

## 'It's Like a War Zone': Jay's Liminal Experience of Normal and Extreme Work in a UK Supermarket During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

This article presents a UK supermarket worker's experiences of work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Writing during a period of uncertainty, Jay's narrative reveals how the sudden and constant transitions between mundanity and extremity on the shop floor evoke conflicting emotions and work intensification that disrupt and reconstruct normality. His accounts describe violent customer behaviours, absent management, a lack of clear organisational policies, and the different views of appropriate health and safety measures among colleagues. It illustrates how liminality in the workplace at a time of crisis can endanger employees whose seemingly mundane jobs become extreme.

### Keywords

extreme work, frontline services, key workers, liminality, supermarket jobs

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both individuals and societies to an experience of liminality; of being 'betwixt and between' two states simultaneously (Turner, 1970). The concept of liminality derives from the seminal work of Van Gennep (2019): *Les rites de passage*. Van Gennep outlines a process through which individuals experience a

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transition from one set of social norms and practices to another. This process starts with *separation* from normal social life, and the norms which enfold it. At this point, individuals enter a *liminal* phase, an ambiguous state that is detached from past norms while new norms have yet to be established. The transition process concludes with *aggregation*, where individuals are anchored into new social norms and practices. This article deploys *liminality* to describe the period between March and May 2020, during which social norms, organisational policies, and workplace practices were disrupted and reconstructed amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the anthropological narrative of liminality, individuals occupying this liminal state are referred to as *liminal personae* (Turner, 1970). A *liminal persona* usually experiences the transit from temporary ambiguity to anticipated aggregation of new norms with little risk (Turner, 1970). However, liminality could induce danger in the void of well-defined customs and resolutions (Thomassen, 2018). As an organisation suspends or amends its policies and practices in a crisis (Powley, 2009), employees become *liminal personae* (Turner, 1970) who face potential disorientation and risks while navigating the porous boundary between normal and extreme work.

Extreme work is sometimes associated with highly paid professionals who work 60 hours or more per week, and whose jobs include managerial responsibilities (Hewlett and Luce, 2006). Previous research has applied the term to professionals working in healthcare (Buchanan et al., 2013) and policing occupations (Turnbull and Wass, 2015). Extreme work is also associated with edgework, which refers to work of a risky nature and involves physical and psychological intensity (Granter et al., 2015, 2019).

The work of frontline supermarket employees is not usually considered 'extreme', instead often characterised as 'mundane' (Bozkurt, 2015), 'routinised' (Newsome et al., 2013) and 'low status' (Bozkurt and Grugulis, 2011). During specific trading periods like Christmas, work on supermarket shop floors can temporarily manifest some dimensions of extreme work, with an increased demand on employees' workload, skills and discretion (Bozkurt, 2015). However, such extremity remains comparatively predictable and low risk.

This article defines extreme work as work that is comprised of an unpredictable workflow, expanded duties, responsibility for mentoring (Bozkurt, 2015; Hewlett and Luce, 2006), and psychological and/or physical risk (Granter et al., 2015, 2019). It draws on the concept to explore the liminal experience of a supermarket frontline worker during a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the UK Government to classify supermarket employees as 'key workers', and their work 'critical' in managing the crisis (UK Government, 2020). In contrast to the expected and planned temporary intensification during Christmas (Bozkurt, 2015), the unplanned and extreme nature of supermarket work amid the pandemic has pertinent implications for the workers. The disruptions and uncertainties places supermarket workers in a liminal state between 'mundane' and 'extreme' work, and between old and new workplace norms. Workers' roles and responsibilities, in both their workplaces and within the wider community, are now subject to deconstructions and reconstructions.

Jay's story of being a UK supermarket worker during the COVID-19 pandemic is drawn from an autobiographical diary that he wrote between 21 March and 13 April 2020. This story is also supported with additional comments generated from a subse-

quent interview about the diary. Jay's story unveils how mundanity and extremity co-exist at work during the crisis.

