

# **COVID-19's Changes to the Irish Job Market: Employees' Perspectives from Food, Retail and Construction Sectors.**

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## Declaration

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## Abstract

The negative outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic have been disproportionately distributed between nations, lower-paid workers, and sectors. In Ireland, despite targeted government interventions, individuals earning minimum wage and working within food, retail and construction sectors in particular have suffered more job losses, received less compensatory spending power, and been more exposed to the virus itself. This paper gathered data from semi-structured interviews of people working in these sectors, and performed a thematic analysis in order to answer the research question: *How have COVID-19's changes to the Irish job market impacted employment in the food, retail and construction sectors?* Results outlined a detailed relationship between the pandemic and a number of negative working experiences the participants faced: Abruptness of change, additional workload, negative client interactions, neglect of employee well-being, lack of communication, inconsistency between workplaces, employee uncertainty and lack of familiarity or satisfaction with governmental welfare schemes. Suggestions were made towards

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## List of Abbreviations

**PUP** – Pandemic Unemployment Payment

**TWSS** – Temporary Work Subsidy Scheme

**HSE** – Health Service Executive

**NCI HPERA Form** - National College of Ireland’s Human Participants Ethical Review  
Application Form



## 1.0 Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Since the COVID-19 virus spread to Ireland in February 2020, Ireland and many other countries have suffered drastic societal changes in a short period of time, many of these having a significant impact on the job market and economy (Conefrey, Hickey and McInerney, 2021). In the past two years, global research has given us more insight into the outcomes of these changes, and there have been attempts at summarizing the immediate concerns and potential risks in the event of another pandemic (Boyacı-Gündüz et al., 2021). There are potential correlations between the specific decisions made by the government regarding lockdowns and restrictions, and the following changes to welfare pay-outs, unemployment and job availability (Byrne et al., 2020; Fana, Pérez and Fernández-Macias, 2020), and the data heavily implies that certain sectors have been disproportionately affected.

### 1.2 Aims of Research

The three Irish job sectors that research show to have been very negatively affected overall are food, retail and construction. The researcher wishes to gather and analyse the opinions of the employees within these groups, regarding challenges surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses will help work towards the main research question: *How have COVID-19's changes to the Irish job market impacted employment in the food, retail and construction sectors?*

This study intends to use the interview data to explore the following research objectives in areas where the literature is currently limited:

1. Outlining employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' employment experience and difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Outlining employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' satisfaction with their employers' responses to COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland.
3. Outlining employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' future fears and concerns for their employment regarding Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Outlining employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' familiarity and satisfaction with the Irish government's Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) systems.

### **1.3 Research Context and Rationale**

COVID-19's impact on society is currently a heavily investigated area, however recent research on employment is often viewed from a quantitative perspective and may miss some nuances on an individual level. There are also more studies exploring COVID-19's changes to employment as a whole than within specific sectors – however due to the disproportionate severity of the disruptions, this may not document the intricate reality of the Irish workforce.

It is known that in Ireland, approximately 25% of the workforce have received assistance from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and an additional 19% have had their wages subsidised through the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (Tetlow, Pope and Dalton, 2020). The job losses have been tallied, and sectors that were forcefully closed by confinement restrictions suffered the greatest amount of job losses (Pérez and Fernández-Macias, 2020), particularly within food, retail, construction and to a lesser degree accommodation, which could at least 'rebrand' temporarily into work-from-home offices in order to mitigate loss of business (Pappas and Glyptou, 2021). Relative to the rest of Europe, Ireland has an above-average population percentage working in these sectors (MacCarthaigh, 2017).

It is relevant to seek personal opinions and experiences from affected workers within the sectors to better understand the internal impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the workers that are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of job security or flexibility during crisis. When analysed together with the external decisions and outcomes reported by the respective companies, there is a more complete picture of Ireland's handling of the pandemic.

The research question outlines the changes in the Irish job market within food, retail and construction sectors. Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that the interviews from the employees working in these sectors would include examples of negative outcomes such as sudden unemployment, increased workplace stress, and uncertainty for the future.

## **1.4 Outcome of Research**

The primary research question was answered, and all four research objectives were examined in detail. The results outlined a relationship between the pandemic and a number of negative working experiences the participants faced: Abruptness of change, additional workload, negative client interactions, neglect of employee well-being, lack of communication, inconsistency between workplaces, employee uncertainty and lack of familiarity or satisfaction with governmental welfare schemes. Suggestions were made towards improving future research and its practical applications.

## **1.5 Research Structure**

This study has been divided into five chapters. They are linked by the primary research topic and systematically detail the procedure, justification and results of the study.

Chapter 1, the introduction, provides an introduction and brief overview of the topic, its importance, and its supporting literature.

Chapter 2, the literature review, advances into more detailed review of prior research related to the various facets of the research topic and describes individual challenges faced by the three job sectors in focus: food, retail and construction.

Chapter 3, the methodology, outlines the method in which the study was performed, including the acquisition and demographic of participants and the procedure of collecting and analysing the data. It additionally elaborates on ethical concerns and limitations of the study.

Chapter 4, the data analysis, explains the findings from the primary research, the semi-structured interviews. It shows all the themes generated and the coding used to establish them, and connects the findings with the research objectives.

Chapter 5, the conclusions and findings, further compares the results of the study with the results of similar studies and discusses their relevance alongside key findings. It makes suggestions for use of the study's data and recommends future research to further the knowledge in the field.

References and Appendices are amended at the end of the paper.

## 2.0 Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

#### 2.1.1 Outline of Employment and Spending During Pandemic Restrictions

Numerous drastic changes have been observed in the Irish labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic. A comprehensive categorisation of pandemic unemployment demographics and sectors showcases the waves in which the job losses occurred, by time and sector, and reaches a number of approximately 620 000 total job losses by April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (Byrne et al., 2020; Fana, Pérez and Fernández-Macias, 2020). Near the beginning, in March 2020, online and internal job listings had decreased by 27.6% and the unemployment rate lay at 7.2%. It was discovered that the waves of unemployment coincided with the increasing levels of government restrictions and guidelines, and that the majority of the 127,000 job losses within the accommodation and food service activities between March 13<sup>th</sup> and April 18<sup>th</sup> 2020 happened before the non-essential mandatory closure announcement on March 27<sup>th</sup>. Within construction, wholesale and retail, most of the 167 800 job losses occurred after this announcement, see graph (Figure 1) below.

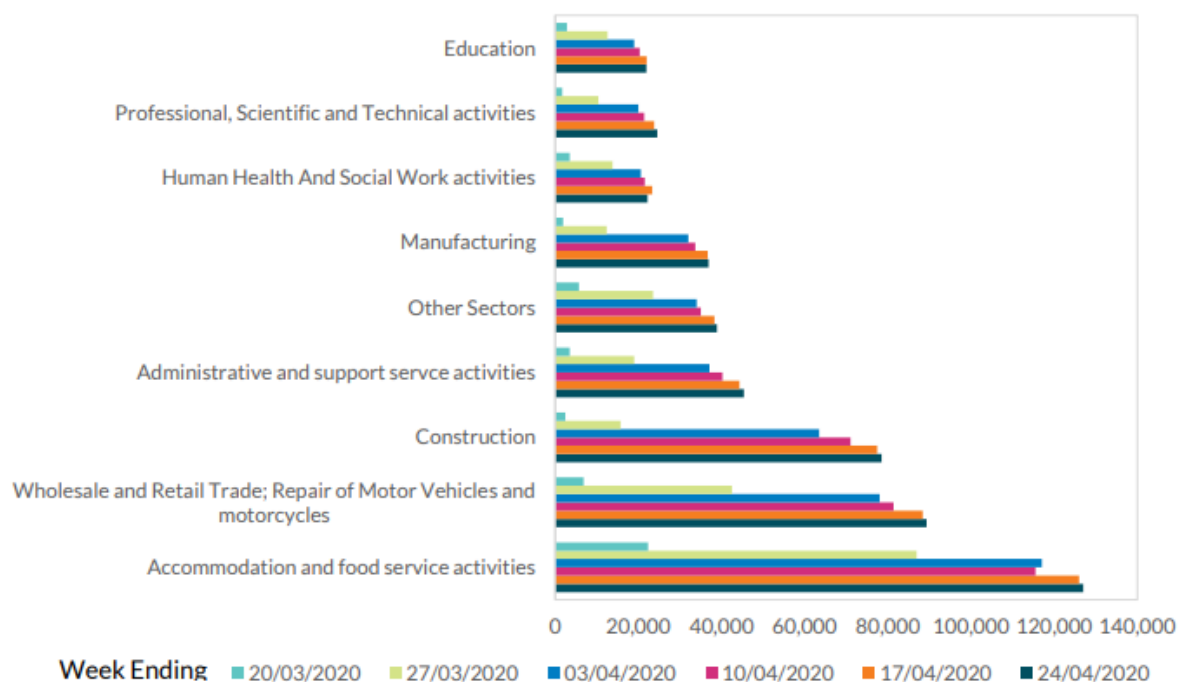


Figure 1, job losses by sector between March 13<sup>th</sup> and April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: Byrne et al, 2020, data gathered from the Department of Employment and Social Protection (DEASP).

