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**The impact of Covid-19 on Organisational
Strategy: Adaptation and Resilience in the UK
Retail Sector**

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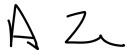
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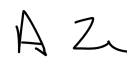
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Abstract

This dissertation investigates how UK retail organisations adapted their strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing six interrelated research questions. These examined (1) how organisations adapted strategies using frameworks such as the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities; (2) the approaches used to implement change compared with established models; (3) how crisis management and resilience frameworks influenced continuity; (4) the role of digital transformation and innovation in adaptation; (5) whether responses differed by scale and sector; and (6) the long-term strategic impacts of the pandemic. These questions are significant because COVID-19 presented unprecedented operational and market disruptions, testing the adaptability, resilience, and renewal capacity of organisations across the retail sector.

The research employed a qualitative design, combining secondary data from corporate annual reports, government and industry sources with semi-structured interviews from managers in smaller retail organisations. Saunders' research onion guided the methodological choices, ensuring alignment between philosophical stance and data collection. The study was theoretically underpinned by RBV, Dynamic Capabilities, and resilience frameworks, which together provided a robust lens for analysing adaptation and organisational survival under crisis conditions.

The findings reveal clear divergences between large corporations and smaller organisations. Tesco and Sainsbury's consolidated pre-existing strategies, scaling digital platforms, logistics, and delivery. Vodafone and BT strengthened network infrastructure and hybrid working capabilities. These adaptations reflected continuity and reliance on VRIN resources, illustrating reliance on established trajectories. In

contrast, smaller companies adapted through diversification, improvisation, and cultural cohesion, embedding improvised practices into lasting business models. Change management approaches also differed: large organisations used structured processes consistent with Lewin (1947) and Kotter (1996), while smaller companies relied on emergent, collective approaches.

Resilience was multidimensional. Large organisations relied on structural resilience, such as buffers (spare capacity), contingency resources, and built-in safeguards, whilst smaller companies enacted cultural resilience, drawing on trust, adaptability, and team cohesion. Digital transformation was central across all cases, functioning as both an enabler of continuity for large organisations and a catalyst for renewal among smaller companies. Long-term impacts showed a dual trajectory: large organisations reinforced market positions through digital consolidation, while smaller companies achieved renewal through codified adaptations and new business models.

The implications are twofold. Theoretically, the study demonstrates that resilience and dynamic capabilities are contextually expressed, shaped by organisational scale, sector positioning, and strategic resources. Practically, the research shows that effective crisis response requires balancing structural buffers with cultural adaptability, embedding digitalisation into core strategy, and institutionalising improvisations into contingency plans. For policymakers, supporting Small to Medium Enterprises digital capacity and resilience-building measures is essential.

In conclusion, the study shows that crises act simultaneously as accelerators of maintaining continuity for market leaders while acting as a trigger for innovation in less established organisations. By linking empirical findings with strategic

management frameworks, the dissertation contributes to both theory and practice, offering insights into how organisations can adapt, build resilience, and prepare for future disruptions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The retail sector in the UK, one of the country's largest and arguably most vital industries, has experienced significant transformation over the past decade. As of 2020, the UK retail sector was valued at £394 billion (ONS 2020), contributing substantially to the nation's economy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented disruptions, pushing companies to reassess their operational strategies and adapt rapidly. The retail landscape, which had been increasingly shifting towards digital platforms in recent years, faced a massive acceleration of e-commerce adoption due to lockdown restrictions and health concerns (McKinsey 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, brought unprecedented challenges to the global economy, with the retail sector being one of the most affected industries. During the period March 2020 to April 2022, the pandemic led to widespread store closures, disruptions in supply chains and a drastic reduction in business. Organisations and small businesses were forced to rapidly transition to online models as in-store shopping was prohibited or restricted (PwC 2020).

There were several government imposed national lockdowns, which restricted physical interactions, and closed non-essential businesses. The ability for customers to physically visit "bricks and mortar" stores was banned for a large majority of the retail sector. Only key essential retail businesses were allowed to remain open for face-to-face customers. Retailers had to quickly adapt to survive. In the United Kingdom, retail businesses were forced to rethink their operational and strategic models. Traditional in-store retailing, which accounted for a proportion of retail sales,

was no longer possible or sufficient to meet the needs of consumers who were increasingly turning to online shopping. The pandemic significantly disrupted supply chains, changed consumer behaviours, and caused severe financial distress for businesses across all sectors of retail, from fashion to groceries.

The retail sector, as a whole, was severely impacted as the closure of physical stores, throughout the whole of the UK. This led to a sharp decline in customers sales due to inability to shop instore, and thereby a loss of business. There was a rapid shift in consumer purchasing patterns, predominately to online sales on retail websites and “click and collect”. The pandemic forced organisations to accelerate digital transformation, pushing many retailers to quickly implement e-commerce solutions, contactless payment methods to enhance their online sales and to continue trading. The crisis highlighted the need for retail organisations to be responsive, adaptable and resilient in an unforeseen and unprecedented disruption.