Jay has worked as a customer assistant at the produce department of a major UK supermarket for the last three years. He is responsible for stocking shelves with fresh vegetables and fruit. Jay describes his work as 'relaxing' despite his work requiring the exertion of considerable physical labour. His use of the word 'relaxing' refers to the social environment of his workplace, rather than physical relaxation. While recognising the prevalence of stringent managerial control in some supermarkets (Newsome et al., 2013), Jay attributes his job satisfaction in normal times to the relaxed management practices that permit extra breaks, flexibility and autonomy. Frequently referring to his colleagues as 'friends', Jay's account also confirms that pleasant work relationships can contribute to a positive experience of mundane supermarket work (Endrissat et al., 2015).

Positive work relationships and physical labour together characterise Jay's experience of work until 21 March 2020, the day when he arrives at the supermarket to find emptied shelves, cleared backstock and a quadrupling in the number of customers. These discoveries signify *separation*, a detachment from normality (Van Gennepe, 2019), as Jay finds himself in an ambiguous 'interstructural situation' (Turner, 1970: 93). His diary records how government guidance, workplace practices and the behaviours of customers, colleagues and management bring abrupt changes to the nature and scope of his work. These changes place Jay in a liminal position: previous work and social norms abruptly enter suspensions while emergent policies and norms are subject to constant negotiations as the pandemic unfolds. In this liminal period of uncertainties, Jay describes violence, the risks of contracting COVID-19 at work and subsequent psychological distress that contrasts with the usual description of supermarket shop-floor work as mundane (Newsome et al., 2013) and low risk.

Following the definition of extreme work, Jay's account describes a disruption in his workflow as there was no stock to move from the warehouse onto the shop floor. He recalls feeling simultaneously relieved and bored as a result of not being able to perform the usual stocking tasks. Meanwhile, his colleagues on the checkouts must deal with enormous queues and aggressive customers. The scope of Jay's work expands to include randomly assigned activities outside of his usual tasks, such as cleaning the floor. Jay also recounts receiving a text message from his line manager that requests Jay to 'look after' new staff who are starting the following Monday while the manager is on sick leave. These changes illustrate unpredictable workflow and the expansion of duties that characterise extreme work (Bozkurt, 2015), especially carrying out temporary supervisory responsibilities without training or additional pay.

The abrupt collapse of routines, defined roles and structured relations during an organisational crisis (Powley, 2009) subjects Jay to *liminal* experiences. The vulnerability of Jay, as a *liminal persona*, resulting from a lack of organisational norms during a crisis (Thomassen, 2018) is evident in his diary. The supermarket eventually begins to provide protective equipment and shifts its policies and practices in response to the pandemic, but Jay recalls no initial communication from the management regarding these changes. For example, Jay discovered disposable gloves in the warehouse, but his managers never informed the supermarket staff that they are available. The wearing of gloves is also left to the discretion of the staff, without any instruction as to their use. To mitigate

the risk, Jay and his colleagues appear to take cleaning products in high demand, such as sanitiser, from the backstock to buy for themselves.

While following governmental and organisational instruction of keeping a two-metre social distance from others himself, Jay angrily confronts a colleague who refuses to conform with the instruction. This colleague continues to socialise with others outside of work despite being aware of the potential risks. The confrontation without subsequent resolution is reminiscent of how lacking 'overt ritual' and peer or mentoring support in liminality can lead to the psychological suffering of *liminal personae* (Beech, 2011). Jay describes a worry that he or his colleagues will become infected at work, and that he would bring the disease home to his family. His experience elucidates the psychological intensity that permeates in extreme work, which can be exacerbated by lacking adequate organisational and managerial support (Granter et al., 2019). Jay recalls feeling extremely bored of having nothing to do at work most of the time, shocked at customers' behaviours, disappointed at management and worried about his colleagues, his family and himself. Yet he simultaneously sees his workplace as a respite from the social isolation induced by the national lockdown. Jay believes that going to work can 'gain freedom' and mitigate the psychological impact of the compulsory 'staying at home' order that some scholars have called for further investigation into [AQ: 1] This is correct. Thank you. Jay's perspective and experience of health risks, psychological stressors and coping mechanisms provokes further consideration of how mundane supermarket work becomes extreme (Bozkurt, 2015) in unanticipated crises.

