



**MSc in Human Resource Management and Organisational  
Psychology**

Occupational stress and remedies amongst supermarket  
employees during COVID-19

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate how the Icelandic supermarket company (Supermarket A) responded to stress that arose from the COVID-19 Pandemic since occupational stress can be detrimental and costly to organisations/companies. Three research questions were investigated: (1) to explore what types of procedures/mechanisms have already been put into place by Supermarket A to minimise stress levels amongst their employees, (2) explore how individuals feel about stress and work-life balance during COVID-19 and (3) develop remedies/coping mechanisms by identifying the elements/sources of stress found amongst the employees.

An explanatory mixed-method design was used to gather data; the qualitative part involved ten participants that participated in an interview, five from the front-line sector and five from the office (able to work from home) sector. The quantitative part involved a survey and had a sample of 137 participants. The results showed that Supermarket A had invested heavily into programmes/interventions that are highly individualised. Moreover, such programmes have been demonstrated to be immensely effective when put into use. However, only half of the participants knew about the programmes. The outcome indicates that there is no need for remedies/coping mechanisms to be implemented; the problem lies with a lack of communication with such programmes/interventions, and thus, more communication channels need to be implemented if the full use of such programmes is to be extracted.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, stress, individualised programmes, lack of communication, costly, highly effective programmes/interventions.

**Declaration of Research Work Integrity**

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature of any degree. This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended. By signing the present document, I confirm and agree that I have read RU's ethics code of conduct and fully understand the consequences of violating these rules in regards of my thesis.



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08-09-21

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 What is the subject?**

An Icelandic supermarket chain that will be known as Supermarket A, has reported that the continuous fluctuation of COVID-19 rules has had adverse psychological effects on their employees, resulting in counselling and other forms of therapy to combat these effects.

### **1.2 What is known about the subject?**

The Pandemic has affected everyone somehow and more so in certain areas than others. Since research has shown that COVID-19 may cause stress (Özer, Özkan, Budak, & Özmen, 2021), this may affect individuals within the company and subsequently affect the company dramatically. Schabracq and Cooper (2000) suggest that turnover and hiring costs are among the few negative consequences that will affect the company.

### **1.3 What is not known about the subject?**

Supermarket A's Human Resource Management has mentioned that specific procedures have been implemented to address occupational stress. The problem is that these measures' effectiveness is unknown; have such measures had a positive or negative impact on Supermarket A, are any measurements missing or found to be mundane, are there alternatives and finally, can such measurements handle future Pandemics that may arise? The unknown about COVID-19 is both disquieting and frightening for all, yet at the same time, the organisations must carry on; people need to resume work, whether it is front-line or office employees. Thus, how are these programmes holding up against the invisible enemy (COVID-19)?

### **1.4 What answers will this thesis provide?**

The purpose of this study splits into three parts: firstly, to explore what types of procedures/mechanisms have already been put into place by Supermarket A to minimise stress levels amongst their employees. Secondly, in light of these procedures/mechanisms, explore how individuals feel about stress and work-life balance

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during COVID-19. Thirdly, develop remedies/coping mechanisms by identifying the elements/sources of stress found amongst the employees.

The Pandemic continues to wreak havoc amongst organisations; thus, by investigating and developing coping procedures/mechanisms that will hopefully assist Supermarket A in mitigating stress amongst their employees if such previous attempts have not been effective. As more variants of COVID-19 become known, and as they come in wave after wave, it will be of paramount importance to address these matters if Supermarket A is to continue to thrive in such a competitive market.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Workplace Stress**

#### *2.1.1 Importance*

To begin, one first needs to define what workplace stress means. According to Thomas and Higgins (2006), "workplace stress can be defined as the change in one's physical or mental state in response to workplaces that pose an appraised challenge or threat to that employee" (p. 89). Many workplace stressors range from colleagues, supervisors, and customers to stressors derived from the tasks at hand (Thomas & Higgins, 2006). A drop in productivity, while rises in mental health issues and absenteeism are a few outcomes of leaving stressors to manifest amongst employees (Thomas & Higgins, 2006). Furthermore, stress can either be challenging or hindering; the former refers to stress that can benefit the individual, such as personal growth and achieving more, whilst the latter can be immensely detrimental (Pearsall, Ellis, & Stien, 2009; Quick & Henderson, 2016). Occupational stress (work stress) is unique because it is not a form of any acute or toxic illnesses in which an antidote can be prescribed. Instead, it is a chronic psychological disorder, and one will need to understand how the stress has manifested in the past to intercept and ward off such illnesses from harming the individual further with the aid of appropriate treatments (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Furthermore, Quick and Henderson (2016) put forth the notion that the epidemiology of stress is divided into three stages, starting with the origin of the stress, then moving to the reaction of the stress and finally, the consequence of the stress (challenging or hindering stress). Moreover, a frightening factor to consider is that high levels of stress are present in one out of three individuals in Britain (Hoel, Sparks, & Cooper, 2001).

#### *2.1.2 Causes*

##### **Locus of Control**

How do people attribute their successes or failures? If an individual were to put forth the notion that their behaviour controls their outcomes, then it can be said that they possess an internal locus of control (Spector, 1998). On the other hand, if the individual blames their outcomes (whether positive or negative) on external factors such as luck or fate, they possess an external locus of control (Spector, 1998). In short, people with an external locus of control believe that outcomes do not stem from their efforts, whilst

people with an internal locus of control believe that they are responsible for their actions/efforts (Hsu, 2011).

### **Locus of Control on the Workplace**

Research has shown that those who can adjust to turbulent events and handle situations where stress can be an issue possess an internal locus of control (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000).

Furthermore, research has suggested that stress prevails in situations where one has little control over their job coupled with high demands (Bhi, Dinos, Miecznikowskam de Jongh, & Stansfeld, 2016). A worrying factor to hypothesising is that employees' locus of control shifts from internal to external as they become more stressed due to the Pandemic (COVID-19).

#### *2.1.3 Consequences*

On the individual level, people will feel more discomfort and less likely to be motivated to work (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983). Moreover, research has linked low job control (external locus of control) to individuals who tend to suffer from musculoskeletal pain compared to an internal locus of control (Meier, Semmer, Elfering, & Jacobshagen, 2008). As mentioned earlier by Thomas and Higgins (2006), some of the consequences of stress are lower productivity and more mental health problems, which can be worrying since both the individual and company will suffer if such stress is not rectified.

## **2.2 COVID-19**

The elephant in the room, or as one would put it, the invisible elephant in the room continues to wreak havoc throughout the world, affecting every person, industry, country, and continent in some way or another. COVID-19 has been known to spread through droplets and has been known to stay on different surfaces for many hours, in some circumstances for up to 92 hours long (Galbadage, Peterson, & Gunasekera, 2020).

Furthermore, around 80% of COVID-19 cases tend to be mild, 13.8% severe, 4.7% critical, and approximately 2% result in death (Worldmeters, 2021). Mild cases tend to last around two weeks, whilst acute/severe and fatal tend to last around three to six weeks and two to eight weeks, respectively (Worldmeters, 2021).

### *2.2.1 Individual Effects*

#### **Psychological Effects**

The Pandemic has changed how people work without a doubt; more and more people work from home. Gartner (2020) reported that almost half of all the companies that had been surveyed said that the majority of their employees were working from home. Working from home may not seem to be an issue when a job allows for such flexibility, yet what if the job requires someone to be on-site?

A recent study found that people tend to develop psychological disorders during a pandemic and that specific procedures/mechanisms need to be put into place to protect these individuals and improve their well-being (Salari et al., 2020). A study conducted in Hong Kong found that psychological stress amongst employees was linked to a lack of both personal protection equipment (PPE) and organisational policies within companies (Wong, Ho, Wong, Cheung, & Yeoh, 2020).

Anxiety and depression are the two highest disorders that have been linked to stress (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Such disorders can potentially be even more so present in front-line workers since they will be in contact with customers and colleagues, compared to others who are working virtually from the confinement of their home. Cai, Velu, Tindal, and Tartanoglu Bennett (2020) conducted a study on how employees in the supermarket experience liminality during a Pandemic. Liminality refers to being in between two states of mind simultaneously (Turner, 1970). Cai et al. (2020) analysed the situation regarding an employee who goes from standardised/day-to-day work where policies and procedures are in place to handle problems they might encounter to the complete opposite during a Pandemic. Furthermore, colleagues and managers act differently, therefore stretching employees' state of mind even more, for example, those choosing to sanitise their hands versus those who do not (Cai et al., 2006).

#### **Psychological Effects of Post Infected Patients**

Since COVID-19 is relatively new and ongoing studies are still being conducted, this paper will be backed with previous research of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Research conducted by Zhou et al. (2020) found COVID-19 and SARS to be almost indistinguishable and share 79.6% of the same genetic code. Furthermore, a study found that around one-third of patients experienced depression or/and anxiety with an intensity level ranging from mild to high, whilst individuals who had lost relatives tended to develop extreme stress levels (Cheng, Wong, Tsang, & Wong, 2004). Moreover, another study revealed that people were fearful about dying and

spreading the virus to others during the SARS Pandemic, which in return had a detrimental effect on their well-being, while the aftereffects of SARS demonstrated high levels of stress in the long run (Gradner & Moallem, 2014). Moving over to the current issue, that being the COVID-19 Pandemic, research has suggested that individuals develop anxiety, hysteria, and stress-related symptoms, due to lockdowns that leave them confined to their homes and the unknown that lies ahead (Macapagal, 2020). What is important to note here is that although Iceland has managed to control COVID-19 immensely, it does not take away from the fact that everyone is still affected in some way or another through the uncertainty about the future. Research has solidified that COVID-19 intensifies fears for people who possess an underlying condition and individuals' relatives that test positive for the virus (Koçak, Koçak, & Younis, 2021).