The pandemic forced retailers to make drastic changes, particularly in digital transformation. Retailers that had already invested in e-commerce and digital solutions were able to adapt more easily. The businesses that struggled were those that were slow or unable to adapt to the rapid changes or those that did not have digital solutions in place before the pandemic. This highlighted the importance of an organisational resilience strategy which was the process to enable an organisation to absorb shocks, adapt to change, and continue to operate effectively.

How the UK Retail sector responded and managed the COVID-19 pandemic offers an interesting area of study. How did retailers adapt their strategies to cope with the crisis? What resilience strategies did they implement to recover, and was this effective in the long term? This dissertation aims to answer these questions by

examining how the organisations navigated the challenges brought by COVID-19, focusing on their strategic adaptations and resilience.

The response of these organisations to the pandemic offers a compelling case study of how strategies can be modified during times of crisis to ensure both short-term survival and long-term sustainability.

The pandemic exposed both significant challenges and new opportunities for the UK retail sector, with two of the country's largest supermarket chains particularly affected. This study focuses on the responses of Tesco and Sainsbury's, examining how Covid-19 shaped their strategic management and long-term direction. Their experiences are contrasted with those of major retail telecommunications providers, Vodafone UK and BT, to capture variation across different segments of the sector. In doing so, the research explores how organisations adapted to the disruptions of the pandemic, with particular attention to organisational strategy, change management, adaptation, and resilience.

The responses of these organisations to the pandemic and how the crisis was managed, offer valuable insights into the dynamics of strategic adaptation, resilience, and digital transformation within a rapidly changing environment. The study aims to understand how these companies adjusted their strategies to maintain operational continuity during the pandemic and whether those responses have shaped long-term strategic direction.

1.2 Research Problem

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the UK retail sector, forcing organisations to make rapid decisions to survive and recover. It

exposed vulnerabilities in traditional retail strategies and offered valuable lessons on how organisations can adapt to significant disruptions.

Some organisations adapted quickly and successfully to the new environment, others struggled to pivot their operations. The lack of preparation for such a widespread crisis raised questions about the ability of organisations (and small business) to manage such disruptions in the future (Williams et al 2017). The need for resilience became apparent as organisations navigated the uncertain environment whilst attempting to maintain operations, meeting consumer needs, and protecting employees.

The focus of the research is on the following questions:

- How did UK retail businesses adjust their organisational strategies in response to the disruptions caused by COVID-19?
- What strategic changes were necessary to ensure short-term survival during the pandemic?
- Did retail organisations build resilience, and what long-term implications does the crisis have for their strategies in the long term?
- To what extent have the adaptive strategies adopted during the pandemic been retained in the post-pandemic recovery phase?

The research examines how major retail organisations in the UK adapted their strategies during the pandemic, with particular attention to digital transformation, operational restructuring, innovation and resilience. By understanding the challenges faced and the strategies employed, the study will provide insights into how the retail sector can enhance its resilience and adaptability for future crises.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on organisational strategy within the UK retail sector. Specific focus will be on how businesses adapted their strategies and developed resilience to overcome the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the strategic priorities of UK organisations before the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on digital transformation, consumer interaction, and competitive positioning.
2. To investigate the strategic adaptations implemented by UK organisations during the pandemic, particularly in the areas of digital capabilities, e-commerce, and operational restructuring.
3. To evaluate the role of organisational resilience in the recovery process, identifying the practices that supported business continuity and long term impact.
4. To compare the strategic responses of major UK retail organisations, such as supermarkets and telecommunications providers, in order to highlight sector-specific challenges and approaches.
5. To develop recommendations that enhance resilience and support sustainable growth for retail businesses in the face of future disruptions.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions are central to this study:

1. Strategic Adaptation

How did UK retail organisations adapt their strategies to respond to the operational and market disruptions caused by COVID-19, considering frameworks such as Resource Based View and Dynamic Capabilities?

2. Change Management

What approaches/processes did retailers use to implement strategic change during the crisis, and how were these compared with established change management models?

3. Crisis Management and Resilience

How did crisis management and organisational resilience frameworks influence the decision-making and operational continuity of UK retailers during the pandemic?

4. Digital Transformation and Innovation

What role did digital technologies, e-commerce, and other innovative solutions play in enabling strategic adaptation and maintaining competitive advantage during the pandemic?

5. Variations Across Sectors and Business Sizes

Did strategic responses differ between larger retail organisations and smaller or medium-sized retail businesses

6. Long-Term Impacts

What lasting strategic changes have emerged in UK retail as a result of the pandemic, and how these shifts relate to theories of strategic management, dynamic capabilities, and resilience?

1.5 Research Significance

This study is significant for several reasons:

1. **Contributes to the field of strategic management:** the study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on organisational strategy and resilience, particularly in the retail sector. While much research has been conducted on the broader impacts of COVID-19 on businesses, it is arguable that few studies have specifically focused on the retail sector's adaptation and resilience during the pandemic
2. **Practical insights for retailers:** The findings from this study will provide practical recommendations for retail businesses, helping them develop strategies to enhance their resilience in the face of future crises, whether they be health-related, economic, or technological.
3. **Policy implications:** Understanding the challenges faced by UK retailers during the pandemic will provide policymakers with insights into how to support businesses during times of crisis. This study can inform policies related to business continuity, digital transformation, and workforce management during disruptions.
4. **Broader application to crisis management:** The strategies identified in this study may be applicable beyond the retail sector, offering lessons for other industries on how to manage crises, adapt organisational strategies, and build resilience.