Similar to his growing concerns with the norm-flouting behaviours of some colleagues, Jay's prior positive perception of 'chilled' management also begins to alter as he witnesses an 'absence of leadership' during the crisis. His diary encapsulates how 'fragmented and distracted' managerial supervision can induce extremity at work (Bozkurt, 2015: 484). Despite the increasing visible changes of the physical environment on the shop floor, Jay expresses a lack of confidence in his employer's ability to protect his colleagues and himself. The role of management, the responsibilities of employees and the information about changing organisational practices become increasingly salient in his diary.

Jay notices that many managers have taken long periods of leave, an option to mitigate the health risks that is not available to many non-managerial staff. While taking 'isolation days' becomes common among managers, some staff are left to work alone. Jay recalls that one colleague sees the need to continue working, including overtime, to secure her income. These reminiscences encapsulate the anxiety associated with financial uncertainty that prevails in part-time employment agreements (Heyes et al., 2018). The Coronavirus Act 2020 extends Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) to UK employees who self-isolate to prevent themselves from spreading COVID-19. However, the SSP scheme is based on contractual hours. Part-time employees whose income is heavily supported by overtime pay usually cannot afford to take leave and rely on SSP that can lead to a considerable reduction in their wage. Jay's account challenges the portrait of part-time labour as a form of employee-friendly flexible work in the Taylor Review (Taylor et al., 2017). It also elucidates how enforced flexibility of retail shop-floor jobs (Moore et al., 2018) can lead to unpredictable workflows and increased psychological intensity that characterise extreme work.

In his diary entry on 13 April, Jay describes what might be considered as *aggregation* (Turner, 1970; Van Gennep, 2019). The changes in workplace policies and practices appear to signify a tentative establishment of new organisational and social norms. Jay begins to carry out his normal duties as the supermarket shop floor returns to a calmer state, the stock of most goods reaches ‘prime’ level, and the number of customers becomes ‘regular’. The organisation continues to introduce new policies and practices, such as the extension of the social distancing and hygiene measures to the toilets and staff canteens. However, a sense of ambiguity persists in Jay’s diary. *Aggregation* in the anthropological sense (Turner, 1970) involves adopting established and respected new norms with little risk. In contrast, the new norms in Jay’s workplace remain dynamic and subject to continued organisational changes and individual interpretations. For instance, Jay’s colleagues show varied perceptions and degrees of conformity to these norms that could result in physical and psychological risks. As the norms continue to evolve, Jay is yet to experience a fully resolved *aggregation* in the void of managerial communications and support (Beech, 2011; Garsten, 1999).

## Jay’ story

### *The normality at work: ‘I love going there’*

I have worked in produce for almost three years. I fill fruit and vegetables, taking stuff from the back store to the shop floor. There’s no checklist or set routine. I see what’s missing on the shop floor and go get it from the back. We also get deliveries – but they come at random times. My job is really physical, really quite demanding. The amount of stuff that we lift is crazy. Each box of bananas weighs around 25 kg, and I’ve got to lift piles of them every day. There’s a big distance between the warehouse and our back store, where we keep our produce. I carry two cages at a time because I don’t want to have to walk all the way back. It requires strength.

I know a lot of people hate working in retail. It is hard at times, but it can also be relaxing. The managers are all chilled out, everyone is good with each other. In some retail environments they treat people like machines, but not at my store. I love going there. It’s not as strict as it should be. It should be a lot stricter. Sometimes we take extra breaks – way longer extra breaks. The managers do it, too.

They’re sitting in the staffroom playing table tennis – senior managers as well.

### *Separation: ‘the most shocking days I have ever experienced’*

I arrived at my workplace at 1 p.m. on Saturday 21 March. This day was one of the most shocking days I have ever experienced while working for the company. The first thing that immediately caught my attention was the fact that there was almost no produce stock available on the shelves, there was barely any trace of common food such as lemons and onions. I initially assumed this was due to the lack of staff that day on produce, or the staff not being bothered to fill the shelves while doing something else. On the contrary, the real reason was that there was no backstock at all. I’ve never witnessed both the shop floor and the backstock being clear within my three years of working here, especially since we had

two deliveries the night before. I've just barely begun my shift, and everything was clear. I was stunned, yet relieved at the same time, primarily due to not having to be subjected to extreme physical labour. The number of customers in the store had more than quadrupled; the queues for the checkouts were longer than the length of an aisle. They went all the way around the store. It was insane. I had nothing to do. My manager said: 'Just clean up the shop floor'. I helped a little bit in grocery, but they were missing a lot of stuff, too. There wasn't much to do. I walked around the store with my colleagues. The managers couldn't say anything because they had nothing to do either. We were bored because there was nothing to do, but also shocked because we've never seen this type of situation before.