### *2.2.2 Organisational Effect*

Now that this paper has covered some of the psychological effects of stress on individuals, it is essential to consider the outcomes that will emerge if such stress is not addressed and rectified. Schabracq and Cooper (2000) suggest several consequences such as increases in turnovers, rehiring costs and irritated customers, while a decrease in morale, communication and product execution are amongst a few crucial adverse outcomes. Research has indicated that stress accounts for two-fifths of workplace absenteeism (Hoel, Sparks, & Cooper, 2001). From this data, one can conceptualise how detrimental stress can be to an organisation. Furthermore, it goes without question that job insecurity is a constant worry throughout the world during such peculiar times. According to Godinic, Obrenovic and Khudaykulov (2020), cognitive job insecurities "relates to the perception of the probability of negative changes, while affective represents the experience of being in the state of anxiety over losing the job" (p.66). Cognitive job insecurities coupled with the fear of contracting COVID-19 are an astronomical recipe for disaster for both individuals and companies.

### *2.2.3 COVID-19 in Iceland*

#### **Iceland vs The World**

Undoubtedly, Iceland has managed to tackle the Pandemic far better than most countries, thanks to its rapid response and integration of premature measures (Fouda, Mahmoudi, Moy, & Paolucci, 2020). From the data, Iceland has gone through two big waves. The first wave lasted for about a month during March and April and peaked at 99

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cases per day (Covid.is, 2021). The second wave hit around September and lasted until November and peaked at 106 Cases. Since then, there has been minor fluctuation (Covid.is, 2021).

Furthermore, the evidence demonstrates how efficient these interventions/measures are in controlling the Pandemic. Iceland has 19,081 cases per one million, whilst other countries such as the United States of America and Denmark have 101,342 and 21.014, respectively (Worldmeters, 2021). Moreover, such representation can compare to the world average of 21,292 as of the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2021 (Worldmeters, 2021). Another factor where Iceland has excelled immensely compared to other countries is that of COVID-19 related deaths. When looking at the data, Iceland has 85 deaths per one million compared to the United States, Denmark and the world average who have 1810, 431 and 441.2, respectively (Worldmeters, 2021). The data shows us how Iceland has managed to control the Pandemic far better than other countries, yet tourism and unemployment have been immensely affected. According to Ferdamalastofa (n.d), tourism in Iceland fell by 75.8% from 2019 to 2020. Moreover, unemployment in Iceland rose to 7.2%, up by 3.6% from last year with a change of 102.82% (Knoema, n.d).

### **Vaccinations**

Looking at vaccinations per capita, Iceland, to date, ranks 19<sup>th</sup> in the world, one place behind the United Kingdom with 104% to 109%, respectively (Pettersson, Manley, Hernandez, McPhillips, & CNN, 2021). Furthermore, Iceland has given 355 178 dosages, 238 814 have been given at least one dosage, whilst 153 725 have been fully vaccinated (Covid.is, 2021). It is worth noting that some vaccines such as Jansen only require one dosage, whilst others such as AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna requires two dosages that are to be given at different intervals (WHO, 2021). In Iceland, the vaccines that have been administered are Jansen, Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and Oxford/AstraZeneca (Covid.is, 2021). Looking at the female to male vaccinations, 78% of females over or aged 16 have received at least one dosage, while males make up a total of 68% (Covid.is, 2021). Moreover, the data demonstrate that Iceland has been rapidly increasing their vaccinations since May and even more so thereafter (Covid.is, 2021).

### **Society's Perspective on COVID-19 Vaccinations**

A study conducted by Karlsson et al. (2020) demonstrates that society has different perspectives regarding receiving the vaccine; those that perceive COVID-19 to have a detrimental effect on them are more inclined to receive the vaccine than those who

do not. Furthermore, COVID-19 is viewed by society to be more deadly than other diseases (Karlsson et al., 2020). Moreover, the Akarsu (2020) study found that that only half of those that participated in the survey stated that they were willing to receive the vaccine, as reasons for the contrary were that individuals thought that the vaccine was relatively new, whilst others worried about the unknown/side effects. However, Iceland has managed to vaccinate (first dose) around 80% of its population to date (Covid.is, 2021); showing that the Icelandic population is firmly in favour of receiving the vaccines.

### **2.3 Interventions**

Since the research method is hybrid, the researcher will start by exploring general literature related to COVID-19. As the data becomes saturated and themes emerge from the interviews (qualitative) and surveys (quantitative), literature will be linked to those findings to form remedies if needed.

Several studies suggest that organisations need to create an environment that provides social support and communication for individuals (Brooks, Dunn, Amlôt, Rubin, & Greenberg, 2018; Quick & Henderson, 2016). Quick and Henderson (2016) go on to say that although such an environment is of paramount importance as it addresses the primary epidemiology step, which is to prevent the origin of the stress from occurring through modification, for example, decreasing role ambiguity and planning by setting clear and transparent goals and taking into account individual differences. Furthermore, this can be validated through a study conducted by Van der Klink, Blonk, Schene, and Van Dijk (2001), who found that individual interventions seem to be more successful than organisational interventions as they can accommodate the employee on an individualistic level whilst organisational interventions focus on elements of the workplace. Nevertheless, another study found that participants prefer organisational interventions over individual interventions as they tended to get rid of or mitigate stressors found within the organisational/workplace environment, thus linking such interventions into the primary category (Bhui et al., 2016). Moreover, the study conducted by Bhui et al. (2016) found that organisational interventions do not always need to be in the forms of training, but rather changes to one's job, the workplace, improving communication amongst employees and allowing for employees to have flexibility in terms of working hours are just a few elements to mention. What is fascinating and can be seen as a positive from the previous sentence is that companies do not need to spend millions each year to reduce

stress. Such interventions can be individual or organisational (interventions for groups/workplace) and categorised into primary, secondary, and tertiary (Kendall, Murphy, O'Neill, & Bursnall, 2000; Quick & Henderson, 2016; Bhui et al., 2016).

### *2.3.1 Primary Interventions*

The goal of primary interventions is to stop such stress from existing in the first place through improving the individual's workspace (Kendall et al., 2000) and perpetuate a healthy work-life balance that can be achieved with the help of social support (Quick & Henderson, 2000). Fredrickson (2009, as cited in Quick & Henderson, 2016) suggests that people who feel more positive than negative tend to excel better. Further research has confirmed Fredrickson's theory that positive thinking mitigates stress levels as the individual views such stress as less harmful than if they were to think negatively (Naseem & Khalid, 2010), thus allowing individuals to function better. Since recruitment can be a crucial element to analyse if an individual can handle such demands (Bartone, Roland, Picano & Williams, 2008, as cited in Holman, Johnson, & Connor, 2018), yet evidence shows that this intervention is not commonly utilised (Giga, Cooper & Faragher, 2003, as cited in Holman et al., 2018).

### **Locus of Control**

When looking at the locus of control, one needs to distinguish between internal and external motivators. Internal (intrinsic) motivators are personal, such as one's well-being, self-growth, and the sense of satisfaction that the job elicits. Therefore, it is paramount that such motivators are strengthened if individuals have control over their job and stress less (Karimi & Alipour, 2011). Furthermore, on the other hand, companies can potentially increase their employees' performance by offering them external (extrinsic) motivators such as pay, bonus and promotions (Karimi & Alipour, 2011). Companies/managers must construct procedures or mechanisms that extract performance and satisfaction (Karimi & Alipour, 2011).

### **Communication**

An essential factor to keep in mind is what Godinic, Obrenovic and Khudayjulov (2020) put forward, which is that people have different perceptions, mindsets and reactions to a Pandemic, one can therefore conclude that although organisations should

have procedures/interventions that cater for the group (organisational), it is also of utmost importance that such procedures/interventions cater to each employee (individually). Communication seems to be the central theme in reducing stress (Hamouche, 2020; Bhui et al., 2016; Schabracq & Cooper, 2000). According to Hamouche (2020), if companies want to reduce employee stress, it is essential to develop a communication plan. This plan should entail clear and transparent information on how COVID-19 will impact current and future business operations, what actions will be put in place, and how the employees' work might be affected (Hamouche, 2020). Furthermore, research has shown that although most businesses do have a Pandemic response plan; it is not used and of little value when considered by those businesses (Smith, Hansen, Spanbauer, & Shell, 2020).

### *2.3.2 Secondary Interventions*

If such stress cannot be prevented, it falls to the next stage, the secondary intervention. This intervention attempts to control the stress at hand by altering/redirecting the individual's energy levels (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Training that employs team development and relaxation techniques classify as secondary interventions (Caulfield, Chang, Dollard, & Elshaug, 2004). Furthermore, a vital element that can be used is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT); the principles of such therapy are to identify the stress, change the way the individual views such stress and introduce different techniques/behaviours to handle such stress (Holman et al., 2018). Moreover, research suggests that companies should consider implementing such interventions, regardless of whether they fall outside the organisational area, as they have a tremendous effect on reducing stress. Thus, if implemented, interventions that fall within the organisational category may not be needed (Bhui et al., 2016).

### **Physical Changes**

Eliminating/reducing the spread of COVID-19 can be done in various ways within the workspace. Galbadage, Peterson, and Gunasekera (2020) go on to say that sanitation in the forms of either soap or alcohol on one's hands, mask-wearing, and distancing oneself from others are some standard yet effective prevention measures. Furthermore, improving the workplace environment through guidelines on protocols, promoting communicational channels throughout the organisation and advising employees to stay at home if they are experiencing mild fevers are of paramount importance towards employees' safety (WHO, 2021).

### **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy**

How does one treat such psychological disorders or reduce stress-related symptoms? One remedy is known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) essentially tries to change the way individuals think about things (APA, 2017). CBT's principles are as followed; firstly, that one's mental problems stem from ineffective thinking. Secondly, such mental disorders stem from maladroit behaviour, and thirdly, people can cope better by reconceptualising the problem at hand. (APA, 2017). These are just a few ways that CBT is utilised, and not all methods have been discussed.

