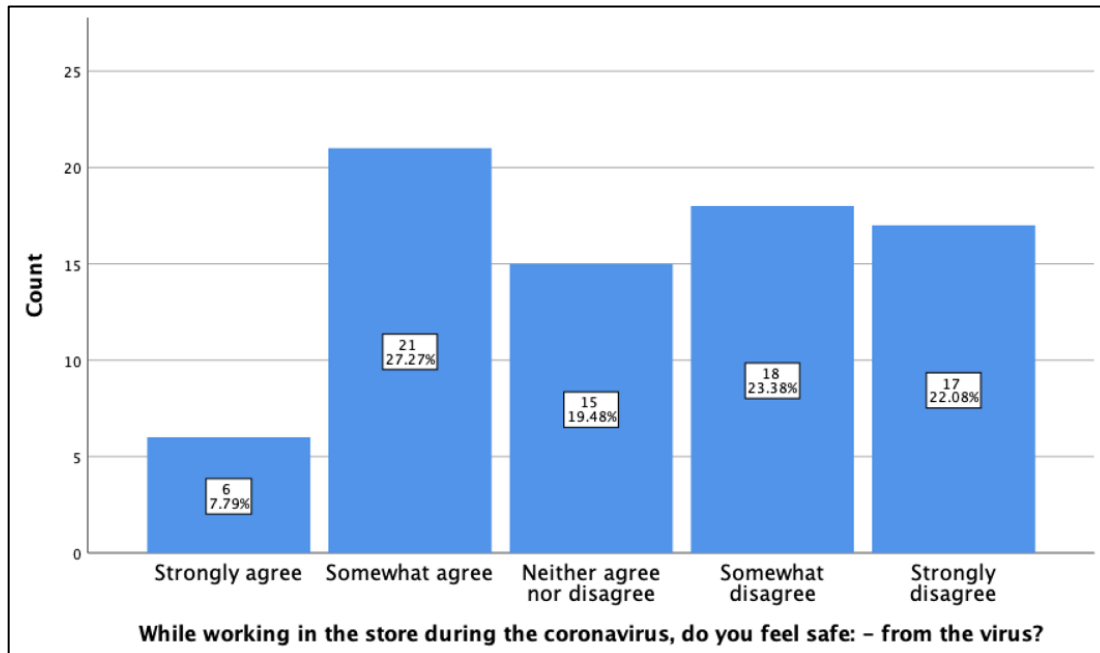
Taiba: No [not worried now] . . . There are a lot of better measures. We do have mask, they're always at work. We have gloves. Everything is there for us. And also customers are cooperating with the social distancing. Like even if we get close to them, they would be like, "Excuse me, where's your distance?" That's what they would say. So that's why I'm not afraid anymore.

Talking about the workers in her store, Emma, a store manager for a wireless provider in Ottawa, describes the situation at the beginning of the pandemic:

Emma: The morale was very low at the time . . . We motivated them [saying], "Hey, look, we're doing everything we can" cleaning wise. But now we have a lot more safety measures in place, like the plexiglass and more cleaning materials and stuff like that. And back then they didn't. Honestly, they didn't feel as safe as they could have . . . Yeah, my employees in particular . . . They're very health conscious and a few of them had asthma. So, they were worried about getting COVID and they saw the cases rising in Ottawa. And they were kind of in a panic. One of them at the time, she worked with the elderly at a volunteer base position because she was in school to be a PSW [Personal Support Worker] and she was really worried about being in the mall because she didn't want to like bring something with her to the elderly home that she was working at, so she was really upset about it. So, it was really hard to keep people's [morale] okay. And obviously, I care about my employees, like I want them to feel safe when they're coming to work, so it definitely wasn't an easy time.

When asked in the survey if they feel safe from getting infected, nearly half the surveyed workers said they do not feel safe (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Fear of infection



Talking to the different retail workers, it became apparent that the older the worker is, the more stressful they feel. A twenty-year old and a full-time student, Joshua is a part-time worker at Pet Smart, to him:

Joshua: Part of the reason that the young people are not worrying quite as much as people want us to is because the media keeps constantly pushing . . . that young people are going to be okay if we get this virus and all that . . . Like they keep telling us that, "Oh, you're fine if you get it," and I think too many kids are taking that as, "Oh, I don't have to worry about this." And I think that definitely carries over to the workplace, and yeah, I just think that the young people aren't worrying about it because they don't think they're gonna die of it . . . The older people have definitely taken it a bit more seriously. We've had a couple managers that have chosen to stop working for the company temporarily . . . They find it ridiculous.