The figure below (Figure 2) represents the 620 000 total job losses by sector, proportionally, up until data collection in April 2020. It includes only completely unemployed individuals claiming Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and not individuals claiming the Temporary Work Subsidy Scheme.

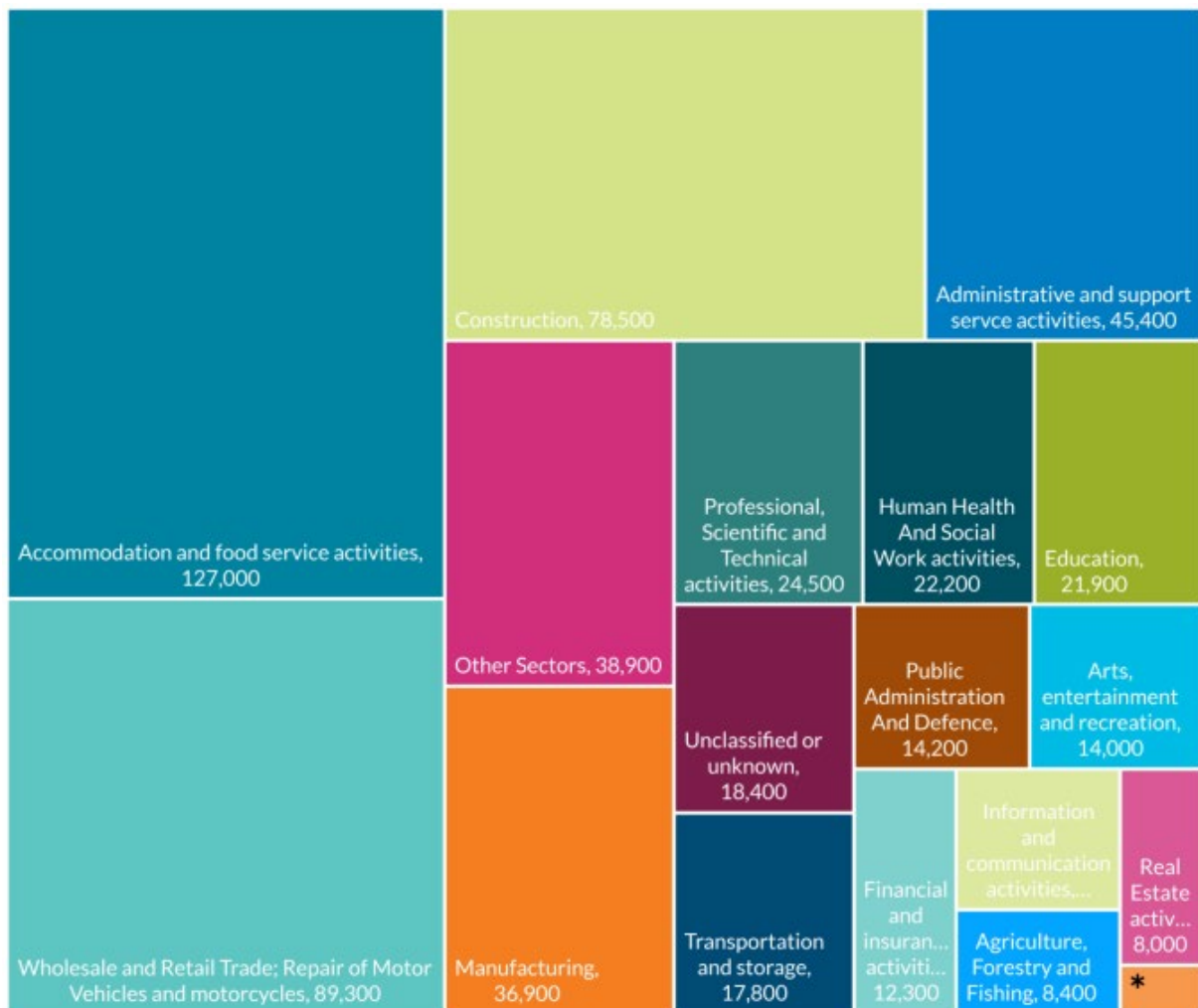


Figure 2, total job losses by sector between March and end of April 2020. Source: Byrne et al., 2020, data gathered from DEASP. \* Electricity, gas and water supply, sewage and waste management: 1900.

From April 1<sup>st</sup>, household consumption was predicted to be on average 16% lower than in 2019, and indirect tax paid per household was predicted to be approximately 25% lower, calculated from card payment data of Irish banks (Coffey et al., 2020). This was a large concern early in the pandemic, as consumer spending accounts for half of national income and was feared to have a cascading effect on the economy (Byrne et al., 2020).

From literature on the topic, the three primary channels of spending can be categorised:

- **Opportunity to Spend:** With reduced access to public locations and activities by way of lockdowns or reduced opening hours, people have moved their spending towards other, available avenues. Overall spending was still reduced, however, which has created a forced rise in savings (Greyling, Rossouw and Adhikari, 2021; Hopkins and Sherman, 2020). One example includes the music industry, in which performers and organisers of live concerts and performances suffered a large reduction in income while digital markets and downloads increased drastically alongside it. Total monthly spending on the industry as a whole dropped by about 45%, however (Denk et al., 2022).
- **Willingness to Spend:** Even prior to restrictions, a rapid decline in time spent in enclosed indoor activities or venues was observed, suggesting fear of catching the virus had an influence on expenditure (Krueger et al., 2020). It is this factor in particular, when paired with a lack of productivity within the workforce, that together create a compounding negative effect on the economy (Curdia, 2020).
- **Precautionary Saving:** When economic predictability decreases, so does consumption. On average, percentage of income set aside to savings increases alongside it, regardless of whether or not a loss of income has occurred. This may suggest that these interventions can influence more than just their targeted groups (Georgarakos and Kenny, 2022; Heffernan, Saupe and Woods, 2020).

The figure below (Figure 3) intends to describe the relationship between the three channels. Similar values were reported by those with reduced income and those with no change in income, however even the small subset of people with increased income reduced their spending.

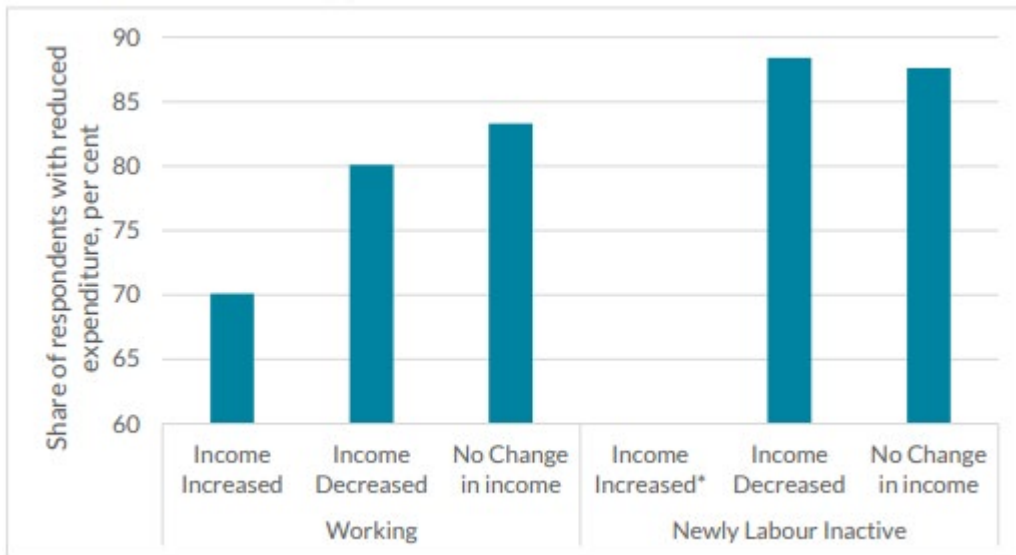


Figure 3, changes in expenditure by increase or decrease in income. Source: Byrne et al., 2020, data gathered from survey: *A Snapshot of Experiences and Expectations in a Pandemic*. \*Not enough data.

## 2.2 Government Interventions

### 2.2.1 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced as an alternative to the regular welfare payments. It was designed to prioritise speed, as it was important to ensure the money was available as soon as possible to reduce the impact of the abrupt job losses. The initial rate was at a weekly 203€, but in less than a week it was increased to 350€. Alongside the PUP, a freeze on rent increases and eviction processes was introduced to last until August 2020 (Hick and Murphy, 2021).