Furthermore, strategic methods to find cures collaborate between the psychologist and the client, and thus not all the methods are utilised (APA, 2017). Moreover, Macapagal (2020) says that to handle the psychological effects that people are experiencing due to the Pandemic (COVID-19), they will need to improve their psychological resilience to cope. Psychological resilience is defined as individuals who can modify their behaviour/mindset to handle/mitigate difficult situations that they may face (Bonanno, 2004). Research has shown that CBT not only improves one's psychological resilience but reduces both depression and post-traumatic symptom disorder (Chen et al., 2014). Furthermore, putting aside one's thoughts and feelings about a traumatic event that might have occurred in the past is thought to be essential. It certainly seems to work in the short run. However, research indicates that it hinders the possibility of recovery in the long run; thus, early interventions are crucial if individuals are to make a full recovery (Chen et al., 2014). Since COVID-19 has increased peoples' fears about dying (Gradner & Moallef, 2014), that fear of death can be a traumatic event and that CBT is known to be a highly effective treatment for PTSD, one can therefore conclude from the literature review that CBT is vital towards fighting off the Pandemic in the psychological sense.

#### *2.3.3 Tertiary Interventions*

This type of intervention is used when one presents stress-related symptoms (Caulfield et al., 2004) that may potentially require psychological intervention in the form of a psychologist (Quick & Henderson, 2016), and the goal is to get the worker back to their 'normal state' to continue their work (Kendall et al., 2000). Organisations can modify certain aspects of the job to reduce stressors that usually manifest from such a job during their return to work (LaMontagne & Keegel, 2010).

### **Psychological Support**

Moreover, programmes that can improve mental well-being, such as psychological support, are vital since research indicates a lack of such services during COVID-19 (Xiang et al., 2020). Additionally, organisations should be aware of psychological issues that might occur during a Pandemic, such as those concerned about contracting the virus, and thus create an environment that protects, nurtures and supports their employees (Brooks, Dunn, Amlôt, Rubin, & Greenberg, 2018). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier about essential workers who cannot work from home, more supportive measures should be afforded to such individuals, based on the risk factor (Brooks et al., 2018). Trumello et al. (2007) found that healthcare workers were more likely to ask for psychological support when working with COVID-19 patients than those who did not. Furthermore, the research found that almost half of young individuals had trouble getting psychological help, whilst a third of individuals found it difficult to get proper medication, suggesting that these could be some factors in explaining why mental health cases have risen (Macapagal, 2020). Similar findings were found amongst healthcare workers during the 2003 SARS outbreak (Hellmich & Zborowsky, 2021). Although these findings are based on individuals exposed to COVID-19 patients, one can assume that there may be a similar occurrence for supermarket employees in contact with others. The utmost importance must be to address matters of the present to avoid future issues as Joshi and Sharma (2020) indicate that the Pandemic has healthcare workers constantly worried about the unknown, which may lead to such individuals experiencing stress after the Pandemic. Addressing the present issue will be more critical than ever since mental health cases have increased during the Pandemic (Joshi & Sharma, 2020).

From nurses to the security industry, research has found that security forces in Spain were exposed to a significant amount of stress during the first wave (Gómez-Galán, Lázaro-Pérez, Martínez-López, & Fernández-Martínez, 2020). Programmes to handle stress need to be considered to prevent individuals from being re-exposed to such stress levels again, as it is unclear how many waves of the Pandemic lie ahead (Gómez-Galán et al., 2020). Furthermore, research suggests that such programmes can mitigate the risk of developing further psychological distress by addressing their well-being/lifestyle, such as smoking, exercising, and alcohol consumption (Stanton et al., 2020). The WHO (2021) recommends that individuals engage in daily exercise to improve their health while lowering the chances of developing depression.

2.3.4 Model

The table below represents potential interventions that could benefit a company to reduce stress in the workplace from the literature analysed. According to Murphy (1995), many different types of interventions can be used; those that can be economically suitable and increase employees' satisfaction will be the most successful to utilise. An essential element to note from the analyses is that some interventions may overlap other categories since they are not entirely monolithic.

**Table 1.** Primary, secondary and tertiary interventions at the individual and organisational level.

Intervention	Organisational	Individual
<b>Primary</b>	Environmental change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work Flexibility</li> <li>• Communicational channels</li> <li>• Job/KSAO's redesign</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Role/task transparency and clarity</li> <li>• Managerial support</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Social distancing</li> </ul>	Recruitment
<b>Secondary</b>	Relaxation techniques <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team strengthening programmes</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Locus of control (control and responsibility)</li> </ul>	Health programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smoking (reduce)</li> <li>• Healthy eating</li> <li>• Physical exercise</li> <li>• Work-life balance (family)</li> <li>• CBT</li> </ul>
<b>Tertiary</b>	Job stressors modification	Psychologist/therapist CBT

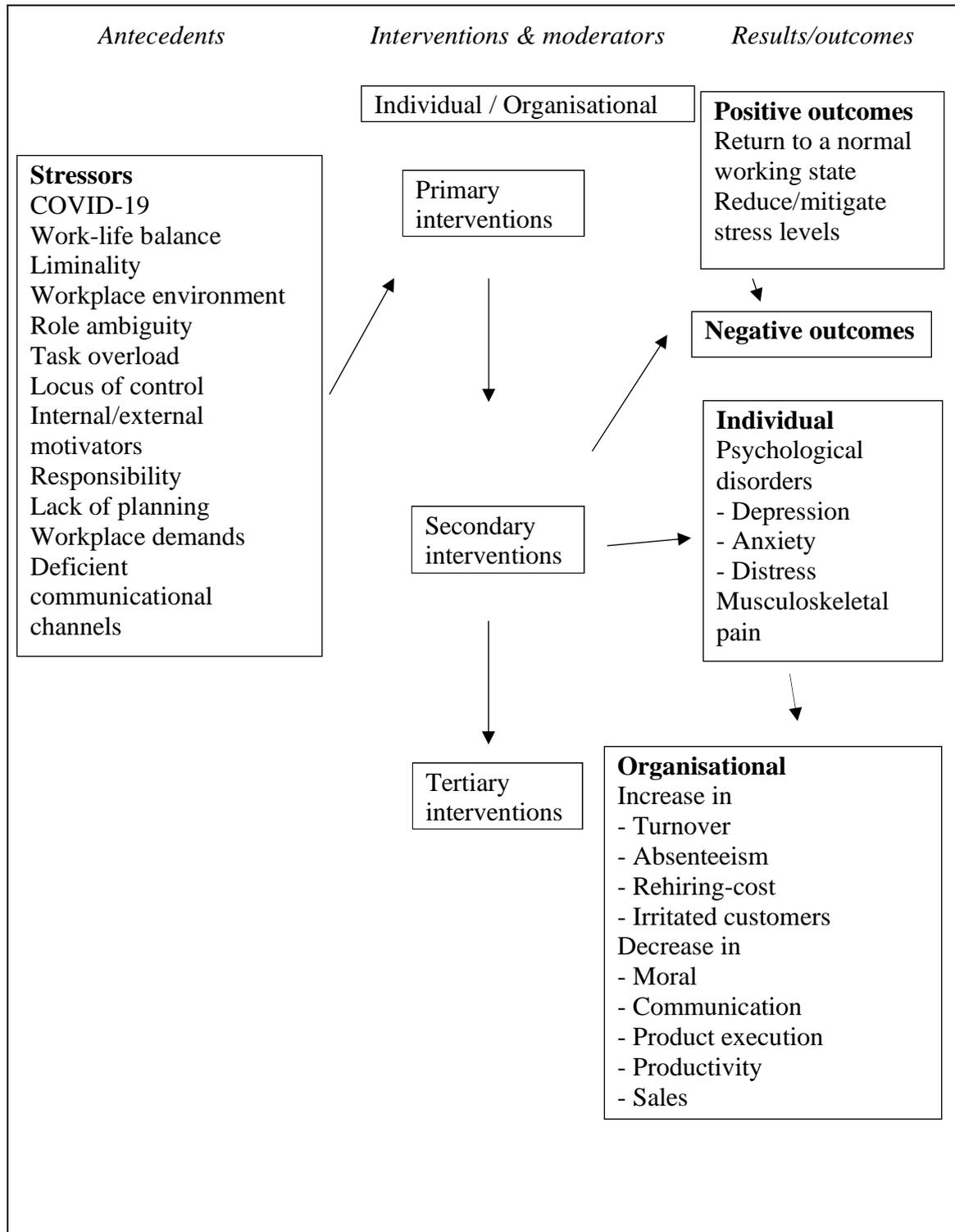
2.4 Summary

Before COVID-19, people experienced stress within the workplace, yet what can be hypothesised and tested is that COVID-19 acted as an external source that has amplified stressors that individuals experience. Covid-19 and other external sources such as ineffective/deficient communicational channels have caused people to develop psychological disorders such as anxiety, distress, and depression. At the same time, the physical aspect is musculoskeletal pain. Furthermore, these adverse outcomes lead to

## Occupational stress and remedies amongst supermarket employees during COVID-19

detrimental consequences for the company/organisation that experiences increase in turnover, absenteeism, rehiring costs, and irritated customers, decreasing morale, communication, product execution, sales, and productivity. Thus, to combat these adverse outcomes, available remedies coupled with front-line mechanisms to eliminate/prevent stress are primary interventions. Since the interventions and available remedies have been extracted from the literature, the following figure will illustrate how stress might potentially emerge, manifest, how it is reduced or intensified, and the appropriate interventions/mechanisms that are to be utilised during COVID-19. If this is not possible, it falls to the next stage, known as secondary interventions, whose sole purpose is to reduce/mitigate stress that the individual experience. Finally, suppose both interventions have not been successful in either preventing, eliminating, or mitigating stress and the individual shows stress-related symptoms. In that case, it is left up to what is known as tertiary interventions, which treat the individual to return to their normal state and resume their work. Without a doubt, Iceland has managed to control the spread of the virus far better than most countries. However, COVID-19 does cause some people to stress, as previous research of COVID-19 and the SARS virus have shown.