Olivia tells a similar story in her workplace at Shoppers Drug Mart in the first couple of months of the pandemic:

Olivia: A lot of the people who were older actually stopped coming into work and took off. So, any kind of employees that were kind of like 50 up or 40 up, actually took a month or two off. So, during the pandemic itself, we were mostly staffed by students. But as of kind of like May, June, the older staff started coming back.

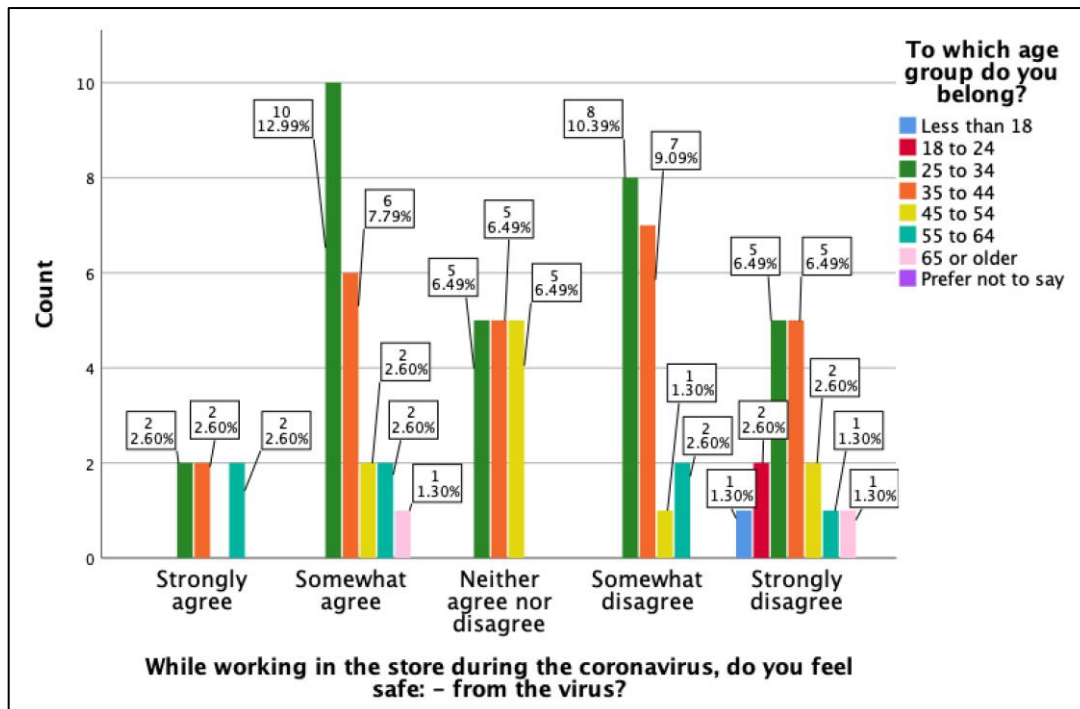
Working as a part-time Sales Associate at Coach Outlet, Wang said,

Wang: Our general manager took it very seriously. She's always afraid of, like, getting sick. So, she's like one of those health nuts. And then all the other

managers were like, “We're more careful.” But as for the associates, some of them just didn't like care that much.

This view that a worker’s age affects their level of fear of infection is echoed in the MTurk survey where 62% of the Mturkers who indicated that they do not feel safe are above the age of 35 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Impact of age on fear of infection



It seems, then, that while fear of infection was extremely high at the beginning of the outbreak, especially for older workers, the provision of PPE and implementation of health and safety policies focused on reducing the risk of infection did help to reduce fear among front-line retail workers.

3. *Mistreatment by consumers*

With the COVID-19 pandemic, retail workers are struggling to cope with the physical and mental demands of the new normal. When it comes to consumers, most of them are well behaved, caring and understanding of the less-than-ideal circumstances brought about by the pandemic. However, on the other hand, there are extreme examples of “frontline employees have been shot, physically assaulted, and routinely face verbal abuse by the consumers who they wake up to serve” and while these are isolated examples, they are “indicative of the implications of COVID-19” (Voorhees et al., 2020, p. 396).

While many of the interviewed retail workers indicated gratitude for having the ability to continue working when so many are out of work, they highlighted the increased stress in their

work lives. And a major stressor was how they were verbally (and sometimes even physically) abused by their consumers. They also expressed concern about the limited compassion being shown by some of consumers.