On September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the PUP was intended to no longer be available to new applicants, however the rise in COVID-19 cases resulted in more partial lockdowns and the deadline was instead moved to March 2021. Ireland resisted the push towards equalizing the pandemic and pre-pandemic payments and sought instead to integrate the PUP into the mainstream welfare system (Hick and Murphy, 2021). The PUP applications have been closed since January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

### **2.2.2 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme**

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, 8 days after the introduction of PUP, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was introduced. This was another governmental payment intervention distributed directly to employers, to be paid through the revenue system to employees unable to work due to restrictions, but who were still legally in employment. The amount to be paid was equal to 70% of net wages, at a maximum of 410€ per week, and the intention was to ease the re-employment that was expected to occur at the end of the restrictions (Hick and Murphy, 2021). It would last until August 31<sup>st</sup> 2020, and also became available for seasonal workers in industries such as tourism who would have had a reasonable expectation of employment outside of the pandemic.

### **2.2.3 Outcomes of Interventions**

Early data from the Economic and Social Research Institute suggests that while the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment mitigated much of the immediate loss in disposable income for at the time about 400,000 families, the Government's Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the alternative to employees with reduced or removed working hours but continued employment, failed to fully cover the financial needs of minimum-wage workers (Beirne et al., 2020). In these instances, the flat rate of the PUP would exceed the wage-dependent rate of the TWSS. As of April 30<sup>th</sup> 2020, almost 620,000 people received PUP, and a further 427,400 people received TWSS but remained linked to their employer. 20.5% of PUP claimants were below 25 years of age despite contributing 10.9% of total employment (McGann, Murphy and Whelan, 2020).

A research paper titled "Tossed to the wind? The Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Reshaping of the Welfare State" by Dukelow, Whelan and Boland (2020), gathered 161 responses to open-ended questions regarding early pandemic work disruption and attitudes towards the government's response. Recurring themes in the responses include the shock, fear and uncertainty felt by those who were abruptly unemployed or received significantly reduced working hours before any government announcement had been made.



Following the PUP and then TWSS announcements, the paper outlines the unemployed workers' surprise, where in contrast to the 2008 financial crisis in Ireland when the state stepped in immediately to provide support almost exclusively for the financial sector, they felt like they had been prioritised as individuals this time around (Dukelow, Whelan and Boland, 2020; Sikka, 2009). Additional policies ensured that migrant workers regardless of legal status had access to both TWSS and PUP without having to share personal migration details with the Department of Justice and Equality (Hick and Murphy, 2021).

Microsimulation analyses show the implementations of PUP and TWSS did not further exacerbate the income inequality gap, even though the amount of money began to lessen and was given to a narrower group of people over the course of the pandemic (O'Donoghue et al., 2021; O'Toole et al., 2020).

### **2.3 Additional Contributing Factors to Employment Issues**

McGann, Murphy and Whelan's (2020) analysis suggests the COVID-19 unemployment crisis was partially rooted in fragile or unstable welfare policies created as a response to the Great Recession, where unemployment eligibility and universal credit budgeting was reduced drastically. Low-paid workers suffered disproportionately both from a lack of savings and the increased rate of job loss in the sectors in which they were employed; food, retail and construction industries.

Analyses of minimum wage policies over the past 20 years have shown that increases in the minimum wage have not led to increased job loss among the recipients, but has reduced the working hours among some groups. More than half of Ireland's minimum wage workers work in the retail, accommodation and food sectors, three of the four most significantly impacted by the pandemic (Redmond, 2020). These employees work an average of 23 hours per week, while the PUP would grant 350€ per week irrespective of former work hours. This means the PUP would vastly outperform their gross weekly income, but was only a temporary measure.

Pandemic-imposed employment changes were also shown to have significantly increased the sedentary activity amongst the affected population (McDowell et al., 2020), which is

described as any activity that does not expend more energy than resting level. This is highly associated with negative health and well-being, as individuals who have adopted a highly sedentary lifestyle suffer from increased risk of cardio-metabolic disease and all-cause mortality (Biddle, Gorely and Stensel, 2004; Tremblay et al., 2011).

## **2.4 Restrictions and Concerns by Sector**

### **2.4.1 Food Sector**

The term 'Food Sector' covers a multitude of industries related to the processing, packaging, transport, distribution and preparation of food. This paper focuses specifically on aspects of the food industry particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions, and that had a large impact on spending and employment.

The figure below (Figure 4) is a graph which compares public spending in various sectors between March-October 2020, to a baseline of public spending in March-October 2019, listed in percent. As it uses specifically public spending data, it does not cover higher-level industrial transactions related to the processing, transport or packaging of food, and is only intended for use as an example of reductions on income and spending between consumers and the sector.



Figure 4, Public spending by sector between March-October 2020, compared to baseline from year prior. Source: : Byrne et al., 2020, data gathered from the Central Bank of Ireland's Credit and Debit Card Statistics.

The food sector is considered an essential service, and was at a higher level somewhat exempt from the lockdown measures in Ireland, in that work was to continue as usual. Despite these exemptions, three major disruptions can be identified: Impacts on agricultural production, shifts in consumer demand and disruptions to the food supply chain (Gruère and Brooks, 2021).

- **Impacts on agricultural production:** The introduction of border, internal and travel limitations led to shortages in seasonal labour, impacting the production of fruits and vegetables in particular (Lusk and Chandra, 2021).
- **Shifts in consumer demand:** The aforementioned reduction in willingness to spend among consumers, as well as the limited avenues to spend in, meant the demand

would shift further away from restaurants and catering, and towards pre-made meals and the supermarkets' raw ingredients. This would also make it more difficult to properly balance the government's subsidation efforts (Chenarides et al., 2021).

- **Disruptions to the food supply chain:** Food processors, manufacturers and packagers were particularly affected by the reductions in the workforce as a result of infections, layoffs and travel limitations. The sanitation and distancing requirements would reduce productivity and create severe concerns regarding perishable fruits and vegetables as well as the dairy and meat sectors (Malone, Schaefer and Lusk, 2020).

#### 2.4.2 Retail Sector

In this paper the term 'Retail Sector' covers industries facilitating the trade of general wares and services directly to consumers, as opposed to trade between businesses and institutions. It is the final link of the supply chain connecting producers and consumers. There is an overlap between the food and retail sectors in establishments such as bars, however for this study these establishments will be considered within the food sector only. Graphs and data in this section will separate these for clarity.

For this topic, it is extremely important to make the distinction between physical retailers and online retailers, a business often labelled E-Commerce (Tian and Stewart, 2006), as the business models faced very different challenges and opportunities during the pandemic. While the closing and suspension of business in physical stores had a significant, negative impact on profits, the convenience and lack of competition for online storefronts provided a vast increase in demand. The main challenge faced by this subsector was with international shipping, as COVID-regulations slowed down transport significantly (Acheampong, 2021; Campisi et al., 2021; Doyle et al., 2021).

The graph below (Figure 5) compares public spending in physical retail stores from March-October 2020 to a baseline of the same spending in March-October 2019, listed in percent and separated by retail establishment type. Tremendous reductions in spending occurred in every type of physical retail shop from March-June 2020, whereafter they either started

equalizing themselves back to the baseline comparison, or in two cases – the sale of books/newspapers as well as household equipment – even bouncing back and seeing a significant increase in spending compared to the previous year.



Figure 5, public spending in retail stores between March-October 2020, compared to a baseline from the year prior. Source: Byrne et al., 2020, data gathered from CSO, Retail Sales Index.

In March 2020, the retail industry was deemed non-essential and physical storefronts were completely closed down, preventing business entirely and either laying off workers or leaving them employed but at reduced pay and no working hours. This was done in order to reduce human contact and thereby reduce the spread of COVID-19, and is what is considered a ‘lockdown’, where only essential businesses are allowed to remain in operation (Cazelles et al., 2021; Kennelly et al., 2020).

This first lockdown occurred in late March 2020, and was gradually lifted until October 2020, when another one was imposed due to rising cases and deaths. In late December 2020, yet another lockdown was imposed, and this one was to include the suspension of schools as well. It was considered one of the strictest lockdowns in Europe until its gradual release in May 2021 (Brodeur et al., 2021).

### 2.4.3 Construction Sector

The construction sector encompasses three major industries:

- The Building Construction Industry, with workers involved specifically in the construction of buildings for all purposes, typically residences and townhouses.
- The Heavy Construction Industry, which involves industrial buildings and other heavy construction such as bridges, roads, railroads, sewers and maritime construction.
- The Special Trade Construction Industry, which covers the remaining contractors who perform specialized work, maintenance or other services on or around construction, but specifically excluding heavy construction. This is a very wide category that spans electricians, plumbers, painters, water/fireproofing work and fencing, for instance.

All three major industries were considered essential services, and allowed to remain in operation but forced to comply with the HSE(Health Service Executive) and government's COVID-19 restrictions from the 18th of March 2020, and lasted until the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, where they were instead incorporated into the less intrusive general health and safety management arrangements. The HSE included a comprehensive list of measures to be taken in the sector workplaces in order to reduce the spread of the virus, including general hygiene, travel measures, preventing cross-contamination, social distancing and the sanitation of spaces following suspected or confirmed cases of the virus (Construction Industry Federation, 2020).