This research will provide an in-depth insight into how the retail sector within the UK responded to one of the most disruptive events in modern history.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of the research will be on a selection of UK retailers, including both large companies and small businesses, representing a range within the sector. It will focus on how these businesses adapted during the pandemic and the strategies they employed to manage the crisis. The study will not cover every retail organisation in the UK but will instead focus on key large organisations.

The period from the onset of the pandemic (March 2020) to the period following the first wave of lockdowns and initial recovery (April 2022) will be the main focus of the research, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of both the immediate and longer term impact of the pandemic on organisational strategy.

1.7 Research Structure

This dissertation is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction:** This chapter introduces the background, research problem, research objectives, questions, and significance of the study. It provides the foundation for the research.
- **Chapter 2: Literature Review:** This chapter reviews existing literature on organisational strategy, crisis management, resilience, and the impact of COVID-19 on the retail sector. It provides the theoretical framework for the study.
- **Chapter 3: Methodology:** This chapter outlines the research design, including the philosophy, approach, strategy, and data collection methods used to address the research questions.

- **Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion:** This chapter presents detailed case studies of selected UK retailers and analyses the data, comparing the strategic adaptations and resilience strategies of the retailers, and discusses the key findings.
- **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations:** This chapter summarises the key findings of the research, offers practical recommendations for retailers, and suggests areas for future research.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

- **Sample size:** The research focuses on a small number of UK retailers, which may not fully reflect the diversity of the sector. However, the case study approach allows for detailed insights into how these organisations adapted their strategies during the pandemic.
- **Geographical focus:** The study is limited to the UK retail sector, so the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries with different market conditions and regulatory environments. Nevertheless, the strategic lessons may still have relevance for international retailers facing similar crises.
- **Time frame:** The research examines the period from the start of the pandemic to the first phase of recovery, capturing immediate responses but not the long-term impacts of COVID-19. Strategic adaptations may continue to evolve beyond this timeframe.
- **Data sources:** The study relies primarily on secondary data and a limited number of semi-structured interviews. While this enables triangulation and

credible findings, it may restrict the range of perspectives, particularly from senior decision-makers in larger organisations.

- **Sector-specific focus:** Focusing on retail means that some findings, particularly regarding crisis management and resilience, may not fully translate to other sectors. However, the study still offers a useful framework for understanding organisational responses to systemic disruptions.

By acknowledging these limitations, the study maintains transparency while providing a foundation for future research, including broader comparative studies, cross-sectoral analyses, and longitudinal investigations.

1.9 Summary

This introductory chapter has outlined the background of the study, research problem, objectives, and the significance of exploring how key large organisations in the retail sector, Tesco, Sainsbury's adapted their strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other large organisations such as Vodafone and BT. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of strategic adaptation, resilience, and the role of digital transformation in navigating a global crisis.

The significance of the research has been outlined, and the structure of the dissertation has been presented. The next chapter will present a detailed review of the existing literature on organisational strategy, crisis management, resilience, and the retail sector's response to COVID-19.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A literature review provides the academic foundation for any research project, connecting the study to established theories, models, and prior findings. This chapter looks at the literature and frameworks for this dissertation: organisational strategy, strategic adaptation, resilience, crisis management, and how COVID-19 affected the UK retail sector. It sets the foundation for understanding how companies responded to the pandemic and the strategies they used.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on organisations worldwide, changing how they plan, adapt, and manage crises. In the retail sector, it revealed weaknesses in strategy but also encouraged innovation and resilience. This literature review looks at existing research on organisational strategy, change management, crisis management, and resilience, focusing on global disruptions and COVID-19's effects. It draws on both academic theories and real-world studies, with particular attention to UK retail.

This literature review helps to frame the research questions, identify key themes, and point out gaps in existing studies that this research aims to fill. The chapter is structured into sections: first, it examines organisational strategy and how it has developed over time; next, it reviews crisis management literature; then, it looks at organisational resilience; and finally, it considers the impact of COVID-19 on the UK retail sector. By bringing together these different areas of research, the chapter builds a theoretical foundation for understanding how retail organisations adapted their strategies during the pandemic.

2.2 Organisational Strategy

Organisational strategy is a long-term plan for achieving a company's goals, usually created by senior management. It sets the direction of the business, decides how resources are used, and defines what success looks like. Over time, strategic management theory has developed various frameworks to help explain how organisations create and carry out their strategies.

Key strategic frameworks include:

2.2.1 Porter's Competitive Strategy (1980):

The study of organisational strategy has been a cornerstone of management research for decades, with significant contributions from Michael Porter, whose frameworks have shaped both theoretical understanding and practical applications of strategic management.

The **Five Forces model** and **Generic Strategies**, provide frameworks for analysing competitive environments and formulating strategies that create sustainable competitive advantage (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1985).

2.2.2 Five Forces Analysis

Porter's Five Forces framework outlines five key factors that shape the level of competition within an industry and determine its overall attractiveness:

1. **Threat of new entrants** – the likelihood that new competitors will enter the market.