3.1 Physical and verbal abuse

The media in North America occasionally report on how retail workers are treated by angry consumers. For example, in Canada, an assault was reported in which a man spat on an employee at Stella Luna Gelato Café in Ottawa after pushing his way past the barricades set up for physical distancing (Spears, 2020), another retail employee was kicked and punched after asking customers to respect physical distancing (Gills, 2020), and a Quebec Walmart worker was struck by a driver allegedly angered by COVID-19 measures (“COVID-19: Quebec Walmart worker struck by driver allegedly angered by COVID-19 measures,” 2020).

For the past seven years, Ashley has been working full-time in the bakery and as a cashier in Publix Super Markets in Deltona, Florida. Describing the customers, she said,

Ashley: They [customers] are angrier or they're just very short. If you run out of a product, they belittle you and get irate. And I don't know if it's because of the stress, because of everything going on, or what it is. But yeah, there's definitely a lot more angry customers . . . To be honest with you, at least in my store, a lot of the customers they truly don't care. I mean they don't like abiding by the rules. We have directions on which way you can go down the aisles. They don't listen. They think it's just a big joke. And the company that I work for, they have these rules but I guess you could say they don't enforce them too strictly. Because they're worried about offending the wrong customer . . . [but] I would not want to be the one to enforce it. The whole situation . . . [is] catch 22. I mean, I think no matter what you do, . . . someone's gonna be upset, you know.

Taiba recounted some of the difficult consumers she had to deal with during the early days of the pandemic when she sanitized carts and supervised lineups at the entrance of Farm Boy. Because masks were not mandatory and carts helped customers keep the two-metre distance, back then, Farm Boy workers asked customers to use the carts instead of the baskets:

Taiba: A lot of the customers that come there are elderly people and they didn't want to shop so many items. So, if we convinced them or force them to take the cart and not a basket, they would get angry. They would say, “Why am I forced to take that whole big cart where I'm only grabbing one item?” . . . There were times where people yelled at me super hard . . . I almost cried because this one guy was telling me that if he were the manager here, he would fire me just because I told him to take a cart with him and that he's not supposed to come in from the wrong door. So, there were a lot of emotional effect on us, on the employees. And I do remember my colleague, she was crying and she was sitting on the floor because nobody was respecting the fact that she had to convince them to take a cart . . . It was always verbal. I can't remember them getting very physical, but it was always verbal.

By the time of the interview, in August 2020 and before the second wave, the situation was already much better:

Taiba: Now, we don't have to do that stuff. That's why they're [customers] not angry anymore, I think. Also because of the whole situation calming down. They're mentally feeling better. They're not as stressed anymore as they were. Those pandemic warnings are not going around as much. That's also why they're not watching too many news about it. We're not hearing too much news. So, I think because of those effects, they're . . . They're treating us nicely now.

Talking about her experience as a store manager for a wireless provider in Ottawa and how she oversees workers in both a kiosk and a store, Emma said:

Emma: Lately, people are very testy. Lately, people are very aggravated. And we actually had something printed that we can put on our kiosks and stores saying that abusive behavior won't be tolerated, just because it did become so common, the last little while, to be honest with you . . . They [customers] don't like that we can't touch their phones as much and do some of the stuff that we were doing before. So like, stuff like content transfers, like we used to handle customers' phones and be able to transfer information from phone to phone, and do bill payments, and like just some of the services that we're not providing any more just to keep everybody safe. People don't understand why we're not doing it. They just . . . we tried to explain that, like this is unprecedented situation like we're trying to keep everybody safe, but people just want us to kind of do what we were doing before and they don't understand why things have had to change even after we explain to them. So that's definitely a cause. The other cause I feel like it's just people stress. They just they're taking their stress out on retail workers because they don't know where else to take it out on. And if they're upset about their phone not working, or if they're upset about something to do with their bill, or it could be anything. They just kind of take it out on the worker in front of them.

Olivia thinks that compared to the time before COVID-19 hit, workers are treated way worse now. A supervisor in Shoppers Drug Mart, she talked about how this type of abuse was frequent not just at the beginning of the pandemic, but also during the Summer before the second wave hit:

Olivia: I think it's worse. The kind of like COVID measures, so things like wearing the mask, sanitizing your hands when you come into the store, keeping the mask on, we get blamed for that a lot. So, we will get like aggressive customers who aren't happy with these rules and that gets taken out on us . . . [In summer,] the customers seem to be getting worse. A lot of people don't kind of recognize this potential for the second wave. So, we're actually seeing the amount of people that come into the store with masks decrease, and the amount of people that keep their masks on in the store decrease. So, it's created a lot of tension between staff members and customers because we're constantly asking people and reminding people, "Keep your mask on," which is also really negatively affected staff members. Again, . . . staff members are really frustrated [with] customer abuse, but also like the personal risk to them of constantly being around people that don't respect our boundaries. They come close to us. They don't wear masks. So, it is sinking again, like customers just aren't taking it seriously and then it gets taken out on staff members.