A study utilising interviews and questionnaire surveys related to challenges within the construction sector during COVID-19 found that the most prominent impacts involved the suspension of projects, labour impact regarding job loss, time cost and financial chain implications (Gamil and Alhagar, 2020).

In Ireland, the construction sector is primarily private, meaning most construction-related organisations are owned and managed by individuals or private companies, or are independent contractors. The government hires these private organisations to perform work for the public sector, for instance in the construction of hospitals or bridges (Ayat and Kang,

2021). Between March-April 2020, just under 80 000 people had lost their jobs in the private construction sector and were claiming the PUP (Byrne et al., 2020), though this number may have been lower had the industry been leaning more towards a public one (Chinn et al., 2020).

The Special Trade Construction Industry typically operates in smaller teams or even just individuals, and was as a result not slowed down as much by the requirement to follow HSE guidelines (Biswas et al., 2021). Additionally, in both Europe and America, the demand for home renovation and refurbishment almost doubled by March 2020 compared to the year prior, providing secure work for many independent Special Trade Construction contractors during the lockdowns (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). One theory for this trend is that with the lack of avenues for spending and safe investment options, consumers increased their desire to have work done on their own homes instead (Bentall et al., 2021).

## **2.5 Conclusion of Literature Review**

While the labour market is no longer in immediate decline, Ireland may benefit from observing certain demographics' views of the pandemic's potential long-term effects to economy, labour and welfare as well as their opinions on which policies implemented in Ireland have had the most positive impact on the labour market and economy, particularly for the young and underpaid. This study is qualitative and narrowed down to workers within the retail, construction and food industry in order to gather collective feelings on the topic from those most affected. The research title is: COVID-19's Changes to the Irish Job Market: Employees' Perspectives From Retail, Construction and Food Sectors.

## 3.0 Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to detail the method in which the research will be carried out, including information about participants such as acquisition, quantity and career background, the interview questions or outline that will be followed, and which ethical considerations have been adhered to for the well-being of everyone involved in the study. The section also reiterates the goal of the research, and explains each research objective's importance with regards to gaps in the literature. It will touch briefly on the research philosophy and approach.

### 3.2 Research Question and Objectives

As it is a very recent occurrence, more research of changes and difficulties in the job market during COVID-19 is beneficial, and it may help shape future regulations and preventative measures for country-wide crises.

The overall aim of this research is to outline the COVID-19-imposed changes in the Irish job market within food, retail and construction sectors specifically. Studies show these are sectors that have suffered disproportionate amounts of employment loss, job uncertainty and work-related stress, and it is expected the responses to the interviews conducted during this study will include examples of these aforementioned negative outcomes, and potentially grant insight into the causes. The question devised is: *How have COVID-19's changes to the Irish job market impacted employment in the food, retail and construction sectors?*

This study uses the interview data to explore the following four primary research objectives that have been deemed useful by previous literature, and that together comprise many of the expected problems imposed by the pandemic. The intent is to create a more complete picture of the workers' experiences by analysing the themes within the responses to these questions:



### **3.2.1 To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' employment experience and difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

It is important to discuss contemporary experiences on an individual level as well as on a national level, in order to pinpoint the largest influenceable factors contributing to loss of general life satisfaction. This will establish a priority for interventions and action plans for future events similar to the COVID-19 Pandemic. While only 22% of the Irish workforce was considered essential, the pandemic directly led to both essential and non-essential workers experiencing significant changes to their personal and interpersonal lives (Redmond and McGuinness, 2020).

### **3.2.2 To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' satisfaction with their employers' responses to COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland.**

The governmental guidelines for pandemic-related measures were introduced on a sector-by-sector basis, but the actual implementation of these measures within individual business were not done equally in either speed or effectiveness (Amin-Chowdhury et al., 2021; Durand et al., 2021). Much of the literature uses self-reported data from the individual businesses or 'averaging' of nationwide employee feedback in order to evaluate the companies' performances, but specific, individual feedback on a smaller scale is also important (Kennelly et al., 2020).

### **3.2.3 To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' future fears and concerns for their employment regarding Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

In less than two months of governmental restrictions and lockdown in Ireland, 620 000 people had lost their jobs entirely, and 427 400 were 'furloughed' on the TWSS and only receiving 70% of their usual income (Byrne et al., 2020). For many, the sheer speed at which they had been removed from their workplaces and forced to rely on social welfare has led to stress and depression (Hyland et al., 2020; Karatzias, et al., 2020). This mass unemployment may breed fear and uncertainty among the population, as it sets the precedent that it is not possible to predict when another event may occur that could strip people from their jobs again.

### **3.2.4 To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' familiarity and satisfaction with the Irish government's Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) systems.**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, PUP was introduced as an alternative to the regular unemployment welfare payments, and on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 TWSS arrived alongside it, as a way to maintain employment even if the workplace had temporarily ceased operations, but at only 70% of the original payment. Not everybody received the payments, and there was a slight skew in claimant age. 20.5% of PUP claimants were below 25 years of age despite contributing 10.9% of total employment (McGann, Murphy and Whelan, 2020).

The Irish government has been praised for the unusually high monetary rate of the payment plans relative to the rest of Europe at a weekly 203€ and quick follow-through in raising the payments to 350€ once deemed necessary (Hick and Murphy, 2021), however it was still a significant loss in spending power for a very large proportion of the population (McGann, Murphy and Whelan, 2020). For individuals earning minimum wage, which is disproportionately common within the food, retail and construction sectors (O'Farrell, 2015), it was paradoxically more financially beneficial for employees to lose their jobs and receive PUP rather than maintain employment within the TWSS (Hick and Murphy, 2021). This study wishes to gather even more data about the reception of the government interventions, in order to work towards improvements and determine whether vulnerable parts of the Irish population have faith in their leaders' abilities to take care of them in the future.

## **3.3 Research Philosophy and Approach**

Research sets the foundation for evidence-based decision making on all scales. Literature uses the term epistemology to describe phenomenon known to be true, while appreciating the human perception's inability to assess truth objectively (Raelin, 2007).

Positivism is the philosophical idea that only these objective truths hold any merit, as the social world exists externally. It suggests the existence of 'social facts' which directly control

an individual's response to situations, and that the goal of social research must be to accurately outline which pre-existing laws of reality are the deciding factors of human behaviour. (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1994). The preferred approaches to positivist studies is using large-scale questionnaires, surveys and official statistics, due to their reliability and easily generalised nature.

The positivist perceptions are challenged in a number of implications by the interpretivist approach, which is the philosophical design this study follows. These primary implications and topics of debate are:

- Independence: Can the observer be truly independent of what is observed?
- Value-freedom: By choosing a topic of research to study as well as the procedure for it, has the researcher already expressed a bias?
- Causality: Should the aim of all social science be to identify causal explanations derived from fundamental laws?
- Operationalisation: Can all concepts be operationalised in a way that we can measure objectively?
- Reductionism: Are all problems more easily understood when reduced to their simplest possible explanations?
- Generalisation: In how wide a scope does social research explain human behaviour?

Interpretivism reverses the causal approach set by positivism, claiming that instead of a rigid 'social truth' insuppressibly shaping the actions of individuals, it is the individuals which reshape the abstract societal laws based on internal reactions and their perceptions of reality. In an interpretivist approach, the goals of research must be a deep, empathetic understanding of individual lives in an attempt to explain causes of behaviour (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Common approaches to interpretivist studies include unstructured interviews and observation of participants in simulated scenarios. The construction of themes used in this study adhere to the interpretivist methodology.

### **3.4 Research Design**

This study's research questions are based entirely on a contemporary problem faced by our society, and is related to subjective experiences and opinions on the problem's impact within specific communities. This means the research must take an interpretivist, qualitative approach, where the aim is to understand and analyse these subjective experiences in order to generalise them using a framework. By finding similarities and themes in the responses from the chosen demographic, inferences can be made on future responses to similar problems, which creates a foundation for developing solutions in the future.

Thematic Analysis is a widely used method of qualitative analysis that can be applied across a range of research questions and topics. One benefit is that it does not require advanced theoretical or technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches, and is therefore significantly more accessible to laypeople or undergraduates in particular (Clarke and Braun, 2014). The analysis was developed after reviewing numerous qualitative studies performed using interviews, and it was noted the search for themes in the text had become a natural procedure even without a rigid methodological framework to follow. Health, social, and psychological sciences have reported the highest reliability in their use of thematic analysis, which grants this study a good baseline (Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

While employing thematic analysis, the researchers inadvertently become very involved parts of the process, as the act of choosing and locating themes to encode is ultimately based on subjective opinions. This emphasises the importance and responsibility of the researchers to maintain and document an objective viewpoint by outlining their own potential biases and limitations within the study.

### **3.5 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews**

Data was collected through individual semi-structured audio interviews with each participant. This is an interview style which loosely follows an interview schedule (Appendix B), but prioritises encouraging the participant to discuss their more in-depth thoughts and feelings on specific topics, should they deem it appropriate to their situation. The interview did not need to follow the order listed in the interview schedule, but still touched upon every topic.