Therefore, one can hypothesise that interventions will decrease/mitigate stress from manifesting and lead to negative individual and organisational consequences. Furthermore, as mentioned before, this research paper will investigate Supermarket A's interventions, their effectiveness and suggest any remedies if needed.



**Figure 1.** A general outline of stress within the workplace.

### 3. Supermarket A's Interventions/Programmes

Supermarket A has implemented specific procedures/programmes against the Pandemic. To begin, the company has firstly, provided regular lunch for their employees. Secondly, the company has had three large online-based parties where each employee was given gift baskets containing different types of snacks and goods. The purpose of these parties was intended to lift the employees' morale/spirit and allow people to get together (online) whilst having fun. Thirdly, after the second wave of COVID-19 hit, all employees were given a bank card containing 50.000 Icelandic Kroners. Fourthly, according to Supermarket A, their most extensive intervention/programme has been their welfare package. This package is available to every employee in Supermarket A, regardless of their employment or job percentage. Furthermore, the package is intended to promote better mental and physical health.

**Table 2.** Supermarket A's Programmes

Welfare service	Three hours with a psychologist: The human resources manager connects an employee to a psychologist.
Three hours in welfare services: initiated by consulting Heilsuvernd.	<p>The options of welfare services are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological counselling (Six sessions)</li> <li>• Trauma help</li> <li>• Lifestyle advice</li> <li>• Nutrition advice</li> <li>• Physiotherapist advice</li> <li>• Consulting of social workers</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• HAM course (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy)</li> <li>• Stress counselling experts at the Stress School</li> <li>• Marriage, parenting, and family counselling</li> <li>• Support for victims and perpetrators of bullying</li> </ul>

Fifthly, a sports grant of 30,000 Icelandic Kroners, is included in the welfare package; the grant amount may be used for memberships at the gym, swimming cards or

equipment that falls under exercise/healthier lifestyle. Sixthly, alternative services that Supermarket A provides can be found in the Ethics Portal: which is an independent party that provides counselling for issues related to bullying or sexual harassment. Lastly, a retirement course is available for such employees that are completing their careers due to age.

**Table 3.** Categorising Interventions.

Intervention	Organisational	Individual
<b>Primary</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online parties</li> <li>• Regular lunch for their employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifestyle advice</li> <li>• Nutrition advice</li> <li>• HAM course (CBT)</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Stress counselling experts at the Stress school</li> <li>• Marriage, parenting, and family counselling</li> <li>• Sport grants</li> <li>• Grants (general)</li> <li>• Physiotherapist advice</li> </ul>
<b>Tertiary</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for victims and perpetrators of bullying</li> <li>• Psychologist</li> <li>• Psychological counselling</li> <li>• HAM course (CBT)</li> <li>• Trauma help</li> <li>• Consulting of social workers</li> </ul>

### **3.1 Responses**

During the previous year, a mini-survey was sent out to employees. One of the questions that were asked went as followed: “Do you think that the Supermarket A’s reaction to Covid-19 so far has been excellent, great, just right, too little or of no use”, as translated from Icelandic to English. There was a total of 443 responses ( $n=443$ ). Out of those responses, 3% found it to be of no use, 9% found it to be of little use, 79% found it to be just right, 5% found it to be great, and 4% found it excellent. What is evident from the responses is that the majority responded with them being satisfied with Supermarket A’s reaction to the Pandemic, and although there was a substantial amount of responses, it does not entirely paint the whole picture for the following reasons. Firstly, the data is not split into those that can or have been working from home from the front-line workers. Secondly, some stores were affected more so than others in terms of size and location. Thus, some employees may not have noticed much of a change since there were not many changes. Thirdly, those that gave responded with highly or to be of little or no use, what was the reason for this. Lastly, this survey was conducted in September and October. Since then, Iceland has experienced many waves, and the long-term psychological effects can start to be analysed.

## **4. Methodology**

The research methodology is a hybrid system of quantitative and qualitative methods known as exploratory mixed methods design coupled with action research. The data collection procedure was conducted as follows; firstly, exploring how the individuals felt in the working environment in terms of stress and work-life balance from semi-structured interviews. The relevant data gathered from the interview was used to draw up a survey distributed to employees throughout the organisation. Secondly, linking the results from the surveys, along with the procedures/mechanisms that were identified earlier to relevant literature and past research to suggest remedies that could help Supermarket A to address present and future issues during not only a Pandemic but everyday situations relating to stress, anxiety, and work-life balance. Since the researcher did not know the outcome of the situation, the remedies were carefully developed by looking into relevant literature that correlates to the information gathered and analysed.

### **Exploratory Mixed Methods Design**

The purpose of exploratory mixed methods design is when one does not have solid/complete theories or there is a lack/need for such information. A researcher will conduct interviews to get a firm understanding of the phenomenon at hand, thereby using qualitative research and then moving over to quantitative research as the individual would like to utilise a larger sample size from the information gathered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Action-based Research**

The purpose of action-based research is two-part; (1) to find out how individuals attach meaning to a particular phenomenon and (2) to try and get such individuals to find solutions for the problem at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **4.1 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research distinguishes itself from quantitative research in many ways: Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated that qualitative research focuses on the process rather than the outcome, leaving the process not just black or white. The purpose of this thesis was to uncover the underlining effects of stress during COVID-19. For that reason, an exploratory mixed methods design was used as the quantitative (surveys) part was followed once the qualitative (interviews & direct observation) have been interpreted. The mixed-method design contributed to having a profound effect since little had been

uncovered or is known about COVID-19. Secondly, another element of qualitative data is that the researcher is the main instrument for gathering data. This is extremely important as it is not just numbers and raw data that is gathered but also other characteristics such as one's tone of voice, non-verbal facial expression, body language and to get instant responses to queries that might be raised during the interviews or observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thirdly, the process is inductive. As mentioned previously, little is known about COVID-19 and the stress that it potentially can cause to individuals and especially in this case, Supermarket A's employees can be detrimental, thus it is crucial to develop new ideas, concepts, theories to help make sense of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and that such data can be used to guide the researcher when transitioning from qualitative to quantitative. Lastly, it is essential to note that one of the main elements that make qualitative data extremely crucial is that it provides a detailed data description. In other words, it gives an underlying meaning of why the data has come to be and not just numbers that have no meaning attached to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### *4.1.1 Participants*

The interviews involve ten employees from Supermarket A that were divided into two groups: the first group were those that were involved in the administrative/could work from home, whilst the second group are what is known as front line employees, in other words, those that could not work from homes, such as floor employees, store managers and cashiers. Criterion-based sampling was chosen to be the preferred sampling method. Criterion-based sampling is where individuals are chosen based on a criterion (elements, characteristics, attributes) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this case, the researcher identified the following criterion that had to be met for them to be interviewed; firstly, all participants had to be employees of Supermarket A. Secondly, employees had to have been working for Supermarket A during the Pandemic. Thirdly, individuals had to occupy positions of either those relating to front-line employees or administrative positions. The former refers to those who cannot perform their tasks away from the workplace, whilst the latter refers to those who could work from home during the Pandemic due to their job allowing for such mobility to take place through virtual/online workplaces. For this case, the workplace is defined as any Supermarket A's store that engages in the following activities; fruit/vegetable, meat, cashiers, store managers, people who sanitise the self-checkout machines or any activity that requires people to be present within the store during working hours. The researcher interviewed five front-line employees and five

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office employees who had worked from home during COVID-19. The researcher concluded that data saturation had been met since reemerging themes and data patterns started to occur. Thus, if the researcher had increased the sample size after that, the data extracted would have been rendered mundane (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015), as no new themes or ideas would have been identified from subsequent Supermarket A's employees.

**Table 4.** Categorisation of Front-line participants in order of number, occupation and gender.

Participant	Occupation	Gender
First	Floor worker	Male
Second	Floor worker	Male
Third	Floor worker	Male
Fourth	Floor worker	Female
Fifth	Floor worker	Male

**Table 5.** Categorisation of office participants in order of number, occupation and gender.

Participant	Occupation	Gender
First	Purchase coordinator	Female
Second	Specialist	Female
Third	Business developer	Male
Fourth	Middle manager	Female
Fifth	Director	Female

#### *4.1.2 Procedure*

The interviews were semi-structured and allowed for questions to be answered and for side comments, suggestions, and possible new questions that may have emerged during the interview (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The process of the interview follows the following order from start to finish; firstly, the human resource department from Supermarket A contacted potential participants based on the criteria that the researcher had developed, each participant and store manager was informed at least a week in advance about the meeting's date and time and if they agreed to be interviewed. Secondly, the interviews were conducted in English and translated into Icelandic by a translator if the individual did not understand the question or preferred to have the interview conducted in English. Thirdly, each interviewee was given a general overview of the interview, asking how they were feeling and if the setting/environment (temperature and lighting) felt fine as such factors can hinder the data quality (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, key concepts and terminologies were briefly described, such as occupational stress, eustress, burnout and liminality. Fourthly, each participant was reassured about the confidentiality of the interview and that their privacy was safeguarded and respected. (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). Lastly, each participant was asked if the interview could be recorded through an audio device. The purpose of such a recording device is that the researcher can replay the interview to extract and analyse the data again to uncover any critical themes, points or relevant data that might not have been picked up during the first interview (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015).

#### *4.1.3 Measures*

The themes identified for the interview were as followed; firstly, questions about stress before the COVID-19 Pandemic since this was to check if individuals were experiencing stress before the Pandemic. Secondly, questions centred around their work-life balance, such questions want to extract information on how work has affected their life and vice-versa. Thirdly, questions focused around their job, in terms of job control, any potential role ambiguity and demand overload. Fourthly, questions about the effectiveness of the interventions/measures that Supermarket A has integrated to counter the Pandemic. This part was two-fold as some questions were asked about organisational interventions and how the workplace/environment has changed, while the

other half asked questions about individual interventions. Fifthly, liminality was an important issue that had to be addressed as previous literature has suggested that individuals/employees were constantly in two states of mind during unprecedented times. Exploring if individuals were experiencing this within Supermarket A was said to be the key to reducing/mitigating stress. Lastly, any questions, suggestions, comments or remarks that an employee might have was allocated at the end of the interview; since there was so much unknown about this virus and coupled with the fact that individuals function differently, such information was of the utmost importance in unlocking new areas or as some would put it, finding out the unknown unknowns. Appendix A provides an example of the questions asked in the interview.