Working as a Sales Associate at Coach Outlet, Wang believes that, in general, workers have been treated far worse after the pandemic.

Wang: Oh worse. A hundred percent worse . . . The customers, they're just so much ruder I have found. It's brutal . . . So, a lot of the times, for our store, you have to wear your mask like above your nose, right? And like if someone comes in and they're not doing that, we have to be like, "Do you mind putting it above your nose?" And like we've been told to go fuck ourselves. We've been told to like "F off." Like people have just straight up ignored us . . . I mean customers can be rude, but like they've never been so blatant about it before really. At least not towards me. And so, it was kind of shocking to be told to fuck off every couple of days I was in . . . Customers are less patient with us. I guess some of them want things done a certain way. Like if we haven't sanitized every single thing, then they're like angry at us. If we don't have plexiglass, they're angry at us. Like it's kind of like we can't win. And it's like . . . They'll come in and they'll be like, "Oh, like you're not doing enough like protection wise" and we're like, "Okay, but like I'm getting paid minimum wage. What do you want me to do about it?" . . . I think the customers have been a lot worse.

Interviewed in October 2020 when the second wave of the epidemic was on the rise, Stephanie opened up about her experience working at one of the Costco branches in Canada. Compared to all the other interviewees' workplaces, Costco came out to be the most difficult workplace for workers during the pandemic. When asked about why that is the case, Stephanie said that it could be because since they pay for memberships, customers have higher expectations of expected services. Her account of her interaction with consumers at the beginning of the pandemic resembles scenes from zombie apocalyptic movies:

Stephanie: The first couple of weeks [of the pandemic, we] didn't really take it very seriously. It wasn't until the toilet paper hoarding, until it really sunk in, I guess . . . It was like at the drop of a hat. It wasn't like a gradual progression. So, a lot of us didn't have time to really have it sink in, like, "Okay, this is real. This is actually happening." It only actually hit us the morning that the first Ottawa case was diagnosed [On March 11, a 40-year-old man who recently travelled to Austria was confirmed as the first coronavirus case in Ottawa.] . . . Yeah, when the very first Ottawa case was diagnosed, then it kind of clicked, like, "Okay now things are kind of getting a little bit more serious." And then the toilet paper hoarding hit and like I said, it wasn't a gradual progression. It was like one morning we opened the doors and we were mad rushed by people running to the back of the warehouse to where the toilet paper and the Lysol wipes and the paper towels were. And when I say running, I mean like 80-year-old men with their shopping carts running to the back of the store. Whereas normally you'd see them hobbling along, like doing their regular stuff. I was trampled over by people because I'm there first thing in the morning when the doors open. I'm there when chaos hits. It's not like the night shift people [who are] like, "Oh, it's not that bad. It's not that bad." But they're not there in the morning. They're not there when that surge of 200 people are waiting at the door for that door to open to come through. And we didn't have any protocols in place. We didn't know what we were getting into. So,

as a staff, we are like “Oh my God! What's going on?” And yeah, like this. It was like I said, it just hit like just flipping a light switch.

To Stephanie, therefore, the simple act of waking up in the morning to go to work has become a stressor:

Stephanie: Right now [mid-October 2020], I think mentally for me to go to work, it's tough for me to get up in the morning to go to work . . . I'm okay in the warehouse situation before the doors open. So, between five am and nine, I'm good. Like, I know that I'm only working. I'm only in that building, people that I'm working with, I have my section, I'm working by myself, I'm stocking that section alone. But when those doors open, that's when my anxiety hits, because that's when you don't know. You don't know how the day is going to go. You don't know how many people are going to come in shopping . . . The staff are at a point where we're not all “Oh, I'm sorry. Hey, let me try and see what I can do for you.” We're at a point now where it's like “If you don't like what's going on, stay home,” because they're taking it out on us, and our patience are down.

Not only do retail workers have to deal with irate consumers, they increasingly find themselves in situations where they have to referee interactions between consumers, which adds another layer to an already challenging job. For example, dealing with such a chaotic situation for a week and a half, Stephanie ended up going on a two-week leave and only went back when new protocols were put in place to help against such abuse. And it was the following incident that made her take that decision:

Stephanie: I could hear screaming in one of the back aisles. Of course, I turn over and I look and it was in the aisle, just where I was standing. And it was two grown men screaming at each other and throwing fists, because one individual got too close. [They were] passing each other and he got too close to the shopping cart. And I had to go and break up a physical altercation between two grown men. Just because people were freaking out . . . And that was that point where I was like, “No, this is not worth it. It's not worth the paycheck to come in here and have to deal with this.” So, I took a I took a two-week leave.