2. **Bargaining power of suppliers** – the ability of suppliers to influence costs or supply conditions.
3. **Bargaining power of buyers** – the influence customers have over pricing and quality.
4. **Threat of substitute products or services** – the risk of alternatives reducing demand.
5. **Competitive rivalry among existing firms** – the intensity of competition in the industry.

The framework allows organisations to analyse and assess external factors, informing strategic decisions regarding market entry, differentiation, or cost leadership. Empirical studies have demonstrated its utility across sectors such as retail, telecommunications, and manufacturing (Grant, 2016). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, UK retailers leveraged Five Forces analysis to assess supply chain vulnerabilities, substitute products (e.g., online delivery alternatives), and shifting customer bargaining power due to changing shopping behaviours.

2.2.3 Generic Strategies

Porter further advanced strategic thinking through the Generic Strategies framework, which posits three primary approaches to achieving competitive advantage:

- **Cost Leadership** – achieving lower costs than competitors while maintaining acceptable quality.
- **Differentiation** – offering unique products or services perceived as valuable by customers.

- **Focus** – targeting specific market segments, either through cost focus or differentiation focus.

The framework highlights the importance of having a clear strategy and warns against being “stuck in the middle,” where a company fails to achieve either cost efficiency or differentiation, which can weaken its competitive position.

Literature demonstrates how organisations in sectors like retail (Tesco, Sainsbury’s) and telecommunications (Vodafone, BT) adopt blended strategies to remain resilient, especially in turbulent environments (Johnson et al., 2017; Grant, 2016).

2.2.4 Value Chain Analysis

Porter’s value chain complements his other frameworks by providing a tool for analysing a company internally. By considering primary and support activities, organisations can identify areas to create value, reduce costs, and achieve strategic advantage. For instance, during COVID-19, companies reassessed logistics, procurement, and customer service processes to maintain competitiveness.

Strategy involves decisions about market position, how resources are used, innovation, and managing risks, all of which affect a company’s competitive success.

Porter’s contribution lies in providing analytical frameworks to assess industry structure, competitive pressures, and potential paths to take advantage of. His work emphasises the need for strategic choice, suggesting that organisations must make deliberate trade-offs to position themselves uniquely in the marketplace.

Scholars often integrate Porter’s frameworks with Resource Based View, dynamic capabilities, and management theories. Organisations must decide on one of these

strategies to achieve a competitive edge in the marketplace. However, these strategies are often built for stable environments rather than during a crisis.

2.3 Resource Based View (RBV)

The Resource Based View offers a framework for understanding how an organisation's unique assets, capabilities, and competencies can serve as the foundation for long-term success. Organisations seek sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging their internal resources

The RBV proposes that an organisation's internal resources, tangible and intangible, are key to sustained competitive advantage (Barney 1991). This framework emphasises the importance of unique resources and distinguishes between resources and capabilities:

- **Resources** are assets, both tangible and intangible, that an organisation possesses. Tangible resources are physical assets such as machinery, buildings, and financial capital. Intangible resources include brand reputation, intellectual property.
- **Capabilities** refer to an organisation's ability to effectively deploy and coordinate resources to achieve desired outcomes. These are often developed over time through complex routines and organisational learning.

If they are valuable, rare, inimitable, then resources and capabilities can lead to sustained competitive advantage substitutable (VRIN framework):

1. **Valuable:** Resources must allow the organisation to exploit opportunities or neutralise threats.

2. **Rare:** Resources must not be widely possessed by competitors.
3. **Inimitable:** Resources should be difficult to copy due to unique historical conditions, causal ambiguity, or social complexity.
4. **Non-substitutable:** There should be no strategically equivalent resources that competitors can leverage.

During COVID-19, organisations with robust digital infrastructure or a strong supply chain, for example, could better withstand the impacts of the pandemic.

Retail supermarkets like Tesco and Sainsbury's leveraged existing logistics networks and online platforms to meet changing consumer demand. Telecoms companies such as BT and Vodafone capitalised on their infrastructure and customer service platforms to accommodate rising connectivity needs.

Unique organisational resources and capabilities reinforce competitive advantage, including the ability to respond resiliently to crises. During COVID-19, organisations with flexible digital infrastructure, skilled human capital, and diversified supply chains were better positioned to absorb and adapt to disruption (Ivanov, 2020). Resilience can be viewed as an extension of dynamic capabilities, representing the strategic deployment of resources to navigate environmental shocks (Teece et al., 2016).

2.4 Dynamic Capabilities and Crisis Adaptation

Dynamic capabilities extend the Resource Based View by focusing on the organisation's ability to adapt and innovate over time, rather than relying solely on static resources. (David Teece, Gary Pisano, and Amy Shuen, 1997)

Teece, Pisano, and Shuen proposed this concept as the ability of an organisation to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external resources to address rapidly changing environments.

Dynamic capabilities serve as an important framework for understanding how organisations can achieve and sustain competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments. By focusing on sensing opportunities, seizing them strategically, and transforming resources, organisations develop the adaptability necessary to thrive in volatile markets.

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of organisations' ability to sense, seize, and transform opportunities by demonstrating how they integrated, developed, and reconfigured resources in response to the disruption.