#### *4.1.4 Analysis Approach*

Now that the data has been gathered, it needs to be coded. The first step was to take the data that had been audio-recorded and type it out on a computer where the researcher could print out the interview to start the coding process. By notetaking when analysing information, one engages in what is called coding (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). After one has jotted down codes, the next step is to put each code into specific themes/categories (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). The objective was to identify sub-themes from each interview and then link them up with a central theme that would be used to build onto the qualitative survey. Data saturation started to emerge after the fourth interview; thus, an extra interview revealed continuous data saturation. Therefore, the discussions/interviews were limited at ( $n = 5$ ) for front-line workers and ( $n = 5$ ) for office workers.

## **4.2 Quantitative Research**

Quantitative research is different from qualitative research in that its data consists primarily of numbers that can extract meaning from the phenomenon at hand (Bhanadari, 2020). Furthermore, quantitative research can generalise larger populations based on samples (Bhanadari, 2020). Since the qualitative part has narrowed down the themes needed to get clarity and transparency, the survey was then written up. Moreover, the data gathered from the survey will describe the population at hand and is known as a research method called descriptive statistics (McCombes, 2019). Quantitative research is instrumental in the manner that it can uncover patterns, connections and similarities

(McCombes, 2019; Bhanadari, 2020). Downfalls of qualitative research are that it does not give an underlying meaning since it consists of numbers or yes and no answers that do not take into account other factors that could be important, and that it may not give an accurate representation of the data if either the procedures are lacking or that responses are missing (Bhandari, 2020). It was, therefore, of paramount importance that the qualitative element was conducted, as it was able to compensate for some of the qualitative downfalls/disadvantages.

#### *4.2.1 Participants*

Criterion based sampling was chosen as the sampling method. The criteria were identical to that of the qualitative data collection (interviews). A survey was created for both front-line and office employees. The researcher aimed for around 300 participants ( $n = 300$ ) for front-line employees and 20 participants ( $n = 20$ ) for office employees.

#### *4.2.2 Procedure*

Firstly, a quantitative survey was conducted for both the front-line employees and the office employees. When it came to front-line workers, the survey was sent to the store managers and then completed by each employee on the store's computer. On the other hand, the office workers were sent the survey by the director of human resources. Secondly, the survey stated at the beginning that all the data would be collected anonymously. Thirdly, the survey was distributed both in Icelandic and English for those that did not speak Icelandic.

#### *4.2.3 Measures*

The themes that emerged from the qualitative data (interviews) were used to build the questions for the survey. Question one was a general overview to see if people were stressed during the Pandemic since previous data showed mixed results, and clarification was needed on a larger scale. Question two added to question one in terms of the stressors. The themes identified to construct question two are as follows: **Worried about family and Odd times**, **The invisible enemy** and **Lifestyle balance**. This question was the only question that differed from the front-line and office employees' survey. The question was constructed around their difficulties in dealing with customers during COVID-19, such

as social distance for front-line employees. The theme that was identified was: **Three types of customers.**

On the other hand, since office employees are working from home and are not in contact with customers, thus the question was constructed to find out what makes working from home stressful. The themes identified were: **Challenging environment** and **lifestyle balance**. Question four cracked into finding out whether or not employees' colleagues had obeyed the rules and regulations during COVID-19. The themes identified were: **PPE, regulations and rules enforcement** and **Sanitise and adjustment to new norm**. Question five was the main focus and built onto questions six and seven as it was concerned with whether Supermarket A's employees knew about the programme or not since office employees indicated that they did, whilst front-line workers were unaware of such programmes. Themes identified were: **Programmes not known – managers awareness** and **Programmes known about**. Question six was built around understanding which programmes employees had utilised, whilst question seven found if such programmes were effective or not. Appendix B and C provide the survey's questions and possible responses.

#### *4.2.4 Analysis Approach*

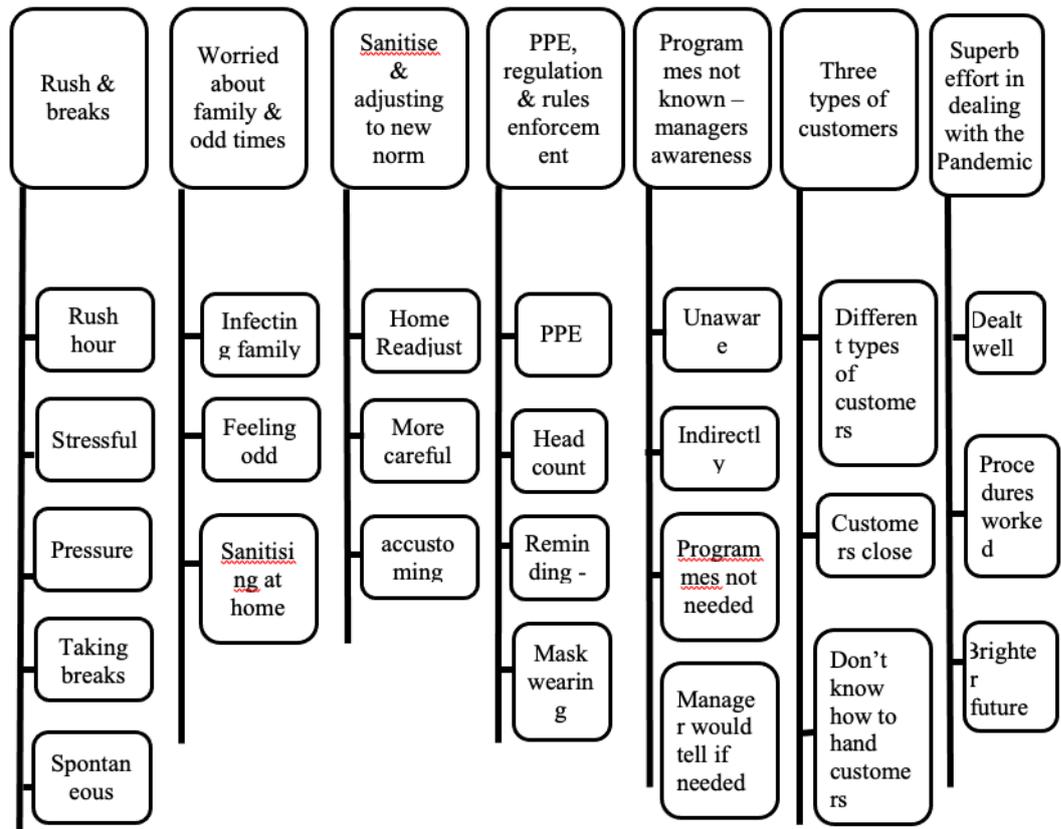
The analysis will need to link to the research objectives, that is, to see if Supermarket A's programmes have been effective. Put differently; one needs to be sure that their data can be linked to their hypothesis (Evans, Gruba, & Zobel, 2011). Therefore, linking similar characteristics, elements and finding patterns is what quantitative data provided (McCombes, 2019; Bhanadari, 2020) and was crucial in evaluating the research objectives. Furthermore, statistical interference was used as it allows one to make generalisations and come to certain conclusions based on sample size (Hubbard, Haig, & Parsa, 2019; Bhanadari, 2020). The survey contained closed-ended questions, thus allowing for quick comparisons to be drawn against the literature review. Data saturation was reached after three weeks of sending out the survey had elapsed since no new responses occurred.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Qualitative Interviews

#### Front-line Employees

From the interviews that were conducted regarding front-line employees, each question produced a theme.



**Figure 2.** Themes and subthemes that emerged for Front-line employees.

**Table 6.** Tally count for front-line employees.

Question	Yes	No	Not sure
1	1	2	0
2	0	4	1
3	2	3	0
4	5	0	0
5	0	5	0

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6	3	2	0
7	3	2	0

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*Question 1: Before the Pandemic, did you experience any stress within your job/life?*

Themes: **Rush and breaks**

Question one showed that those who answer yes to no were 1 and 2, respectively. Whilst two of the individuals had stated that they had not worked before the Pandemic. The themes that emerged from this question were scheduled rush and breaks. The former was found to be that individuals did experience heightened stress levels during rush hour, Christmas or special events, yet such situations were anticipated. The latter puts forth that if employees felt stressed or overwhelmed, they just needed to alert their manager/leader and would then be allowed to take a break to readjust and feel comfortable again.

...One of my friends fainted, just fell to the ground, it was around five/six o'clock in the evening, and it was not COVID, but he heard many voices and then started to feel dizzy and fell. So ever since then, I am always asking the new kids that are coming, "hey do you need something to drink, do you need a break, go a little bit on the phone and relax". We do this mostly around Christmas (P1).

*Question 2: Have you felt stressed during the Pandemic?*

Themes: **Worried about family and odd times**

The second question revealed that the majority found Covid-19 not to impact them, whilst one individual was unsure whether it did or did not. Key themes were worrying about infecting others rather than being infected, especially the elderly. Another theme was how odd people felt; when asked if they felt uncomfortable or more stressed, all stated that it was just strange but did not hinder their performance.

...it has been different definitely, myself I was not afraid about getting Covid, but I was always afraid of passing it on to others, so I was uncomfortable at first, especially around old people and would try to take a step back, but at the same time still trying to help them, I felt that (P4).