In addition to a tense and volatile working environment during the first few weeks of the pandemic, Stephanie had to deal with other stressors: she is considered high risk because she has asthma, she suffers from anxiety and depression disorder, she has four children (ranging in age from a kindergartener to a 16-year old) who had to be homeschooled during the period when schools were shut down, and it was quite difficult for her to explain how stressful her job has become.

Stephanie: [My husband] had no idea . . . He didn't get the whole concept of what we were dealing with, that what I was dealing with at work. So, it was hard for me to explain to him . . . I don't just get up and go to work anymore. I get up and I have to mentally prepare myself for my day. And when you come home from that type of an environment, you're tired. You're exhausted. You're mentally exhausted and you're physically exhausted. And there's nothing you can do about it because it comes with the territory, right? Like yesterday. Yesterday was a rough day. Yesterday there was angry people because again we're dealing with shortage of toilet paper and paper towels. And again, I'm getting yelled at. “What do you

mean there's no paper towel? Why can't you guys put it out in the afternoon so that we can shop in the afternoon to get it?"

On the other hand, what helps Stephanie is the fact that schools have reopened in Fall 2020 which means that when she gets back home from work, she has one hour to herself before the children are back from school:

Stephanie: I'm home at 2:45. They [kids] don't get home till four. I have an hour. So, to decompress, a little cat nap or to, like, you know, get my dishes done without any distraction, that sort of thing. So that's kind of what's my saving grace right now . . . That's just it . . . [I keep telling myself] through my whole day, "Okay. I get to go home and have an hour by myself." Like how awesome is that?

When we interviewed consumers, they all agreed that workers get occasionally mistreated (with many of the Canadian consumers mentioning that the situation is worse in the U.S.).

Myint: Some people don't consider that workers are just human beings trying to get a job or trying to have a job. So, they also, you know, just kind of brush past them, especially in COVID times. I've heard a lot of things that made me just be like, "What are you doing?" . . . situations that people, you know, yelling at cashiers like "I don't have to wear a mask." It's mostly in the States, "You're infringing on my rights. I don't have to do this. I have no good reason for not wanting to do it. I just don't want to do it." So that bothers me. It bothers me like just as much as seeing anyone else treated badly or unequally. I don't know. Some people are just having a bad day for their whole life I guess.

Robert: I was at the grocery store over the weekend, and I noticed a customer in front of my wife. Just going off on the cashier for like no apparent reason. She was arguing with her. She was belligerent. She was using profanity, just because the cashier asked a simple question, "Do you have bags [or] do you want bags?" And the customer just went off. It's like, "Why are you asking a stupid question? I just want to get my shopping done and go." . . . If you're going to have that sort of attitude towards like customer service staff, just order everything online instead of going into a store and being ignorant and belligerent to somebody that has been dealing with COVID since it started.

According to the MTurk survey, 50.7% of the workers believe that they are treated worse because consumers are frustrated with the COVID-19 new store regulations (Figure 4) and 36.4% do not feel safe from angry customers (Figure 5).

Figure 4. How retail workers think they are treated as a result of consumers' frustration with newly implemented shopping regulations