A key feature is the ability to sense changes in the market and seize opportunities while maintaining flexibility:

- **Sensing:** Identifying emerging threats and opportunities.
- **Seizing:** Mobilising resources to exploit opportunities or mitigate risks.
- **Transforming:** Reconfiguring operational and strategic processes to sustain competitive advantage.

COVID-19 demonstrated the value of sensing opportunities and transforming the organisation in response to external shocks of the pandemic.

The Resource-Based View explains why certain resources provide competitive advantage, whereas dynamic capabilities show how organisations achieve and sustain advantage over time.

Dynamic capabilities are relevant across multiple strategic domains:

1. **Innovation and Product Development:** Can rapidly develop and launch new products.
2. **Digital Transformation:** to adopt emerging technologies and integrate them into existing operations efficiently.
3. **Strategic Alliances and Mergers:** Seizing collaboration opportunities by sensing potential partners a.
4. **Crisis Management and Adaptation:** to pivot in response to unexpected disruptions, such as pandemics.

Initial evidence from UK retail and telecoms supports this framework. Tesco and Sainsbury's rapidly expanded online shopping capabilities and adapted store operations to comply with social distancing, demonstrating effective sensing and seizing (Tesco Annual Report, 2020; Sainsbury's Annual Report, 2020). Vodafone leveraged cloud technologies and remote customer support infrastructure to sustain service delivery, illustrating transforming capabilities in a crisis (Vodafone Group PLC, 2020).

2.5 Change Management in the Context of Crisis

Change management is broadly defined as the systematic approach to transitioning individuals, teams, and organisations from a current state to a desired future state (Cameron & Green, 2019).

In crisis situations, whether driven by economic shocks, pandemics, technological disruptions, or reputational threats, demand rapid, coordinated, and effective organisational change. Scholars emphasise that organisations unable to adapt

swiftly during crises risk operational failure, loss of market share, or even collapse (Burnes, 2009; Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). Crisis contexts expand the complexity of change due to heightened uncertainty, time pressure, and emotional strain (Burnes, 2020).

Change management literature offers frameworks to guide structured organisational transitions. There are two dominant theoretic frameworks for structured change:

1. **Lewin's 3-Step Model:** A foundational framework emphasising unfreezing, movement, and refreezing (Lewin, 1947).
2. **Kotter's 8-Step Model:** A more granular framework extending Lewin's principles with emphasis on leadership, communication, and culture (Kotter, 1996).

Both models stress the importance of getting the organisation prepared for change, implementing it strategically, and sustaining new behaviours, though they differ in complexity and operational guidance. They remain highly influential due to their clarity, practical applicability, and focus on both human and structural aspects of change. This section of the review examines these models in the context of crisis-driven change, highlighting their theoretical foundations, practical application, and limitations.

2.5.1 Lewin's 3-Step Model in Crisis Context

Lewin's model conceptualises change as a three-stage process:

1. **Unfreeze:** Preparing the organisation for change by challenging existing behaviours, norms, and mindsets. Unfreezing is particularly critical as

employees may resist change due to fear, uncertainty, or perceived threat (Burnes, 2004). Leadership must communicate the urgency of change and the risks of inaction, aligning the workforce with the organisational imperative to adapt (Lewin, 1947).

2. **Change (or Movement):** Implementation of new processes, structures, or behaviours. In crisis conditions, the pace of change is accelerated, often requiring rapid decision-making and resource reallocation. Effective change relies on clear communication, training, and support mechanisms to ensure employees adopt new ways of working.
3. **Refreeze:** Involves embedding the changes into the organisational culture to ensure sustainability. In a crisis, the refreezing stage often encounters challenges due to continued volatility. Without refreezing, temporary adaptations risk regression, undermining long-term resilience.

Lewin's model offers simplicity and a clear framework. It could be argued that it is too simplistic and inflexible, potentially limiting responsiveness in prolonged or recurring crises. Furthermore, the refreezing stage may be impractical in constantly changing environments, where organisations need to stay adaptable rather than settling into a fixed state.

2.5.2 Kotter's 8-Step Model in Crisis Context

Kotter (1996) provides a more detailed framework, focusing on creating a vision, communicating it, empowering employees, and reinforcing change. Firms that applied these steps, formally or informally, handled the pandemic more effectively.

Kotter expanded Lewin's principles into an eight-step process providing more detailed guidance for managing organisational change, particularly in complex and high-pressure situations:

1. **Establish a Sense of Urgency:** Crisis inherently creates urgency, but Kotter emphasises formalising this awareness to motivate stakeholders and overcome complacency.
2. **Form a Guiding Coalition:** Effective change requires a dedicated leadership team with credibility and influence across organisational levels.
3. **Develop a Vision and Strategy:** A clear vision directs change efforts and provides a strategic roadmap for action.
4. **Communicate the Change Vision:** Continuous, transparent communication ensures that employees understand the rationale and expected outcomes.
5. **Empower Broad-Based Action:** Kotter stresses the removal of barriers, enabling employees to participate actively in change initiatives.
6. **Generate Short-Term Wins:** Identifying and celebrating early successes reinforces commitment and demonstrates the feasibility of change.
7. **Consolidate Gains and Produce More Change:** Momentum from early wins is leveraged to implement additional changes, preventing regression.
8. **Anchor New Approaches in the Culture:** Sustained change requires integration into organisational norms, values, and reward systems.