*Question 3: Has your working conditions/environment affected you, your lifestyle or relations outside the workplace?*

Themes: **Sanitise and adjusting to new norms**

Question three had a mixed reaction, with the majority responding with no (3). The themes identified were constant sanitisation and becoming accustomed to the new norm; the former paints a picture of employees always sanitising their hands. Therefore, each employee felt protected when they returned home since their colleagues were sanitising, wearing masks and using personal protective equipment. The latter shows that employees did experience heightened stress initially, yet this was minuscule, and such employees become accustomed to the more complicated unscheduled situation within a short time, therefore not feeling that the Pandemic has impacted them in terms of stress.

...During Covid you are constantly changing masks, washing your hands, not touching your face and you go home, you need to take maybe two hours minimum until you forget that you are at work because when you are at home you think oh I must wash my hands, I can't touch my face, so it takes a little bit longer to shut it down when you get home (P1).

*Question 4: Do you feel anything has been done in the store to manage the Pandemic?*

**Theme: PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), regulation & rules enforcement**

Question four's findings demonstrated a one-sided answer. All participants responded with yes concerning Supermarket A's implementation of procedures/mechanisms to counter the Pandemic. The themes that emerged were personal protective equipment(PPE), social distancing, headcount and vouchers. Most of these themes are general have and already been discussed in the literature review or found in Supermarket A's report.

...yeah, the normal stuff, you know, reminding us to use sanitisers to clean our hands, use masks and just always be aware of social distancing (P3).

*Question 5: Have you used any of the programmes provided by Supermarket A?*

**Theme: Programmes not know – managers awareness**

Arriving at the findings of question five, all individuals either stated no or did not know about such programmes. Those that had an idea had found out through a friend or stated that their manager would have alerted them about such programmes if they felt it to be necessary. Themes were unawareness and managers understanding of their employees.

...no, I don't know about it but haven't been any problems on my side. I would think that if there came up a problem, but I think that if there were a clash, our store

manager would come up and tell us. He keeps us well informed about sanitising, mask-wearing and so on (P4).

*Question 6: Have you experienced liminality within the workplace?*

Theme: **Three types of customers**

Questions six cracked into the unknown unknowns in terms of discovering a new phenomenon. Tally count in terms of yes or no was three to two respectively, the majority leaned towards yes whilst discovering the phenomenon that a few responses pointed out known as the 'three types of customers': this means that employees do not know how to respond to different customers. The first type of customer will keep such a far distance that one cannot hear what they want due to the distance and the mask. The second type of customer can be seen as the ideal customer in terms of employees understanding what the customer wants whilst keeping a social distance. The last type of customer is those who stand close to the employee, tap them on the shoulder, listen by lowering their mask, and then proceed to get angry when the employee asked them to please obey social distance rules.

...you never know how to interact with the customers; some get angry when you ask them to keep a distance, while others lower their masks when you are trying to tell them something as if the mask would be over your ears (P1).

*Question 7: Anything that you would like to add?*

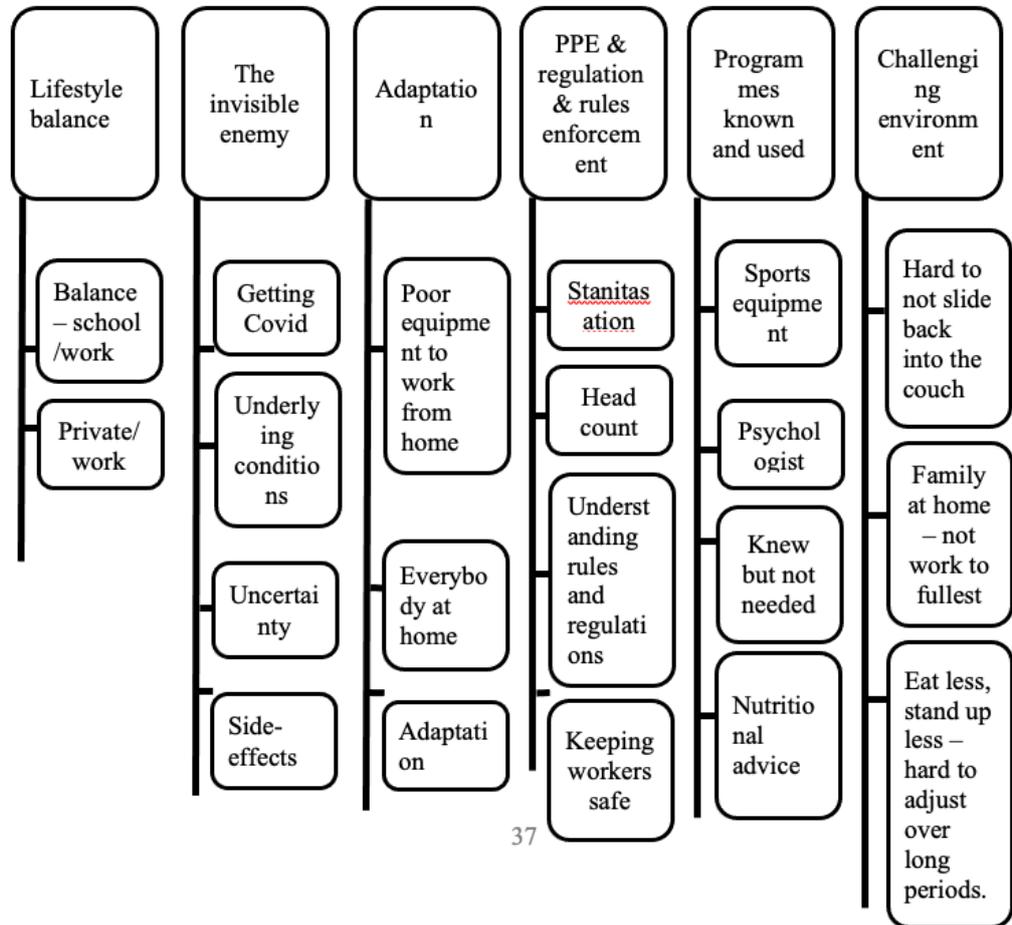
Theme: **Superb effort in dealing with the Pandemic**

Question seven demonstrated that all participants in the front-line interviews felt that Supermarket A handled the Pandemic immensely well. The themes that emerged were that the Pandemic had had a psychological effect on employees, not uncomfortably or detrimentally but just peculiarly or odd at times. One employee felt that priority should be given to front-line workers in Supermarket A in terms of the vaccine, yet this is outside of Supermarket A's control.

...I think we dealt with it good, I mean like the procedures we did, I think it worked, at least here, and we didn't have any like major breakouts in the store, which was good, there was only a few times that he came up and we were able to isolate it right away, and people went to quarantine, and then it was just done, it never became big (P4).

Office Employees

The data outlined six themes that emerged since none of the respondents answered the last question.



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**Figure 3.** Themes that emerged for office employees.

**Table 7.** Total count of office employees.

Question	Yes	No	Not sure
1	2	3	0
2	3	2	0
3	3	2	0
4	5	0	0
5	4	1	0

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6	4	1	0
7	0	5	0

*Question 1: Before the Pandemic, did you experience any stress within your job/life?*

Theme: **Lifestyle balance**

Tally count for question one in terms of yes or no was two to three, respectively. Although those who answered yes found it hard to manage their personal lives (school or/and family) and their work.

...combining work and private life and also being in school at the same time (P4).

*Question 2: Have you felt stressed during the Pandemic?*

Theme: **The invisible enemy**

Tally count for question two in terms of yes or no was three to two, respectively. The theme that emerged was determined to be the invisible enemy. This term has been formed because participants indicated how worried they were in terms of getting the virus, underlining side effects, infecting loved ones/others, the unknown side-effects that are being discovered every day and the uncertainty that lies ahead, such as when the Pandemic will end, more mutations/variants and future lockdowns.

...just the uncertainty of the Pandemic and side effects and not knowing when it will end (P4).

*Question 3: Has your working conditions/environment affected you, your lifestyle or relations outside the workplace?*

Theme: **Adaptation**

Tally count for question three in terms of yes or no was three to two, respectively. The theme that emerged was adaptation. Participants indicated that they find it challenging to work from home, especially when the whole family is present and having inadequate computer equipment to complete specific work tasks.

...I have three children, and we were all home at the same time, so we needed to adjust to different living situations (P2).

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On the contrary, some participants could adapt and did not find it challenging to work from home.

...I always felt like I was at work. The office was in my living room. So, at times I felt like I should always be working and felt bad if I was taking a break (P4).

*Question 4: Do you feel anything has been done in the store to manage the Pandemic?*

Themes: **PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), regulation & rules enforcement**

Tally count for question four in terms of yes or no was five to zero, respectively. The themes that emerged were PPE (personal protective equipment), regulation and rules enforcement. Participants reported that Supermarket A's main goal was to protect their employees. Furthermore, participants mentioned that sanitisation stations, counting the number of customers allowed in the store at once and communicating rules and regulations to the employees were just a few measures used to move closer towards the goal of protection.

... A lot of things have been done in the stores at Supermarket A. We implemented stations where people could sanitise. All the trollies and baskets were sanitised. The registers were also sanitised after each use. A staff member was counted all customers that were coming in and out to make sure that there were not too many people inside at once (P1).

*Question 5: Have you used any of the programmes provided by Supermarket A?*

Theme: **Programmes known and used.**

Tally count for question five in terms of yes and no was four to one, respectively. The theme that emerged was programmes known and used. All respondents stated that they had used Supermarket A's programme one way or another except for one person, although they did not feel that they needed to use any available options. Participants used different programmes, ranging from a psychologist to nutritional advice and the purchase of sports equipment.

...I saw a psychologist after working much from home (P2).