### *Liminality: 'it was like a war zone'*

It was like a war zone; customers were fighting over food and toilet paper. I saw customers pushing, shoving and barging. I saw a customer grabbing another customers' collar. A colleague was crying because the customers were angry. She told me that she couldn't handle the pressure. Her manager was crying too. It was pretty insane. The store manager wouldn't come down for an hour. Customers could only buy three of any items at a time. My friend was working on the checkout and one customer had way more than three items. My friend was trying to do his job, saying, 'Sir, you can't buy more than three items of the same type'. The customer said, 'I'm going to fuck you up when I see you outside'. Security came immediately and took the customer out of the store. Security was all over the place. We had to hire more security, the ones we had weren't enough to handle all the situations. It's shocking. Customers do argue every now-and-then, but never on this scale. Several exchanges turned physical, which led to police intervention.

Our management is just ridiculous. The management didn't know what to do – they were taken by storm. Usually they would just ask you to work in other departments, but they really didn't know what to do. The store manager, he was just walking around. He didn't really say anything to my manager or other managers. Normally all the managers have team meetings once a week. That's where they talk about what to do next, etc., but that day there was nothing. The following week was the same, when I came in there was nothing there, so it was just 'tidy up the shop floor'. I didn't see my manager for four hours – he disappeared, and I had no idea where he was. I asked others but they hadn't seen him. I think he took advantage of the situation.

To protect myself I brought hand sanitiser from home, but other colleagues didn't have any. We would go to the back store, take hand sanitiser, and keep it in our pockets. When we finished our shift, we would buy it. A lot of people were doing that and it's not like we were stealing. I went to the back with my friend who was worried because she has kids, but we found an opened box without any sanitisers inside. It didn't even go out to the shop floor; colleagues had taken it. Rumours were that people in the warehouse might have taken it, which seems likely since they're the first people to get the delivery. Currently, the store does not provide protective gear, and only a few colleagues, including myself, brought face masks and gloves.

**Saturday** 28 March seemed to be a mirror image of the events that took place last week. The store was pretty empty, the grocery section being particularly targeted, and the occasional 'fights' between customers. Despite still having no tasks, I volunteered to



help a friend who works in stock control, counting stock of particular products. That ended within an hour as very few products were available, despite stock control checks usually lasting around at least three hours. There were some changes in the store. Protective screens were placed at checkouts to create a shield between staff and customers. However, according to a friend who works in checkouts, this is of little use as the screen only covers the front while the sides are still exposed to customers when bagging their items. The queues were so long that they crossed multiple departments. They put labels all over the floor, stating '2 metres apart', but no one pays attention to it except in the checkout area. No one cares about the labels when grabbing items in the aisles.

30 March – The gloves just appeared now. Every week the supermarket emails us a newsletter about changes, but our managers don't tell us. Most of the stuff you have to discover or learn by yourself.

For example, they put a box of gloves on the waste cage and that's how I find out that we're to wear gloves now. No one tells me. I still bring my own gloves because what they gave us are flimsy and would rip easily. They don't really help, but at the end of the day, for those who don't have gloves that's a good thing. A colleague of mine refused to wear them, stating that cross-contamination would still be an issue through having to touch various items.

Labels were placed on the floor to ensure a two-metre gap between individuals. However, this turned out to be of little use except in queues as customers are extremely close to one another in the aisles when like scavenging what is available. At this point, the daily death toll has increased a lot. I'm a hygiene freak so I think they should have done social distancing a long time ago. I apply the distancing rule, but most of the people in my department cannot care less. They're still hugging and everything like that.