Kotter's model is particularly suitable for large-scale crises where change must be both rapid and comprehensive. For instance, in the UK retail sector during COVID-19, companies such as Tesco and Sainsbury's applied several principles: communicating urgency to staff, empowering teams for online delivery expansion,

celebrating initial operational successes, and embedding new digital workflows into standard practice (Tesco Annual Report, 2020).

Both models offer insights that complement each other. Lewin offers simplicity useful for rapid, urgent change, whilst Kotter provides practical steps to integrate change and build resilience. In practice, organisations often integrate both frameworks, using Lewin for initial diagnosis and movement, and Kotter for effective rollout and incorporation into the company's culture.

2.6 Crisis Management and Organisational Resilience

Crisis management refers to the steps an organisation takes to anticipate, respond to, and recover from unforeseen events that interrupt normal operations. Research in this area covers both theoretical frameworks and practical approaches for handling disruptions, risks, and uncertainty. It closely overlaps with studies on organisational resilience.

2.6.1 Crisis Management Principles

According to Mitroff (2005), effective crisis management consists of signal detection, preparation, damage containment, recovery, and learning.

Mitroff provides a framework for seven essential lessons for organisational survival and growth during and after crises. These lessons offer both theoretical and practical perspectives on how UK retail organisations managed the challenges brought by the pandemic.

1.Acknowledging the Inevitability of Crises

Crises are a normal part of organisational life, and this view aligns with contingency theory, which highlights the need for flexibility and proactive planning in uncertain environments. During COVID-19, many organisations underestimated the scale and duration of disruptions, leading to reactive approaches. However, organisations that foresaw potential crises and integrated risk assessment into their strategic planning showed greater ability to adapt effectively.

2. Developing a Crisis-Prepared Organisational Culture

Organisations that foster a culture of flexibility, accountability, and continuous learning are more capable of handling disruptions. During COVID-19, qualities like trust, empowerment, and open communication played a key role in enabling effective responses, including shifts to remote work, contactless retail, and accelerated digital service adoption (Duchek, 2020).

3. Crisis Planning and Simulation

Mitroff emphasises the importance of proactive crisis planning, using simulations to foresee possible disruptions. Techniques such as scenario planning, stress testing, and contingency exercises help organisations spot weaknesses, improve decision-making, and put preventive strategies in place.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations with pre-existing crisis protocols (For example, organisations that already had technology infrastructure in place to switch to online sales or to facilitate remote working) were able to transition more efficiently to e-commerce platforms and modify supply chain logistics.

4. Building a Crisis-Ready Infrastructure

A strong infrastructure which includes technology, systems, and processes, is essential for effective crisis response. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of digital systems, flexible supply chains, and effective communication tools for keeping operations running smoothly.

Retail telecoms companies such as BT and Vodafone expanded network capacity and customer service platforms, while other retailers like Tesco and Sainsbury's enhanced online order processing and last-mile delivery capabilities.

5. Leveraging Stakeholder Relationships

Strong stakeholder relationships during crises are very important. Trust, transparency, and collaboration with employees, customers, suppliers, and regulators are essential for maintaining both organisational credibility and smooth operations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations that shared information openly, upheld ethical practices, and involved stakeholders in decisions showed greater resilience and stronger customer loyalty.

6. Learning from Crises to Enhance Capabilities

Crises should be understood not only as threats but also as opportunities for organisational learning and capability development (Mitroff, 2005). The pandemic forced organisations to innovate rapidly, adopting new business models, digital tools, and business operations. For example, supermarkets expanded e-commerce

channels and developed contactless delivery systems, whilst telecoms suppliers enhanced remote work solutions and customer engagement platforms.

7. Integrating Crisis Management with Strategic Planning

Crisis management should be integrated with overall strategic planning rather than implemented on a reactive basis. Organisations that intertwine crisis readiness to long-term goals can better allocate resources, anticipate changes in the market, and take advantage of opportunities arising from disruptions.

The pandemic showed that organisations with strategies integrating crisis planning, digital initiatives, and flexible leadership could sustain operations, innovate, and maintain a competitive edge in turbulent conditions. This approach illustrates the link between dynamic capabilities and strategic management theory.

Mintzberg et al. (2005) emphasised that strategy is not only deliberate but also emergent. During the pandemic, many organisations moved away from pre-set plans and developed adaptive strategies to tackle unexpected challenges, making strategic flexibility an essential capability, aligning with Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) view of dynamic capabilities as a organisation's ability to adapt and reconfigure its resource base in rapidly changing environments.

Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington (2017) describe environmental turbulence as a major influence on strategic choice. The COVID-19 crisis created an environment of extreme turbulence, where businesses had to reassess competitive advantages, stakeholder priorities, and core business models. For example, supermarkets shifted to e-commerce models, while telecom companies invested in capacity expansion to support increased digital communication.