*Question 6: Has working from home been harder to adjust to?*

Theme: **Challenging environment**

Tally count for question six in terms of yes and no was four to one, respectively. The theme that emerged was a challenging environment. Similar to question three, where people found it difficult to adapt to the working environment, question 5 delved deeper into this phenomenon. Participants reported that they sometimes found it hard to harness the energy to work over returning to the couch or attending to family matters within the house. Furthermore, it appears that finding a good balance is crucial in terms of working from home and work as the first participant stated:

It is not hard to work from home a few days in a week, but after working home for many days, it gets old quickly. You get tired more quickly, you don't stand up often enough, you don't eat good food and etc. You are not meeting people, it's harder to communicate in an efficient way. However, it is nice to know how to work from home and I am happy that it is now more accepted. Sometimes you may have to work from home because of something, and it's good to know that it is okay and possible (P1).

## 5.2 Quantitative Results

The total about of responses was ( $n = 127$ ). Table 8 displays all yes or no questions, with ( $n$ ) representing the total responses question, while the percentage (%) represents all those who responded with yes.

**Table 8.** Categorisation of office participants in order of number, occupation and gender.

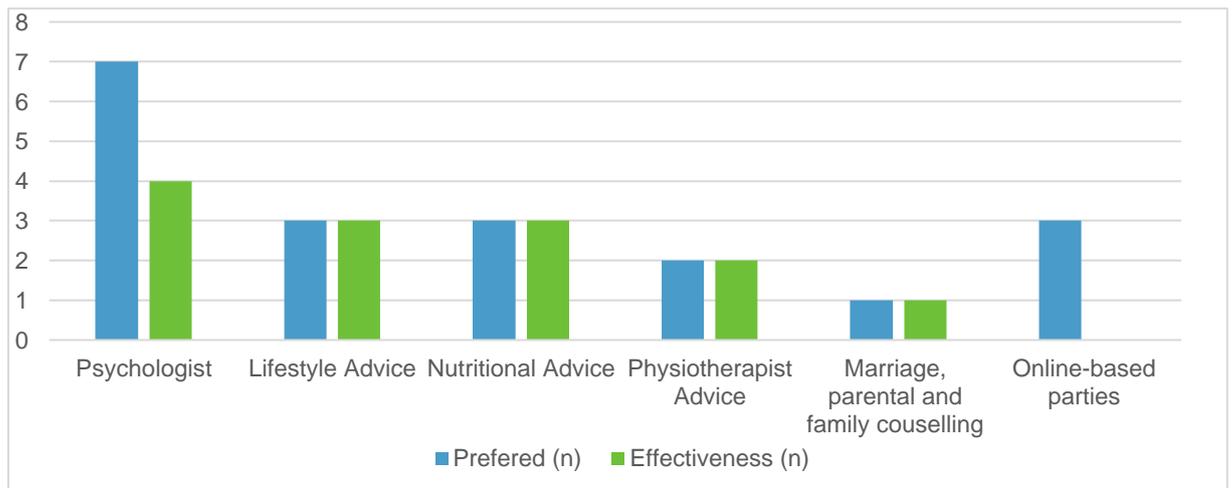
Question	$n$	%
Q1	126	65.1
Q3	126	34.9
Q4	126	70.1
Q5	127	48.8
Q1	10	60

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Q4	10	100
Q5	10	10

### Front-line Employees

Question 2 had an outcome of 83 total responses ( $n = 83$ ). Those that were afraid of getting COVID-19 ( $n = 53$ ; 63,9%), infecting others with COVID-19 ( $n = 50$ ; 60.2%), job tasks ( $n = 19$ ; 22.9%), increased workload ( $n = 54$ ; 65.1%), and the repercussions of getting COVID-19 ( $n = 16$ ; 19.3%). Question 6 showed that only 15 employees used such programmes ( $n = 15$ ), while question 7 shows the total effectiveness ( $n = 10$ ). Figure 4 shows the programmes the employees chose (question 6) and their effectiveness (question 7).



**Figure 4.** *The programmes chosen and their effectiveness.*

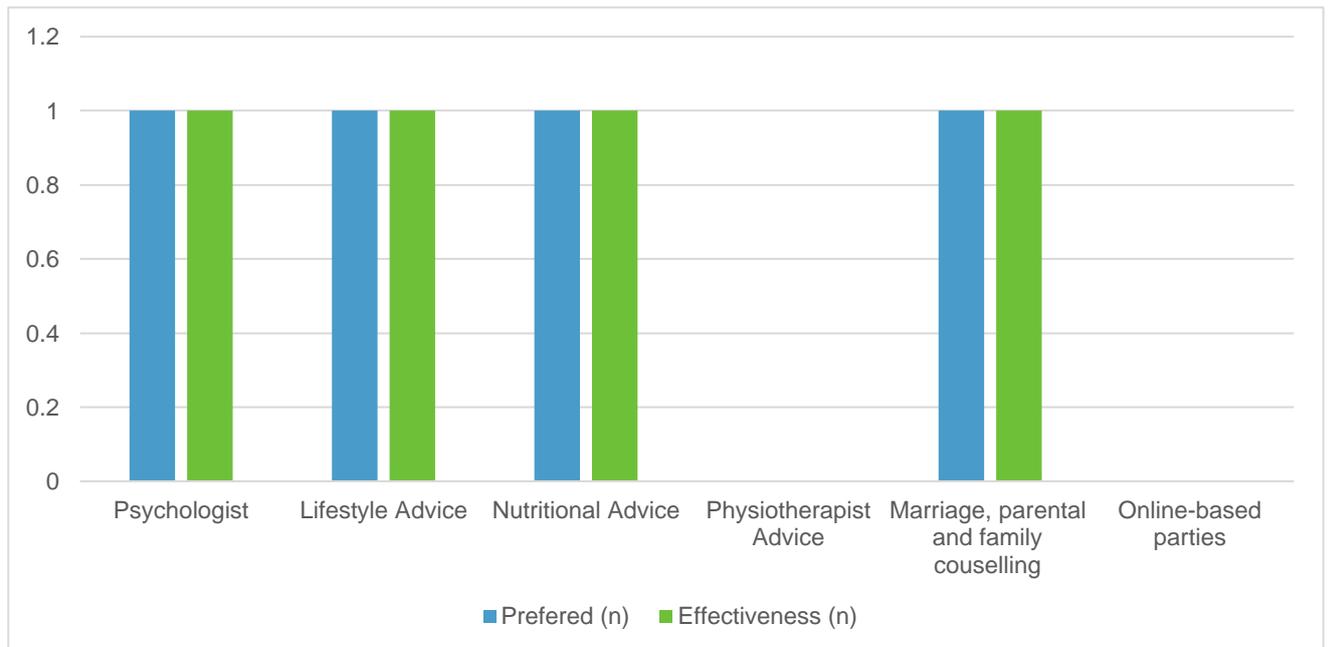
### Office Employees

The total amount of responses was 10 ( $n = 10$ ). Question 2 had a total response of ( $n = 6$ ). Those that were afraid of getting COVID-19 ( $n = 3$ ; 50%), infecting others with COVID-19 ( $n = 3$ ; 50%), unclear job tasks ( $n = 0$ ; 0), increased workload ( $n = 4$ ; 66.7%), and the repercussions of getting COVID-19 ( $n = 1$ ; 16.7%). Total response ( $n = 10$ ). Work-life balance ( $n = 6$ ; 60%), Social distancing ( $n = 2$ ; 20%), Job tasks ( $n = 1$ ; 10%), communication ( $n = 2$ ; 20%), those that did not find it to be stressful ( $n = 2$ ; 20%).

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Question 6 showed that 3 employees used such programmes ( $n = 3$ ), while question 7 shows the total effectiveness ( $n = 3$ ). Figure 5 shows the programmes the employees chose (question 6) and their effectiveness (question 7).

**Figure 5.** *The programmes chosen and their effectiveness.*



## 6. Discussion

By breaking down the results, one can unravel a few points. To begin, results from both front-line employees and office employees show that the majority do, in fact, experience stress during COVID-19. Results show that those afraid of getting COVID-19, infecting others with the virus and increased workload are causing stress. Nevertheless, these stressors can be somewhat inevitable. Since so much is unknown about the virus, research has pointed out that sources of stress during the SARS virus were people worrying about being infected or spreading the virus to family members (Cheng, Wong, Tsang, & Wong, 2004).

Furthermore, an explanation for the increased demand could be due to the nature of the Pandemic and how it has caused sudden unplanned increased workload. In the past, the increased workload was attributed to the festive season, and as such, it could be anticipated. Therefore, higher demands have caused people to stress more, as the research has suggested (Bhi, Dinos, Miecznikowskam de Jongh, & Stansfeld, 2016). It is apparent that Supermarket A excelled in mitigating stress as job tasks results ( $n = 19$ ; 22.9%) were low, thus confirming previous research that stress can be mitigated if job tasks are clear and transparent (WHO, 2021). Moreover, the results show that a majority of employees do not find it hard to interact with customers ( $n = 66$ ; 52.4%), yet a recommendation could fall on the customer to obey these rules through the use of signs and posters, although this is easier said than done.

When it comes to Supermarket A's integration of sanitisation, social distancing, rules and other regulations, results indicate that the company has done a phenomenal job as front-line employees found their colleagues to be obeying COVID-19 rules (masks, sanitising, social distancing) ( $n = 89$ ; 70.1%), office employees ( $n = 10$ ; 100%). The results align with previous research that found stress manifests amongst front-line employees who did not have adequate personal protection equipment (PPE) and organisational policies (Wong, Ho, Wong, Cheung, & Yeoh, 2020).

The most divided and fascinating area between front-line and office employees was not if Supermarket A had sufficient programmes/interventions but rather that people did not know about them. Initially, the ten interviews showed that all five employees from the office knew about the programmes, whilst none on the front-line employees were aware and faintly knew about it through colleagues and not managers. Moreover, the results from the survey found front-line employees that answered yes ( $n = 62$ ; 48.8%) to

those that answered no ( $n = 65$ ; 51.2%), whilst office workers all knew about the programme ( $n = 10$ ; 100%). Furthermore, the data from the survey shows that only 11.8% of the front-line workers and 30% of the office workers who knew about the programme used it. Such statistics are twofold as on the one hand, the majority of front-line employees did not know about the programme. However, on the other hand, through data analysis and interviews, the general feeling is that Supermarket A is doing a superb job in mitigating stress in the store through environmental interventions such as sanitising, rules, regulations, protocols and creating a positive working environment. Thus, many individuals felt that such programmes were not necessary.