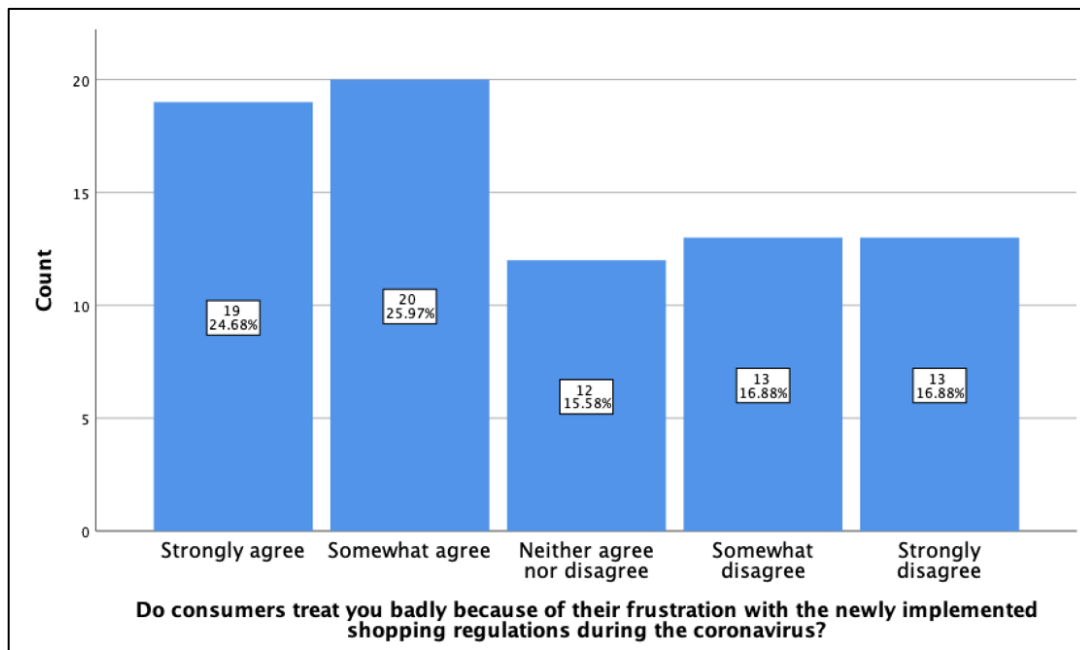


Figure 5. How safe retail workers think they are from angry consumers



3.2 Social distancing

To keep individuals safe from the coronavirus, the World Health Organization (WHO) asks the public to “Maintain at least a one-metre distance between yourself and others to reduce your risk of infection when they cough, sneeze or speak. Maintain an even greater distance between yourself and others when indoors. The further away, the better.” (WHO, 2020). In both the U.S. and Canada, all retailers have to maintain a two-metre (equivalent to a six-feet) physical distance between individuals in their spaces (CDC, 2020b; RCC, 2020a).

While maintaining social distancing inside retail stores has become one of the main topics of contention between consumers and retail workers, the interviews revealed another dimension: in some cases, even the consumers who follow the two-metre-rule between themselves and other consumers do not abide by that rule when dealing with retail workers (for example, trying to reach over their head to get things off the shelf when they are restocking, or when talking to them). This leads retail workers to feel more stressed out, worried about getting infected and more importantly, feeling disrespected and even inhuman.

To Mitig, who works at Loblaw's:

Mitig: One thing that I found was quite interesting was when there's recommendations for social distancing or physical distancing, you can see that customers would keep distance between them and other customers, but then they would disregard any sort of distance from staff member and employees.

Joshua talks about how he feels disrespected when customers do not keep their distance:

Joshua: They get right up next to me, they're showing me their phone, they're handing me their stuff . . . They don't seem to respect us as employees; that we need our distance as well.

Olivia: It's one of my biggest pet peeves. And it makes you feel so inhuman. Because it's like they don't see you as a person, they see you as a part of store so they can just interact with you as they normally would. I've had customers touch me. I've had customers come like face to face with me. And it's just like . . . it gets really tiresome having to keep backing away and they keep coming close to you. You ask them to stay back and they just ignore it. So, it's very frustrating. Like I say, it makes you feel like you're not a person, like they don't see you as a human being. They see you as part of the store.

Working at Costco, Stephanie complains that this problem is not just with regular customers, but also with the people working with Instacart (a service where they shop for other customers):

Stephanie: Oh yeah, it's got to a point where on our name badges, we had to have this little red tag that said, “Please stay two meters away” because they don't. They get like right in your face . . . Right now, the biggest thing with Costco is the Instacart . . . Instacart will come and they have their list of what they have to shop for, but they want to get in and they want to get out as quick as possible. So they approach a staff member and they have it on their phone, and they'll put it right in your face like “Where's this? Where's this?” and they'll scroll, “Where's this.” And they're like right in your space, right in your space . . . They don't care because they just want to get in. Because they can get in and get their cart full, get out and deliver their order, the quicker they can do another order. Because they get paid

by the order, right? They don't respect anything and it's awful . . . And a lot of these Instacart people are people that have lost jobs due to COVID and this Instacart is kind of what they're supplementing their income for, right? So, you can't really blame them. But at the same time, they're a pain because they're creating some of this anarchy that goes on during your shift.

Although retail workers try to emphasize with customers, the verbal and sometimes physical abuse they endure in the course of the work hours has a de-humanizing effect.

4. The role of the powerless enforcer

One of the challenges retail workers face is coaching consumers to abide by the new norms. Thus, in addition to trying to personally adapt to new policies at their workplaces, retail workers have new responsibilities thrust upon them; they are now being asked to implement new rules and regulations that are not universally well-received by consumers. In many situations, consumers simply ignore those requirements (for example, maintaining social distancing and wearing a mask) and workers are uncertain how to manage such behaviour. Consequently, as the public face for the retail establishments where they work, retail workers have to endure the brunt force of the consumers' negative behaviours and emotions.