Other considerations of crisis management include:

- **The Phases of Crisis Management:** According to Fink (1986), crisis management can be broken down into four stages: (1) Prevention, (2) Preparation, (3) Response, and (4) Recovery. During the pandemic, retailers found themselves rapidly moving between these stages. In the initial response phase, many retailers focused on protecting employees and customers, while during the recovery phase, strategies shifted toward business continuity and adapting to new consumer behaviours.
- **Types of Crises:** Crises can be classified into different types, such as natural disasters, technological failures, or health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global health crisis that had far-reaching impacts across every industry, including retail. Crisis management research often focuses on high impact events and provides insights into how organisations can maintain business continuity in the face of unforeseen disruptions.
- **Strategic Responses to Crises:** A key theme is the importance of flexibility and agility in organisational strategy. The ability to respond quickly and effectively to a crisis can determine the survival of a business. The pandemic required many retailers to shift their strategies at an unprecedented pace, embracing digital tools, expanding e-commerce capabilities and modifying supply chains to ensure they could continue operating.
- **Communication and Leadership:** Effective crisis communication is another critical component. Retailers that communicated clearly with their employees, customers, and suppliers were more likely to maintain trust and adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Leadership during a crisis also plays a pivotal role in decision-making and guiding organisations through periods of uncertainty.

2.6.2 Organisational Resilience

Resilience is defined by Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) as the capacity to absorb, strain and maintain function, An Organisation which is considered resilient is able to absorb shocks, adapt to changes, and recover from disruptions while maintaining its business operations. **It is closely linked to crisis management and strategic adaptation but goes further by focusing on long-term sustainability.**

Resilience capability is usually considered as anticipatory, adaptive, and absorptive capacity.

- **Anticipatory** refers to an organisation's ability to forecast potential disruptions and develop contingency plans.
- **Adaptive** involves the capacity to reconfigure resources, processes, and structures in response to unforeseen challenges.
- **Absorptive** represents the ability to withstand shocks without catastrophic failure, maintaining core functions despite environmental turbulence.

Duchek (2020) presents a dynamic model of resilience that places these capabilities within a process-focused framework. She emphasised that resilience is not static but emerges from continuous organisational learning and resource structuring. This model is particularly relevant in the COVID-19 situation, where organisations faced rapidly evolving public health regulations, shifting customer behaviour, and supply chain challenges.

There are several key frameworks and theories around resilience:

- **Organisational Resilience Frameworks:** Scholars like Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) define resilient organisations as those that can maintain performance while adapting to disruptions. They highlight the role of organisational culture, leadership, and the ability to innovate and make effective decisions under pressure.
- **Resilience vs. Robustness:** Resilience is an organisation's ability to recover from crises, whereas robustness focuses on sustaining operations during disruptions. Resilient organisations embrace change and innovation rather than relying solely on stability when customer behaviour, technology, and market conditions change rapidly.
- **Resilience and Digital Transformation:** Resilience is closely linked to digital transformation. Organisations that had adopted e-commerce and other digital tools before the pandemic were better able to respond quickly. Digital technologies helped maintain customer engagement, optimise supply chains, and explore new business models.
- **Learning from Crisis:** Resilient organisations learn from previous crises, creating flexible strategies and processes for future challenges. This includes developing a strong crisis management culture, investing in innovation, and recognising opportunities that emerge from disruption, such as the surge in online shopping during COVID-19.

Organisational resilience was a crucial factor determining both survival and performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars emphasise that resilience is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic and ongoing process. A process that is shaped by

the effective mobilisation of resources, the development of capabilities, proactive leadership, and adaptive organisational culture. Resilient organisations are able to withstand immediate shocks, to adapt strategically to evolving challenges and align crisis management with long-term objectives. Resilience has been closely linked to the ability to maintain operational continuity, and respond flexibly to shifts in consumer behaviour, along with supply chain disruptions.

Furthermore, resilient organisations actively integrate lessons from past crises into organisational learning processes, to reinforce capabilities such as digital transformation, and agile decision-making. This positions resilience at the intersection of crisis management and strategic adaptation, highlighting its role as a protective mechanism and a driver of sustainable competitive advantage.

A major challenge during the pandemic was supply chain disruption causing shortages of essential goods and interruptions in global logistics (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2020). Research highlights strategies for building supply chain resilience, such as diversifying suppliers, maintaining buffer inventories, and using digital monitoring systems (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Ivanov, 2020). For example, Tesco diversified its sources for key products and used real-time inventory tracking, allowing it to respond quickly to changing demand (Tesco Annual Report, 2020).

Digital technologies played an important role in supporting organisational resilience. Firms that adopted e-commerce, cloud computing, and remote work platforms were better able to continue operations during lockdowns. Studies emphasise that digital transformation strengthens both adaptive and absorptive capabilities, enabling businesses to adjust their models, and maintain service continuity.

Leadership and organisational culture are also critical for resilience (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Research shows that clear communication, empowering employees, and fostering psychological safety improve an organisation's ability to adapt under pressure.

Literature on organisational learning highlights that rapid experimentation, knowledge sharing, and iterative problem solving are essential for navigating uncertainty (Argyris & Schön, 1996). During COVID-19, companies that quickly piloted new delivery models, online services, and health protocols were able to sustain operations and capture emergent market opportunities.