Moreover, front-line workers job is, by nature, high in turnover. Thus, one needs to constantly remind individuals about the existence of such a programme that Supermarket A has to offer, whether through morning talks, posters, emails, etc. As for the effectiveness of these programmes, results for front-line indicate that 57% found a psychologist to be effective, whilst lifestyle advice, nutrition advice, physiotherapist advice and marriage, parental and family counselling all had 100% effectiveness. However, the response rate for them was meagre. Furthermore, office workers reported 100% effectiveness on psychologists, lifestyle advice, nutrition advice and parental and family counselling.

When looking at the stressors that have occurred from working at home, 60% of employees indicated that work-life balance had been the most stressful element. Furthermore, this is confirmed through the interviews where individuals stated that school, family and work has been extremely challenging to balance. Moreover, working from home is more challenging because people are not in line with their working environment. They have trouble balancing their two states of mind: from work to home and vice versa. Such factors that hinder them from extracting their entire performance at home are attending to their family, inadequate equipment to work from home and falling into a state of constant comfort.

## **6.1 Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations will need to be addressed. First, although this paper was conducted privately, data was collected from only one supermarket company and cannot be generalised to other supermarket companies as they will have different interventions, protocols, guidelines, sanitisations, and rules. Secondly, quantitative data (survey) was

gathered around the end of June 2020, the start of the Icelandic holidays, and therefore the sample size fell a bit short than what the researcher would have liked, such as the results for the effectiveness of the programmes. Thirdly, qualitative data was gathered by the researcher who had little experience in such a field. Fourthly, one has to consider social disability bias that individuals during the interview or survey might have acted in a manner that they would have usually not acted in (Chung & Monroe, 2003).

## **6.2 Practical Implications**

This has validated specific theories/models of work stress or relevant literature. An essential element to mention is that due to this thesis being conducted within a business, confidentiality and privacy are of the utmost importance, and therefore the name of the supermarket was renamed to Supermarket A.

## **6.3 Conclusion**

As more and more people are vaccinated every day, society will return to its normalised way with a twist. People will be able to conduct their work from the confinements of their homes and on-site when needed. This paper set out to investigate the programmes that Supermarket A implemented, whether or not they worked, and give any recommendations if needed. After a detailed analysis of the programmes implemented to combat the Pandemic (COVID-19), it is without a doubt that Supermarket A's human resource department has excelled in terms of the variety offered and that most are individual interventions. Unlike most companies, Supermarket A has provided employees with programmes that are not on the cheap end, and rightly so since research has demonstrated that the consequences for allowing stress to manifest are detrimental to an organisation as a whole (Schabracq & Cooper, 2000). Arriving at the effectiveness of the programmes/interventions and it cannot be stressed enough how successful such programmes/interventions have been, from the rules, protocols, sanitisation and masks, to the psychologist, lifestyle advice and nutrition advice. Supermarket A's employees are happy without a doubt, and although the majority are experiencing stress, it is both expected and, in most cases, inevitable. Supermarket A, along with the outstanding efforts by the Icelandic authority, has managed to mitigate the fears on the 'invisible enemy' (COVID-19) and create a healthy and safe working environment. The only

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recommendations/suggestions that can be made are that people are made more aware of the programmes/interventions available. Furthermore, proper equipment should be provided to those that work from home. In times of uncertainty, people's stress levels tend to go up, Supermarket A continues to stay open and keep COVID-19 out of its door, companies can learn a lot from a company that treats their staff as a family, which in return fills them with assurance and comfort that leaves a mark on their happy customers.

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## Appendix A

Appendix A provides the interview questions

1. Before the Pandemic, did you experience any stress within your job/life?
  - a. If yes, from what?
2. Have you felt stressed during the Pandemic?
  - a. If yes, from what?
3. Has your working conditions/environment affected you, your lifestyle or relations outside the workplace?
  - a. If yes, how so?
4. Do you feel anything has been done in the store to manage the Pandemic?
  - a. If yes, what is being done?
5. Have you used any of the programmes provided by Supermarket A?
  - a. If yes, can you tell me which ones?
6. Have you experienced liminality within the workplace?
  - a. If yes, where/when?
7. Anything that you would like to add?

## Appendix B

Appendix B provides the survey's questions and possible answers for Front-line employees.

### COVID-19 FL

Öll svör verða nafnlaus - All responses will be anonymous.

Q1: Hefur COVID-19 valdið þér streitu? / Has COVID-19 caused you to stress?

- Já - Yes
- Nei - No

Q2: Hverjir eru streituvaldarnir? (Merktu við þá sem eiga við þig) / What are the stressors? (Tick those that apply to you)

- A: Að fá COVID-19 / Getting COVID-19
- B: Smita aðra með COVID-19 / Infecting others with COVID-19
- Óljós verkverkefni / Unclear Job tasks
- Aukið vinnuálag / Increased workload
- Aukaverkanir vegna Covid-19 s.s. síþreyta, skert lyktar- og bragðskyn / The repercussions of getting COVID such as tiredness, loss of smell and taste, etc?

Q3: Finnst þér erfitt að eiga samskipti við viðskiptavini vegna COVID-19 reglna, svo sem félagslegrar fjarlægðar. / Do you find it hard to interact with customers due to COVID-19 rules, such as social distance?

- Já - Yes
- Nei - No
- Ekki viss - Not sure

Q4: Finnst þér samstarfsmenn þínir hlíta COVID-19 reglum í vinnunni (grímur, hreinsun, osfrv.)? / Do you feel your colleagues are obeying COVID-19 rules at work(masks, sanitising, etc)?

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- Já - Yes
- Nei - No
- Stundum - Sometimes

Q5: Þekkir þú til velferðarpakka Matvöruverslun A. (sálfræðingur, lífsstíls- og næringarráð, lífeðlisfræðiráð osfrv.)? / Do you know about Supermarket A's Welfare package (psychologist, lifestyle and nutritional advice, physiologist advice etc)?

- Já - Yes
- Nei - No

Q6: Hvaða þjónustu hefur þú nýtt þér? / Which Programmes have you used?

- Sálfræðingur / Psychologist
- Lífsstílsráð / Lifestyle advice
- Næringarráðgjöf / Nutrition advice
- Ráð sjúkráþjálfara / Physiotherapist advice
- Hjónaband, foreldraráðgjöf og fjölskylduráðgjöf / Marriage, parental and family counselling
- Aðilar á netinu / Online-based parties

Q7: Hvaða þjónustu hefur þér fundist skila árangri? / Which programmes have you found to be effective?

- Sálfræðingur / Psychologist
- Lífsstílsráð / Lifestyle advice
- Næringarráðgjöf / Nutrition advice
- Ráð sjúkráþjálfara / Physiotherapist advice
- Hjónaband, foreldraráðgjöf og fjölskylduráðgjöf / Marriage, parental and family counselling
- Aðilar á netinu / Online-based parties

## Appendix C

Appendix C provides the survey's questions and possible answers for office employees.

### COVID-19 OFFICE

Öll svör verða nafnlaus - All responses will be anonymous.

Q1: Hefur COVID-19 valdið þér streitu? / Has COVID-19 caused you to stress?

- Já - Yes
- Nei - No

Q2: Hverjir eru streituvaldarnir? (Merktu við þá sem eiga við þig) / What are the stressors? (Tick those that apply to you)

- A: Að fá COVID-19 / Getting COVID-19
- B: Smita aðra með COVID-19 / Infecting others with COVID-19
- Óljós verkverkefni / Unclear Job tasks
- Aukið vinnuálag / Increased workload
- Aukaverkanir vegna Covid-19 s.s. síþreyta, skert lyktar- og

bragðskyn / The repercussions of getting COVID such as tiredness, loss of smell and taste, etc?

Q3: Hvað hefur verið mest stressandi við að vinna heima? / What has been the most stressful thing about working from home?

- Jafnvægi á milli vinnu og einkalífs - Work-life balance
- félagsforðun - Social distancing
- Starfsverkefni - Job tasks
- Samskipti - Communication
- Það hefur ekki verið stressandi - It has not been stressful.

Q4: Finnst þér samstarfsmenn þínir hlíta COVID-19 reglum í vinnunni (grímur, hreinsun, osfrv.)? / Do you feel your colleagues are obeying COVID-19 rules at work (masks, sanitising, etc)?

## Occupational stress and remedies amongst supermarket employees during COVID-19

- Já - Yes
- Nei - No
- Stundum - Sometimes

Q5: Þekkir þú til velferðarpakka Matvöruverslun A (sálfræðingur, lífsstíls- og næringarráð, lífeðlisfræðiráð osfrv.)? / Do you know about Supermarket A's Welfare package (psychologist, lifestyle and nutritional advice, physiologist advice etc)?

- Já - Yes
- Nei - No

Q6: Hvaða þjónustu hefur þú nýtt þér? / Which Programmes have you used?

- Sálfræðingur / Psychologist
- Lífsstílsráð / Lifestyle advice
- Næringarráðgjöf / Nutrition advice
- Ráð sjúkraþjálfara / Physiotherapist advice
- Hjónaband, foreldraráðgjöf og fjölskylduráðgjöf / Marriage, parental and family counselling
- Aðilar á netinu / Online-based parties

Q7: Hvaða þjónustu hefur þér fundist skila árangri? / Which programmes have you found to be effective?

- Sálfræðingur / Psychologist
- Lífsstílsráð / Lifestyle advice
- Næringarráðgjöf / Nutrition advice
- Ráð sjúkraþjálfara / Physiotherapist advice
- Hjónaband, foreldraráðgjöf og fjölskylduráðgjöf / Marriage, parental and family counselling
- Aðilar á netinu / Online-based parties