Many of the workers we interviewed talked about how they have been forced into the role of "rule enforcer" when consumers refuse to follow the new protocols set in place after the COVID-19 pandemic hit. They, moreover, agreed that this new role is unwelcomed, for it not only add to their emotional stress, it sometimes leads to direct confrontations with the consumers.

Paulo: Actually, I feel kind of powerless in terms of telling customers to do the things. So, for example, nobody follows the signs from the floor, nobody. And then I started telling them to help this, to follow the sign, but nobody follow. So, I just don't tell them anymore . . . I talked to my manager [about customers not wearing a mask] and actually we, as retailers, we don't have the power to [say] "Go, leave my store" because they can say, "Oh, I have a health condition and I can't wear a mask." But there is no card. There is no proof. They don't need to show you proof. So, we are powerless.

Joshua: I do feel like I need to watch people a bit more . . . Personally, just because I'm worried. What are they gonna do? What are they gonna touch? What are they gonna . . .? Because I know that I'm gonna have to be the one later that's gonna have to touch it, that's gonna have to do whatever with it. Like, so yeah, it does cause a little bit of stress.

Chan: It's funny because the City of Ottawa health unit came for inspection. They were looking at staff if they are wearing a mask. And then we were pointing out where there's a lot of customers not wearing them . . . And there's like a specific one [customer] that just tells us that he doesn't feel like it, you know? He don't find mask necessary for him. And then all we can do is to say, "I'm sorry, sir, but that is a bylaw and you're legally required to wear a mask." But we can't enforce it . . . And there really isn't anything that I can do toward the customer.

Stephanie: You get people yelling at you because, well, "That person over there is not wearing a mask." And it's like, "Okay, well what do you want me to do about it?" I'm not police. I'm not paid well enough to be able to go and police these

people, to tell them that they have to put a mask on, you know. Like that's not what I get paid for. I get paid to make sure that you get your food and get your stuff in your shopping cart and get through the line as safe as possible. That's my job. But we can't tell people you have to put a mask on. We are told that we cannot enforce it. We can remind them that they should have a mask on, but we can't enforce it. So, you get the backlash from that.

To the interviewed workers, therefore, asking them to enforce safety regulations in the store is an unrealistic demand since they have no power beyond reminding customers of what should be done. And when customers refuse to comply, it only adds to their feelings of stress, frustration and powerlessness.

The second wave

With the advent of Fall 2020, many cities in both Canada and the U.S. started seeing a surge in COVID-19 cases, signaling the beginning of the second pandemic wave. Thankfully, many retail workers feel less worried now compared to the beginning because of the safety regulations put in place and because they have a better idea of what to expect:

Joshua: To an extent, yeah, I am worried. But I'm not overly worried because I don't feel like they're going to do a shutdown like they did last time where everything is like gone. Everything is like shut down and only essential services. I'm not overly worried about that just because I feel like since we're 9-10 months into this, they could probably approach it without having to close everything. So, I'm not overly worried about that. I think we're going to stay open. And maybe we may just get some new, like, precautions. We may have to limit the amount of people in the store and all that, but I don't think . . . I'm not overly worried about . . . about us having to close or losing my job again really.

Emma: I feel like the morale has gotten a little lower lately. I don't think it's to the point that it was before. Because I think before, this was something so new and it was something that nobody's dealt with and nobody really knew how to handle it . . . but now, it's like we're more used to kind of the situation that's going on. Everybody's been wearing masks for months. But like the last week [of September 2020], I have noticed a bit of morale drop to where people are saying that they don't feel as safe as they used to going to work and they're getting a bit frustrated. At work, as long as I'm keeping my hygiene up, and I'm staying behind the plexiglass, and I'm wearing a mask, and I'm doing all the things I'm supposed to do, I do feel fairly safe. It's more when I'm in other situations, like I'm not behind plexiglass and say, I'm in the elevator with somebody who's coughing or something like that. It's more situations like that at work.

To Paulo, an immigrant with a work permit, losing his job is more frightening than the probability of him getting infected:

Paulo: I have one supervisor there [at Value Village] that is like freaking out. And she has anxiety problems and she's calling sick twice a week because the numbers of COVID cases are starting to increase again. So, a lot of people are very afraid. In my case, I'm not, I am afraid of the store closing again . . . I believe we should get the economy going. Even if we have a second wave, we can't afford to close

the stores anymore. Nobody can afford. And Canada will be broken if it goes everything again. So, it is what it is.