The questions within the interview outline were derived directly from the four research objectives, and designed to allow the participants to share their experiences on these topics. Only one question was asked at a time, and the follow-up question listed in the interview schedule was only asked if the participant did not elaborate on their own, and if continuing the dialogue was relevant. Additionally, the interview requests basic demographic information in order to provide a more complete image of the interviewee. The interviews were controlled by the interviewer, but with the intention of allowing free conversation, section skipping or backtracking for a more natural and comfortable flow.

Some interviews were held in person, and others over the internet, as per the participants' convenience. When performed over the internet, interviews were recorded and transcribed through Microsoft Teams, an online video conference program which provides automatic transcription and records audio, with the researcher proofreading and correcting the transcription manually after the interview should it have been inaccurate. When performed in person, Google's Live Transcribe, a mobile phone application, were used instead in order to save a transcription of the interview. Names of people, companies and specific locations were replaced by pseudonyms in order to ensure privacy. Care has been taken to maintain use of the programs listed in this section within their licensing.

### **3.6 Sampling**

In order to meet the inclusion criteria, the participants were required to have worked in Ireland within one of the three sectors relevant to the research: food, retail or construction, as of the beginning of March 2020. This is after it became clear Ireland would be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and possibly require measures to control it, but before the lockdowns and rapid unemployment processes.

Participants were gathered through convenience and snowball sampling as well as the researcher's own professional network in construction, in order to locate multiple participants for each sector. As participants were gathered and interviewed one by one, the researcher took care to balance the collection effort in order to ensure relatively equal representation between the three sectors. The social media application LinkedIn provided a convenient way to seek the relevant employees and begin a conversation within a short timeframe. The

consent form (Appendix A) was sent to potential candidates by email and through social media, alongside a message requesting participation. The process of arranging a time for the interview would begin after a positive response was received to the initial message. The consent form had to be signed by the participants before the interview could begin, and it was discussed at the beginning of the interview itself, as listed in the interview outline (Appendix B), emphasising the voluntary nature of the study and the participants’ rights to skip any questions or withdraw entirely at any time. Assorted literature on data saturation and information power suggests a floor of 12 participants may be adequate for this field of research pertaining economy and labour (Sandelowski, 1995; Boddy, 2016; Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016), and the founders of thematic analysis suggest 6-15 is adequate for a Master’s or Professional Doctorate Project (Clarke and Braun, 2013). These are manageable numbers for a single interviewer without assistants or funding.

### 3.6.1 Participant Profiles

This table (Table 1) displays anonymized participant data, including recoded name, gender, job title, age and sector. 3 interviewees were found for each relevant sector, totalling 9 participants.

Number	Name	Age	Gender	Job title	Sector
1	Barry	31	Male	Construction Engineer	Construction
2	William	40	Male	Professional Painter	Construction
3	Paul	26	Male	Front Desk Associate	Retail
4	Christine	26	Female	Waiter	Food
5	John	29	Male	Bartender	Food
6	Claire	32	Female	Baker	Food
7	David	20	Male	Sales Assistant	Retail
8	Sarah	22	Female	Bookseller	Retail
9	Nina	25	Female	Electrician	Construction

*Table 1. Simplified participant profiles.*

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

In order to ensure transparency regarding data analysis of qualitative studies, it is important that the researcher makes their pre-existing beliefs and assumptions of the topic known, as it may subconsciously influence the methods in which the data is analysed (Letts et al., 2007; Twining, Heller, Nussbaum and Tsai, 2017). The researcher is not and has not been in employment in the retail, food or construction industries within Ireland, however they have worked within the construction industry abroad, for a company who has an Irish branch as well, with which they have corresponded with. They were not working within the country at the beginning of the March 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns in Ireland, and failed to find employment in Ireland until June 2021, therefore no PUP nor TWSS was earned.

The interviews were recorded and then the transcriptions were checked and analysed. The full data gathered was encoded and reviewed using Thematic Analysis, a model for use in qualitative research involving 6 recursive steps of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2014):

1. Become familiar with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define themes
6. Write-up

The researcher must achieve proper familiarisation with the data in order to encode labels, or 'keywords' related to the broad research topic. These keywords are grouped into wider themes, which are then independently reviewed to ensure their content encompasses the overall responses to the interview questions, and have a coherent story. This is considered an inductive approach, as the findings are developed further from the data (Thomas, 2006).

### **3.8 Ethical Concerns**

To some, unemployment, disease and societal change may be sensitive topics. Before collecting the data for the study, the researcher had to await a verdict from the National College of Ireland's Human Participants Ethical Review Application Form (NCI HPERA form). This application covers potential ethical risks as well as ensures the research proposal meets a minimum requirement of confidentiality and data protection. Participants must sign a consent form (Appendix A) before the interview begins, and it is also brought up at the start of the interview should any questions or uncertainty about content arise. An ethics application checklist is amended (Appendix C), detailing the NCI HPERA form's considerations that research conducted by students of NCI must adhere to.

### **3.9 Limitations**

This study suffered from severe time constraints as well as a complete lack of funding. The participant quantity for qualitative studies often becomes a compromise; the more data the better, but this becomes too significant an investment of time.

Qualitative data is often influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by personal experiences or values, which is most easily counteracted by having multiple researchers or assistants also performing the encoding, neither of which were available for this research. The researcher's familiarity with the construction sector but lack of familiarity with the food and retail sectors may have prevented a fully neutral, objective analysis across all three sectors.

Studies involving entire nations are difficult to acquire fully generalizable samples for (Flere and Lavrič, 2008), and this study was only able to acquire 9 participants to represent three large Irish job sectors containing over one million people, or 0.0009% representation. Out of the three participants from the construction industry, two were from the special trade subsector and one was from the building subsector, while none were from the heavy construction subsector. This may skew results.

Many of the experiences this study wishes to analyse took place over two years ago, which means the responses may be less reliable than those taken two years earlier due to memory decay (Brewin, Andrews and Mickes, 2020).



### **3.10 Conclusion of Methodology**

The methodology section provides an overview of the main research questions and their justifications for study, and grant an overview of data collection, sampling and analysis while including prior research on the topics. It highlights the importance of approval from a well-established ethical committee and how the study ensures to keep its participants safe and comfortable.

A number of limitations have burdened the study by reducing the value of its findings, but great care was taken to treat the subject with care and respect in order to preserve academic integrity.

## **4.0 Chapter 4: Data Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction to Data Analysis**

The full data gathered was encoded and reviewed using Thematic Analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2014), a model for use in qualitative research involving 6 recursive steps of analysis. The researcher must achieve proper familiarisation with the data in order to encode labels, or ‘keywords’ related to the broad research topic, before grouping the keywords into broader themes. These themes are then independently reviewed to ensure their content encompasses the overall responses to the interview questions, and can tell a coherent story that either confirms similarities or differences in the participants’ responses. This chapter provides an overview of the participant profiles, then the findings of the thematic analysis in order of their relevant research objective.

### **4.2 Participants’ Profiles**

The nine participants range from age 20 to 40, with an average of just under 28 years old, five of them were male and the remaining four were female. Every participant was or had been working at some point between the period of March 2020 and March 2022. There were three interviewees in each of the three sectors this study examines:

The food sector is represented by Christine(26F) the Waiter, John(29M) the Bartender and Claire(32F) the Baker.

The retail sector is represented by Paul(26M) the Front Desk Associate, David(20M) the Sales Assistant and Sarah(22F) the Bookseller.

The construction sector is represented by Barry(31M) the Construction Engineer, William(40M) the Professional Painter and Nina(25F) the Electrician.

All participants were originally from Ireland with the exception of John who is Australian and Nina who is Swedish, however their professional careers did begin in Ireland. Each interview took on average 15 minutes to complete.

More information is available in the appendix (Appendix D).

### **4.3 Research Objective 1: To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors’ employment experience and difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Every single participant experienced a noticeable change in their workdays as a result of the changes and governmental restrictions brought in by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were distinct differences between the types of changes that occurred by sector, and even within the sectors themselves. The participants reported an overall negative experience in several aspects regarding the changes themselves, the additional workload or stress this brought, and the new dynamic that occurred between themselves and clients.

Themes	Codes
Abrupt changes to daily operations	The nature and facilitation of changes, confusion, lack of preparedness, conflict, suddenness
Additional workload and stress	More responsibilities, less time, extra work
Client interactions	Stressed customers, Calm customers, No interactions

*Table 2. Themes and coding for research objective 1.*

#### **4.3.1 Abrupt changes to daily operations**

‘Change’ was the most universally present response when asked about employment experiences and difficulties during COVID-19. All nine participants explained in detail the major changes that happened in their workplace from March 2020 and onwards, that they had not experienced at any point in their careers prior to the pandemic. The sectors selected for this study were all notably unable to work from home, however many had family members who did, which changed their home dynamic as well.

The sheer abruptness of the restrictions was mentioned in several interviews; David, who worked at an electrical store in Crumlin stated: “Early on in March(2020) we were obviously expecting something to happen at work given all the news in the papers and on TV from the weeks before, but we were never even told by our managers what to imagine or prepare for at work. Then one morning a week later we get a massive email giving us a list of guidelines to follow starting immediately”.