My manager is still missing. He's been missing now for two weeks. He WhatsApped me, saying: 'Jay, I'm not coming in on Monday, so when you come in on Monday just do your usual stuff'. He wanted me to look after some new staff. There is an absence of leadership. The managers really don't care. They do whatever they want. Are they all sick? No, I don't think so. I think most of the managers are lying just to get leave. One senior manager and three managers took 12 weeks off to isolate. I was not made aware of this until a friend from stock control told me. I know they are lying for sure. How is it possible that they all dropped out at the same time saying that they have symptoms or are vulnerable? Three people in my department all said, 'Oh, I'm feeling sick'. I know that some of them are not.

My manager asked me to cover the shifts of a colleague who is going to isolate herself as her daughter is ill, which meant doing extra overtime. Under normal circumstances I would've taken the opportunity. However, I declined because of not wanting to put both myself and my family at risk. His facial expressions became moody, but he understood my situation. Every colleague in produce declined his offer. I felt bad for declining, but I guess life is more important than money. I'm not going to do overtime; I don't want unnecessary risk. I'm not going to lie about feeling ill and abandon the store, but I'm also not going to do anything that puts me or my family at risk either.

### *Partial aggregation – a new normal?*

13 April – The queues are shorter now, far shorter, and have almost reached ‘regular’ levels. Security only admits a limited number of customers into the store at a time to decrease crowding and risks. We originally had 10 security staff, with at least four being present in a single day. Now the externals far outnumber our own security. The biggest surprise today was that I haven’t seen any fights between customers. I guess this can be attributed to stock levels being stable again, with many goods, except hand sanitisers, have now reached their prime. This means less time for me to talk to my friends in the store. I was slightly relieved because doing nothing all day can drive me crazy. Several colleagues and I shared the feeling of time being slow when there is nothing to do.

Both customer and staff urinals and toilets are now limited to one-at-a-time to encourage social distancing. Many chairs have been taken out in the canteen and the tables were divided for a maximum of two individuals each. There are disinfectant wipes at each of the remaining tables to encourage staff to clean the table after eating. The pool table and the table tennis table were removed temporarily.

More staff are taking isolation days. A trend which I’ve noticed for a while during the coronavirus situation was that staff usually hated to confront their managers to take days off because most managers don’t take absences very well, mine included. Managers cannot complain as isolation is now a part of government regulations. There is only one person working in the clothing department, who was working for four days in a row, and the managers aren’t there – she was really upset and felt that she was being used by her manager. She explained that everyone in her department took isolation, including her manager, as a precautionary measure, despite that they, and the individuals they’re living with, have no symptoms. If we take isolation, we get paid our contracted hours. She is contracted part time and so, if she takes isolation, she will get paid only her contracted hours. Most of her pay is actually overtime. She will lose money. I told her that her life is more important than money and she has the legal right to take isolation, but she said the 10% pay bonus that the company would provide for working in this month and the 15% discount for working certain days were important to her because she has to pay rent, and so she is doing a lot of overtime. I can relate to her because the bonus was also a great motivator for me to go to work.

Being at work gave a sense of ‘gaining freedom’. Weeks of lockdown seemed to have a psychological impact on me. I’m a very outgoing person, barely staying at home. My typical day out would be going to the gym, restaurants, the cinema and hanging out with friends. I felt glad coming to the supermarket. It felt almost like a second home! This wasn’t just me, several friends at the store also said the same thing about preferring coming to work rather than being isolated at home. One of my close friends got a job and ended up working in my department as the store recruited more temporary staff! This lifted my spirits even more. I am trying to get him a permanent position.

Despite staff being aware of the daily death toll, an individual from my department confessed that he still socialises outside of work. He still regularly goes to the park – not to exercise, but drinking with friends. He told me that a few people scolded him, but he said: ‘I don’t care what people think about me, it’s my life, I can do what I want’. I had to act up and tell him that he should stop what he was doing as that could potentially put



all the staff in our store at risk. Unfortunately, he didn't listen, and replied: 'Bro, just relax, don't take it too seriously'.

My manager has returned and seems to have gotten back to his usual, more outgoing self. He didn't even complain when I asked him to reduce my hours for the time being. I assumed this was due to temporary staff being willing to take overtime. Colleagues talk about the virus all the time. It's got to the point that it's driving me crazy. A lot of people are wearing face masks now. Some customers are wearing face shields – like riot police helmets. If this was pre-corona this would be embarrassing, but no one's thinking about it, it's how serious they take this – they look like Darth Vader.

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