In the midst of the second wave of COVID-19, it seems like some of the stressors still exist, while others are having a reduced impact. At present, new vaccines are being announced almost daily, but governments are still unsure when they will receive a supply and procedures regarding the distribution of vaccines need to be put into place. The impact of the second, and perhaps third, wave of COVID-19 on retail workers remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

To understand the impact of the COVID-19 on retail workers and the ensuing stressors they have to deal with, the authors conducted a qualitative exploratory study through which they interviewed and surveyed retail workers and consumers in North America. Four types of stressors emerged from the analysis of the collected data: fear of the unknown, fear of infection, mistreatment by consumers, and the role of the powerless enforcer.

While recent governmental aid packages in both Canada and the USA have taken some of the immediate economic strain off retailer workers, they neither address the longstanding disparate employment outcomes nor protect their financial stability. Moreover, as the world progresses through this crisis, retail workers need to be protected and helped, not just financially and healthwise, but also physically and mentally inside the retail stores where they work. Both retailers and consumers, therefore, need to take action and try to alleviate at least some of those emotional and physical stressors. The first step towards helping retail workers is to listen to their stories:

Stephanie: During that first week of the of the virus. I put a video out on my own private social media and I was bawling my eyes out in my car and I was freaking out. And I was like, “You know what guys, it's not the retail workers. Please stop taking it out on the retail workers. Stop screaming at us. Stop yelling at us. It's not our fault. This isn't something that we've caused. We have to just get up in the morning and go to work and get a paycheck, be able to support our families, and we can't do that if you guys are bringing it down on us. You're breaking us down mentally.” And I had a mental breakdown. That's basically what it was. I had a mental breakdown because of everything at work that we were dealing with.

The authors hope that through this research, the pressure under which retail workers are working is better understood. When asked about whether she feels “safe” or not at work, Myint nearly cried in the interview. She said:

Myint: You asked me about, like, if I feel safe. Because I just like when people care for each other . . . I just like that you included this question, like, do the workers feel safe themselves? Because . . . yes, we have to care about the safety of our customers and those who come to our stores, but we also have to care for us. So yeah, I just like that you included that question.

Limitations

This paper is not without limitations. First, geographically, the research focuses on the retail sector in North America and it would be interesting to see and compare the stressors workers

face in other parts of the world. Secondly, another limitation is that the paper focuses on the stressors that retail workers face during the pandemic and does not cover consumers' side of the story and the reasons behind their frustrations and fears. Thirdly, there are many stories that were excluded from this paper covering how retail workers were appreciated and their front-line work applauded by consumers. As expressed by one of the workers who works in multiple retail stores (in Arkansas, Texas and Florida), promoting events and products:

Matthew: It's a mixed bag. Like sometimes people will yell. Sometimes people are giving us a big thank you. Sometimes we're getting hugs. And some people seem to be grateful for what we're doing and helping them but not everyone.

A part-timer at Pet Smart, Joshua echoed the same idea:

Joshua: I think some people are just grateful that we're open and that we're available . . . Like some people are just happy that we're putting ourselves out there so that they're able to shop. But I think there's some other people that are so immensely stressed by the entire situation still that they are a little rude and all that. Because what I think, in their heads, the things they're asking like the social distancing and all that is realistic. But in the real world, a lot of people aren't respecting it and I think there's a lot of people that are upset by the whole COVID thing and they are taking it out on people like me and other employees.

And while Stephanie agrees that there are many kind customers who appreciate the workers, it takes only one rude customer (whom she describes as a "Karen") to ruin their day:

Stephanie: But all it takes is that one Karen to ruin your entire day. And it doesn't matter how good of a day you're having, all it takes is that one Karen, and you [are] like "rrrraaaa."

The authors, however, believe that there is still hope for how consumers can help positively impact retail workers through positive gestures and behaviour that would make the latter feel no longer ignored or unappreciated.

Directions for future studies

The authors hope that their research stimulates future work on the impact of COVID-19 on frontline services. Suggested topics for further studies include: (1) studying the other stressors faced by retail workers outside their workplace, since they have to deal with things like children staying at home, spouses losing their jobs, health issues of their own, etc.; (2) understanding the coping mechanisms used by frontline service workers (including retail) to deal with the increased stress associated with working during the pandemic; (3) finding new ways that can help both retailers and their workers to manage the new social dynamics (for example, worker-worker, worker-consumer, and consumer-consumer interactions) in order to ensure both the workers and the consumers' welfare; and (4) closely looking at the evolving role of service employees (including retail workers) and what their workplaces will be like once restrictions are lifted in the (hopefully near post-COVID) future.

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