Barry, working on a construction site quipped on: “We had this big team meeting at the site, they said we had a whole new system when it came to sharing tools, working indoors and even how we ate lunch, one lad asks yeah so when do we start all this and the man goes ‘yesterday’”.

#### **4.3.2 Additional workload and stress**

It is well-documented that changes in the workplace often leads to short-term stress (Cunningham et al., 2002; Lazarus, 2020; Mujtaba and McCartney, 2009), but a majority of the responses to the interview question could pinpoint additional stressors that had occurred as a result of extra responsibilities, workload or a reduced staff rotation. This is distinct from the previous theme in that instead of having different daily tasks than before, extra tasks were added on top of participants’ workload, giving them less time but more work.

William the painter mentioned “While we used to be two to three people for a job depending on size, we were suddenly expected to only work alone or in pairs, and the excuse from the boss was social distancing. But he’d have another job lined up for us two days later, meaning even though we’re paid by the hour we’d still have to just hurry up and work faster”.

William’s experience was not unique among his industry, as demand for home projects and renovation increased significantly as many families decided to invest in their homes during the lockdowns (Coffey et al., 2020; Waldron, 2022).

Sarah working as a bookseller and David also in the retail industry both reported additional workloads related to sanitation and managing customer flow in establishments with reduced capacity. Sarah said: “Sometimes there would only be two of us in the shop, but we still had to do extra work like watching how many people were in the building and sanitise returned or swapped products while still manning the till”.

Nina the electrician was the only participant to report that there was no change in workload, and Paul, uniquely, reported there was less work than usual at the gym early on in the pandemic: “We were meant to be cleaning the machines anyway, but there were less people in the gym since we couldn’t host big workout groups anymore, so that actually meant less cleaning overall. (...) They (Personal Trainers) had to do twice as many sessions with smaller groups, but barely anyone came into the shop, so I sat around most of the day”.

### **4.3.3 Client interactions**

The pandemic restrictions forced several workplaces to interact with clients differently, for the sake of public safety. This theme had mixed responses: while some considered the new dynamic to be more pleasant than before, others stated that customers had become more difficult or even volatile. David mentions following the restriction guidelines: “We were only allowed a certain amount of people in the store, so we’d have to lock the doors and let two people in, two people out and so on. Sometimes it would be raining and the customers, especially older ones would be furious and start shouting at us to let them in, but you know, we had rules to follow”.

The bakery Claire worked at shut down their shop for regular customer use at some point during the pandemic, completely removing face-to-face client interactions but continuing business as usual: “Our physical shop closed, but we kept on baking every day and had delivery drivers on bikes and sometimes vans bring the bread directly to the customers or other shops. (...) There was a number on the door you could call to basically order bread, or you could do it from our website which was completely reworked”.

Electrician Nina states “I usually start work in the early afternoon, and before the pandemic there might be only one person at home while I was there, and they clearly had to take time off work just to let me in! I would just do what I came for as quick as possible and leave, but after most offices made people work from home there would often be half a family there all day, and they were much friendlier and more relaxed than I was used to”.

#### 4.4 Research Objective 2: To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors’ satisfaction with their employers’ responses to COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland.

The second research objective ties closely in with the first, as the employers’ handling of the situation was often the direct cause of many of the stressors or additional workloads reported previously. These themes often came up while the participants were talking about additional workloads, wondering why the shops or businesses had not considered reduced working hours or additional staff to make up for the increased work load and demand. There was an overall negative reception of the employers’ decisions, though some empathised with them considering the uncertainty of the pandemic and the lack of a ‘tried-and-true’ solution that would work for everyone.

Themes	Codes
Employer prioritising business over employee well-being	Bad conditions but work continued, at risk of virus, too high expectations
Empathy towards employer	Unknown situation, trying their best, clever ideas
Inconsistency between workplaces	Unfairness, increased demand, no communication

Table 3. Themes and coding for research objective 2.

##### 4.4.1 Employer prioritising business over employee well-being

Most participants felt their needs were pushed aside to allow for the continued operation of the business or shop under suboptimal conditions, and some spoke about this alongside their concerns about additional workload. They did not consider it fair that the quality of their work was expected to be at the same level as before the pandemic, when they also had even more responsibilities.

Some were afraid of their own health being at risk when exposed to a large number of customers every day. Christine, working as a waiter at a restaurant, said: “Just before we closed down for a second time, there was a week or two where we were working as usual with our masks, in a building full of people who have to take their own masks off to eat. It stressed me out because I felt like the owners didn’t really care that we might have a much higher risk of catching the virus, they just wanted to open back up as soon as possible”.

Sarah stated, while talking about client interaction: “So many people would ignore all the signs and just touch everything, it was disgusting. Sometimes the customers and I couldn’t hear each other very well and their solution was to take off their masks and try to shout under the separating plastic barrier, it’s no wonder two of my colleagues got sick working there. They should have closed it down much earlier”.

#### **4.4.2 Empathy towards employer**

A few participants, while making their newfound struggles in the workplace quite clear, were either happy with or could at least sympathise with their employers’ decisions regarding business operations. Notably and previously quoted Claire had their bakery shut down for regular use and instead temporarily adopted a delivery-based business model, to which she said: “Overall, that part was actually a nice change of pace since they didn’t expect me to change my working hours and I could continue doing almost exactly what I was used to doing. The guy who usually worked the till was instead taking phone calls for orders and updating stock on the website, which he told me he was happy with too”.

John, working at a bar just before the first and second lockdowns, stated: “I’m not super happy about the way they (The owners/managers) handled it or anything, but to be fair they also didn’t know what (...) was going on as it was all new for them too. So no, I don’t think I would have handled it too differently, but I would maybe have had more transparency with the employees”.

Paul answered the question briefly: “Yeah management actually did well I think, they kept the place open when it was still reasonable to keep it open and shut down when there was talk of closing the gyms”.

#### **4.4.3 Inconsistency between workplaces**

A minor theme that also appeared to have an influence on whether or not the participants were satisfied with their employers' decisions, was whether the decisions were similar to other businesses within the sector. Two participants, Barry and David, mentioned this explicitly. Barry said: "I remember at some point the foreman told us the restrictions would technically allow us to keep working, but that almost all the other companies were going to close temporarily and put the workers on paid leave. I was waiting to hear the same for us but it never happened".

David said: "The situation with the customers got way worse for us when the only other electronics shop in the area closed temporarily and we had twice as many people to deal with. Some of us were basically begging the manager to close the shop but they just didn't".

#### **4.5 Research Objective 3: To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors' future fears and concerns for their employment regarding Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

A very common theme within the interviews was the participants' concerns regarding their own job security both during the pandemic and afterwards, should another major event occur that the country is not prepared for. This research objective encompasses specifically employment-related concerns and not government interventions, which are instead examined in the 4<sup>th</sup> and final research objective.



Themes	Codes
Employment uncertainty	Lack of communication, mismatch of news and internal channels, business seems poor
Inadequate compensation	Working for two at the price of one, reduced bonus,

*Table 4. Themes and coding for research objective 3.*

#### **4.5.1 Employment uncertainty**

Five of the nine participants expressed genuine worry and uncertainty about whether they would be able to remain in employment during or after the lockdowns, or whether they might be placed in a similar situation in the future. Employment uncertainty is considered a very significant source of stress (Mantler et al., 2005), which may explain its frequent mentions during the interviews.

This experience was brought up most frequently by the participants with variable working hours or ‘shift’ work, commonly used within the food or retail industry. Sarah, David, John, Christine and Paul all explicitly mentioned employment uncertainty, which is all three of the participants representing the retail industry and two of the three participants representing the food industry, with the exception of Claire. By her own words, it is likely Claire’s bakery’s shift in business model was what made her experience stand out.

In the words of John: “We hear the announcements of another potential lockdown on the news but our managers haven’t said anything and there’s no roster for after the weekend. Do we come in, do we stay home, do we have a job?”.

Sarah stated: “Eventually the shifts became incredibly unreliable, people wouldn’t show up and others would have to cover even though they didn’t know themselves which days they would be working on yet. We were all kinda just waiting for the email that would tell us the place was shutting down permanently”.

The overall employment uncertainty brought on by COVID-19 also heavily influenced younger workers’ goals for the future as their financial well-being plummeted (Lajoie, O’Neill and West, 2020).

#### **4.5.2 Inadequate compensation**

Another theme that was brought up very frequently while talking about other aspects of work during the pandemic was the insufficient compensation offered, usually none, towards employees who had been practically forced to work two roles. This theme is also slightly related to the 4<sup>th</sup> research objective, but will focus on payment sought during active employment.

The topic was rarely brought up independently, as the loose interview schedule did not have it listed, but it is naturally one of the most important aspects of a career. Previous analysis mentions that participants from the specialised trade construction sector had a much higher number of available jobs and therefore a higher expected ceiling of pay, but in an aforementioned quote by William, this does not always translate to better pay or working conditions: “He’d (the boss) have another job lined up for us two days later, meaning even though we’re paid by the hour we’d still have to just hurry up and work faster”.

John stated: “Massive new workload and to no surprise, same pay as before. Less, actually, we got fewer tips when there were fewer people allowed into the bar and for shorter timeframes”. He mentions later in the interview that “The tips picked up again in bursts as the bars opened up again for short periods of time, but it was nothing we could ever rely on”.

#### **4.6 Research Objective 4: To outline employees in the food, retail and construction sectors’ familiarity and satisfaction with the Irish government’s PUP and TWSS systems.**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, PUP was introduced as an alternative to the regular welfare payments. The initial rate was at a weekly 203€, but in less than a week it was increased to 350€.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, TWSS was introduced. This was another governmental payment intervention distributed directly to employers, to be paid through the revenue system to employees unable to work due to restrictions, but who were still legally in employment. The

amount to be paid was equal to 70% of net wages, at a maximum of 410€ per week. This failed to fully cover the financial needs of minimum-wage workers (Beirne et al., 2020).

It quickly becomes clear that financially, PUP is a far better option for minimum wage workers, at the cost of ‘continued-but-suspended-employment’. This suspended employment still does not guarantee full employment when business operations resume, though many workers did not even get the choice (Gibbons, 2021).

Themes	Codes
Level of familiarity with interventions	Explained well, explained poorly, no mention, no offer
Satisfaction with payment value and equality of policy	Minimum wage, no guarantee of employment

*Table 5. Themes and coding for research objective 4.*

#### **4.6.1 Level of familiarity with interventions**

Only four of the participants expressed detailed knowledge about either PUP, TWSS, or both. Three participants responded that they had some surface-level knowledge, and two participants reported they had hardly any knowledge at all. This is a concerning statistic when taken from the three work sectors in Ireland with the lowest pandemic job retention and a country with a peak of 18% total workforce reliance on government schemes in June 2020 (Müller, Schulten and Drahokoupil, 2022).

Two of the participants who were well-informed about the interventions had heard about them from their employers, and the other two had heard about them from the news and looked up more information online. John explained “Some of our colleagues were laid off early and told how to get the PUP (...) They should have made sure to explain it to everyone, we found out quickly from the news of course but still”.

Barry said: “Many of us weren’t sure at the time, we thought our current site would be shut down and we’d keep being paid like the guys on the other sites, but they never told us it would be at a much lower pay”.

#### **4.6.2 Satisfaction with payment value and equality of policy**

Five of the participants answered in variations of “probably”, when asked if they believed PUP and TWSS were fair to everyone, or that the pay was adequate. Claire and Nina, who are included in those five, had surface level knowledge of the schemes. Nina responded: “Maybe, I don’t really know what to compare it to, but I know it has helped a lot of people and that’s probably the point”.

Paul, who had previously also been empathetic towards his employer’s handling of the situation, responded: “It (PUP) gave a much higher amount than regular unemployment did, which is nice of a country to do, you know, make us feel like they’re doing more than the bare minimum towards all the people who don’t have jobs anymore but still need food and to pay rent. I think rent was even frozen some places which is great”.

#### **4.7 Conclusion of Data Analysis**

This chapter provided an overview of the nine participants’ working experience during the pandemic, with comparisons to pre-pandemic experiences and other sector expertise. A majority of the experiences were shared among several participants, further supporting the validity of the chosen themes and the interview schedule used to gather the data. Responses were varied and could briefly cover each of the four research objectives, which has also brought the study closer to answering the primary research question. Many of the experiences reported in the interviews are supported by scientific data or literature on the topic, further reinforcing the generalisability.

## 5.0 Chapter 5: Conclusions and Findings

### 5.1 Summary of results

The aim of this study was to provide an overview of an Irish sample's employment-related experiences as directly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample chosen to examine was from the food, retail and construction sectors, as these are the three sectors to have suffered the highest amounts of employment loss, job uncertainty and work-related stress, and are therefore the sectors which would benefit the most from targeted interventions and unemployment policies. The literature review assisted in narrowing down four research objectives which together helped produce ten relevant themes from the interviews. These themes answered the research question by providing a varied overview of the food, retail and construction sectors' employment experiences during COVID-19. The rest of this chapter explains the study's findings in further detail, their potential significance, and makes suggestions for future research.

It is important to assess social topics using both broad and narrow research in order to portray the reality of a situation more accurately. If a study is too narrow, it may be difficult to find and analyse data on the subject, while if it is too broad the information may be overwhelming or not useful. This study bridges the gap between the two, though could benefit from being narrower.

The findings provide value by contributing more detailed data on the employment experience during Ireland's COVID-19 crisis, on the sectors other literature advises to focus on. The recurring themes found within the participants' responses are separated into four main topics that each represent potential stressors or negative experiences within the working environment, which provides excellent starting points for specialised interventions.

Based on the literature from which the four research objectives were based, it was hypothesized that the interviews from the employees working in the food, retail and construction sectors would include examples of negative outcomes such as sudden unemployment, increased workplace stress, and uncertainty for the future. All of these factors appeared frequently within the results, and the participants provided plentiful data to assist in

pinpointing the causes. In some cases, the participants provided examples of workplace ingenuity such as flexible shifts in an organisation's business model, that were not mentioned in previous literature but had notable positive effects on the working experience despite the otherwise universally negative effects of the pandemic.

One theme that was brought up particularly often was the additional workload and stress imposed by the restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants reported a number of extra responsibilities related to sanitation, client management and covering shifts for colleagues who were sick or had left the job. The refusal to hire additional employees, reduce opening hours, or facilitate any other processes that would contribute to lessening the workload, made participants feel like their employers were neglecting them for profit.

This is a factor that severely lowers employees' trust towards employers, which is one of the most significant contributors to workplace well-being (Helliwell and Huang, 2011; Hughes et al., 2018). Trust is difficult to rebuild and is a slow process (Reina, 2009), this may have longer-lasting effects on the recruitment processes of the food, retail and construction industries, even after the pandemic.

## **5.2 Answering the research question: How have COVID-19's changes to the Irish job market impacted employment in the food, retail and construction sectors?**

The data gathered from the interviews succeeded in outlining many of the sectors' changes introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic and its surrounding restrictions.

Some of the pandemic's effects were noticed immediately. The participants who were still permitted to operate in their businesses during the initial lockdown in March 2020 reported three main factors that led to strained employment in their workplace during that time:

- **Abruptness of change**

Employees were not prepared for the suddenness in which new policies and procedures were expected to be followed in the workplace. Changes at work can often lead to stress (Cunningham et al., 2002; Lazarus, 2020; Mujtaba and McCartney,

2009), and this was the first negative experience the participants reported that stemmed directly from the pandemic restrictions.

- **Additional workload**

A vast majority of the employees interviewed reported additional workloads had been imposed on them as a result of new sanitation procedures, slowdowns in logistics, or staff shortages.

- **Negative client interactions**

Employees in the food and retail sectors reported less pleasant interactions with clients and customers than usual, often as a result of being forced to police restriction guidelines within their facilities, and potentially due to the clients also experiencing stress during the pandemic.

Participants reported that as the country-wide regulations in Ireland progressed further past March 2020 and towards the end of December 2020, there had been more time to evaluate the responsibilities of the employers themselves and how they were often contributing to the negative employment experience through several factors:

- **Neglect of employee well-being**

By failing to provide stress relief or alleviation of the additional workload suffered by the employees, employers left their workers feeling neglected and broke their trust, reducing employee well-being even further. In some instances, empathy towards employers mitigated some of the negative factors of neglect.

- **Lack of communication**

Employees reported feeling uninformed regarding their employers' plans forward and the expectations this would place on the workforce.

- **Inconsistency between workplaces**

Employees reported that while they became aware of the governmental restrictions placed on individual work sectors, the execution of the involved procedures could

vary drastically between businesses, and made it difficult to know what to expect from their own employer.

For many of the employees in the three sectors examined in this study, the employment experience during the pandemic as well as the levels of faith they had in the Irish government's COVID-19 welfare plan left lasting fears and concerns regarding future employment.

- **Employment uncertainty**

Several employees expressed worry and uncertainty about whether they would be able to remain in employment during or after the lockdowns, or whether this experience set the precedent for similar situations in the future. This was experienced mostly by employees being paid wages and with a shift-based working schedule, frequent in the food and retail industries. Employment uncertainty is considered a very significant and long-lasting source of stress (Mantler et al., 2005).

- **Lack of familiarity or satisfaction with governmental welfare schemes**

Most employees reported adequate knowledge of the Irish government's PUP and TWSS procedures, but many wished their employers would have further assisted them in understanding the processes, or whether they as employees would even be offered the TWSS.

Additionally, there were concerns regarding the monetary pay-outs of the TWSS compared to the PUP for minimum wage workers, where it would be more beneficial to lose one's job rather than remain in employment at pitiful pay (Beirne et al., 2020).

### **5.3 Recommendations for future research**



Crisis prevention, particularly in topics related to economy, continue to be very valuable areas of research for Ireland (MacCarthaigh, 2017). By studying the negative outcomes of situations from the past, important insight can be gathered to minimize the impact should the situation reoccur (Fischhoff, 2013).

The more time lies between the experience one wishes to analyse and the present, the less reliable human sources become (Brewin, Andrews and Mickes, 2020). This means the data gathered and analysed during this study may have been influenced by the decay and unreliability of human memory. The research topic may benefit from older, pre-gathered data that is less likely to have been skewed over time.

Further research would benefit from a larger sample size, as 9 only barely reaches the lower bounds of data saturation as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2013) for use in thematic analysis. For fields of research pertaining economy and labour, a sample size of at least 12 is suggested instead (Sandelowski, 1995; Boddy, 2016; Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). The sample in this study is also almost exclusively extracted from Dublin city, as opposed to being spread out more evenly across the country.

Narrowing the research topic to focus on individual sectors would improve generalisability significantly, should the resources be available to still acquire enough participants. Splitting attention between three sectors allowed for an insight into the most commonly shared experiences, but inexorably missed some finer information about the COVID-19 working experience.

One suggestion for practical application and value from this study involves using its results to help decide which theme of negative employment experiences would benefit the most from - or be the most feasible target for – a targeted intervention. It may be possible to utilize previous types of intervention such as ‘stress optimisation’ (Crum, Jamieson and Akinola, 2020), saving the time and resources required to develop an entirely new method.

Recruiters may also find value in the overview of negative experiences at work, in order to improve their knowledge on what makes a workplace attractive. This is an immediate and cost-efficient method of improving their recruitment processes, by placing emphasis on features shown to reduce workplace stress and employment uncertainty.

## 5.4 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide a detailed, research-backed overview of the specific negative employment experiences that the COVID-19 pandemic brought, through thematic analysis on an impacted sample. Results outlined a relationship between the pandemic and a number of negative working experiences the participants faced: Abruptness of change, additional workload, negative client interactions, neglect of employee well-being, lack of communication, inconsistency between workplaces, employee uncertainty and lack of familiarity or satisfaction with governmental welfare schemes. Many of the experiences reported in the interviews are supported by scientific data or literature on the topic, further reinforcing the reliability of the findings.

## **Personal Learning Statement for MAHRM**

My entrance into the field of Human Resource Management was rough, as it was a hard pivot from a different science-based field. I was initially unfamiliar with the topics presented during the curriculum, and my working experience in construction did not grant additional insight.

I believe having now finished studies in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as well as gathered knowledge about both positivist and interpretivist philosophical approaches to research, I am better equipped to understand practical problems and academic challenges. I am hopeful this will help support me in my new career.

This new process of research required me to read many studies on workplace stress and interview analysis, which has taught me to better understand employees' concerns and the method in which they construct and deliver feedback.

Looking back, I would have benefit from taking a break between my undergraduate and postgraduate courses, especially with one repeated module. The time commitment of a full-time job and two simultaneous dissertations caused great stress and likely had a negative impact on all three responsibilities.

Vaughan Andrew Bjørn Lund

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## Appendix

### Appendix A – Consent form

This research is being conducted by Vaughan Andrew Bjørn Lund, a student at the School of Business, National College of Ireland. Contact at [x17718249@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:x17718249@student.ncirl.ie) to arrange participation.

This task will involve an audio interview with the researcher on the topic of pandemic-impacted employment, which will be recorded.

The method proposed for this research project has been approved in principle by the Departmental Ethics Committee, which means that the Committee does not have concerns about the procedure itself as detailed by the student. It is, however, the above-named student's responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in their dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.

There are no expected discomforts or risks associated with participation.

All data from the study will be treated confidentially. The data from all participants will be compiled, analysed, and submitted in a report to the School of Business, and stored for up to 5 years.

Data is at all times de-identified and will never be traceable to the participants.

Data will not be stored and used for future research different than the one outlined.

At the conclusion of my participation, any extra questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.

I may refuse to participate and withdraw from this study at any time, and may also withdraw my data at the conclusion of my participation if I still have concerns.

I have been informed as to the general nature of the study and agree voluntarily to participate.

### Appendix B – Basic interview outline

1. Prior to recording of interview.

Reemphasize contents of consent form, ask for approval to record and commence interview.

2. Introduction of participant.

Introduction of participant including name, age, position and experience as well as current or former sector of employment.

3. Employment experiences or difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Has the participant been in employment from March 2020 – Present?

Abrupt changes in the workplace during pandemic?

Slowdowns, extra workload?

Is the participant familiar with anyone else, a colleague or family member experiencing any of these things?

Stress as a result of own or others' difficulties?

4. Satisfaction with their employer's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Does the participant believe their employer handled the situation adequately?

Does the participant have ideas on how to have handled the situation?

Did the employer's handling of the situation lead to additional stress for the participant or colleagues?

Is the participant aware of how other sectors or companies within the sector handled the situation, and were they better or worse?

5. Future fears or concerns for their employment after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Has the participant been uncertain about their job security during COVID-19?

Is the participant worried about future abrupt changes to the job market affecting them or their family, and are they preparing for this?

Is the participant considering a change of career or country, and is this change as a result of Ireland or their employer's handling of the situation?

6. Familiarity and satisfaction with the Irish government's PUP and TWSS.

Is the participant familiar with or has received PUP or TWSS?

How was the participant informed about existence of and eligibility for PUP or TWSS, or how does the participant feel about not having been informed about PUP or TWSS?

Does the participant believe PUP and TWSS were fair to everyone?

Does the participant believe the amount paid by PUP and TWSS was adequate?

Is the participant aware of other countries' pandemic interventions, and were they better or worse compared to Ireland's?

7. Interview wrap-up.

Is there anything the participant would like to add regarding employment or COVID?

Would the participant like to discuss anything else?

### Appendix C - Ethics Application Checklist.

Please complete the below checklist, ticking each item to confirm that it has been addressed.

1. I agree to obtain informed written consent from all human participants aged over 18 who are involved in this research (or if circulating digitally, I will ensure that informed consent is completed, and will have the participants indicate their informed consent by continuing with their study engagement).	X
2. I agree to obtain informed written consent from the parents of anyone aged under 18 in this research (or from the schools if appropriate), and informed written assent from those under 18 in this research.	X
3. I append a letter of agreement from a clinically responsible individual agreeing to (where appropriate) help me recruit/provide clinical support in the event that participants become distressed/host the study data collection.	X
4. I append a letter of agreement from an external institution or organisation agreeing to host the study.	X
5. I agree to comply with NCI's Data Retention Policy.	X
6. I have appended a) information sheet, b) consent form/assent form, c) debriefing sheet.	X
7. I have provided details of how non-anonymised data will be stored, in a safe and encrypted manner.	X
8. I have included my contact details and those of my supervisor (where appropriate). I have only included my NCI email address and not included any personal contact information.	X
9. I have given sufficient details on the proposed study design, methodology, and data collection procedures, to allow a full ethical review, and I understand that my failure to give sufficient detail may result in a resubmission being required.	X
10. I understand that if I make changes to my study following ethical approval, it is my responsibility to seek an ethics amendment if the change merits ethical consideration.	X

## **Appendix D – Detailed Participant Profiles**

### **Food:**

Christine, 26, is a former waiter in Dublin. She received PUP after her restaurant closed down in early April 2020, and found employment elsewhere after the pandemic, where she still worked at the time of the interview.

John, 29, is a former bartender in Dublin. He was offered the TWSS by his employer after his bar was closed during the first lockdown in March 2020, but has since left his industry entirely.

Claire, 32, is a baker in Dublin. Her bakery shifted business model to small- and large-scale deliveries, and remained in employment throughout the pandemic. She was still employed at the same bakery at the time of the interview.

### **Retail:**

Paul, 26, works at the front desk of a gym in Dublin, which also involves manning the fitness shop. He was offered and accepted the TWSS when the gym was closed down in either April or May 2020, and resumed employment at the start of January 2021. He was employed at the same gym at the time of the interview.

David, 20, is a former sales assistant at an electrical shop in Dublin. He received PUP after his shop closed sometime between April and May 2020, and found employment in April 2021 in a coffee shop. He was still employed at the coffee shop at the time of the interview.

Sarah, 22, is a former bookseller at a bookshop in Dublin city centre. She received PUP after her shop closed in May 2020, and did not seek to regain employment in the industry or elsewhere. She was unemployed at the time of the interview.

### **Construction:**

Barry, 31, is a construction engineer operating primarily around Kilkenny. He remained in active employment almost all the way throughout the pandemic and was still employed at the same company at the time of the interview.

William, 40, is a professional indoor painter/decorator working for a Dublin-based company. He remained in active employment during the entirety of the pandemic and was still employed at the same company at the time of the interview.

Nina, 25, is a private indoor electrician operating in Dublin. She remained in active employment throughout the pandemic and was still in the same line of work at the time of the interview.