The literature suggests that organisational resilience during COVID-19 emerges from the interplay between resources, capabilities, leadership, and culture. Key insights include:

1. **Dynamic capabilities are central:** Resilient organisations proactively sense threats, mobilise resources, and transform operations.
2. **Digital readiness enhances adaptive capacity:** Investment in technology enables continuity and flexibility in response to rapidly shifting conditions.
3. **Leadership and culture are critical enablers:** Trust, communication, and empowerment facilitate employee engagement and reduce resistance.
4. **Resilience is multidimensional:** Anticipatory, adaptive, and absorptive capabilities must be aligned with organisational strategy to achieve sustained performance.

Despite evidence of resilience, scholars emphasise limitations and trade-offs. High investment in digital infrastructure or supply chain diversification may strain financial

resources, particularly for small to medium business with lesser financial resources. Additionally, the rapid pace of change during crises can exacerbate employee stress and resistance, undermining organisational capacity, as a whole, if not managed effectively (Cameron & Green, 2019). The literature also critiques the lack of longitudinal studies, noting that resilience during a crisis may not automatically result in long-term sustainability or competitive advantage for organisations (Duchek, 2020).

2.7 The Impact of COVID-19 on the UK Retail Sector

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and severely disruptive impact on the UK retail sector. There was a sudden paradigm shift and several factors contributed to the disruption. Retailers were forced to respond quickly and take measures to survive. The factors that caused the most impact included:

- **Store Closures and Social Distancing** Government-imposed restrictions resulted in the temporary closure of non-essential businesses, disrupting traditional retail models. Retailers had to quickly adjust their operations, relying on e-commerce platforms and contactless delivery services.
- **Changing Consumer Behaviour:** The pandemic caused shifts in consumer behaviour, with an increased focus on health, safety, and convenience. E-commerce grew significantly as consumers avoided in-person shopping. Many consumers also focused on essential goods, with spending on non-essential products declining sharply during lockdowns.
- **Supply Chain Disruptions:** The pandemic led to widespread supply chain disruptions, with delays in production, transportation, and inventory management. Retailers had to adapt their supply chains quickly, diversify

suppliers, and consider alternative logistics solutions to maintain product availability.

- **Financial Impact:** Many retailers, particularly small and independent businesses, faced severe financial challenges due to reduced revenue during store closures. Large retailers with more robust financial positions were able to weather the storm more effectively, but even they had to make strategic adjustments, such as cost-cutting measures and temporary furloughs.
- **Acceleration of Digital Transformation:** The crisis accelerated digital transformation within the retail sector. Businesses that had already invested in e-commerce platforms, digital marketing, and omnichannel strategies were able to pivot more easily to an online model.
- **Adapting Business Models:** Many UK retailers introduced new business models during the pandemic. For example, some transitioned to click-and-collect services, while others offered virtual services or pivoted to new product lines (e.g., PPE and sanitising products). This shift highlights the importance of strategic flexibility and resilience in the face of a global crisis.

2.8 Summary and Research Gaps

The literature establishes a solid theoretical foundation for understanding how organisations navigated the COVID-19 crisis. Strategic management theories such as resource-based view and dynamic capabilities theories emphasise the importance of a firm's internal skills, resources, and ability to adapt.

Change management models describe how organisations implement strategic changes, while crisis management and resilience frameworks show how they respond to disruptions.

However, several gaps remain in the existing literature:

- **Limited comparative analysis across sectors:** Most studies focus on individual organisations or single segments of the retail sector, with minimal research comparing strategies across multiple sectors, including small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This limits understanding of sector-specific vulnerabilities, adaptive strategies, and how organisational size or market positioning influences strategic responses.
- **Insufficient exploration of operationalised change management during crises:** While change management theories are widely discussed, there is a lack of empirical evidence showing how organisations actually implemented strategic changes under crisis conditions. Specifically, how organisations adapted processes, reallocated resources, and engaged employees during COVID-19 remains underexplored.
- **Scarcity of long-term impact studies:** Most research has focused on immediate responses to the pandemic. Few studies have examined the enduring strategic consequences, such as lasting shifts in supply chain design, digital adoption, customer engagement models, or organisational culture. Understanding these long-term effects is essential to assess the sustainability and effectiveness of strategic adaptations.

This dissertation aims to address these gaps by investigating how the UK Retail sector adapted their strategies, managed organisational change, and built resilience, with a view toward long-term transformation.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This methodology chapter outlines the research methodology adopted to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the organisational strategies of UK retail businesses, with a focus on their adaptation and resilience. The research aims to answer key questions regarding the strategies employed by UK retailers during the pandemic and how these strategies have influenced their post-pandemic recovery. In particular, the study aims to understand how organisations such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, BT, and Vodafone responded strategically to environmental turbulence caused by the pandemic.

This section outlines the research design and methods adopted to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on organisational strategy specifically in terms of adaptation and resilience in the UK retail sectors. It provides an in-depth explanation of the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

Saunders et al. (2019) present the “research onion” as a framework for guiding methodology. This consists of six layers, each representing a stage in the research design process.

- 1. Research philosophy** - the assumptions about how knowledge is created and understood. This study adopts an interpretivist stance, recognising that managers' responses to COVID-19 can only be understood by interpreting their subjective experiences.

2. **Research approach** - How theory and data are connected. This study aligns with an **inductive orientation**, moving from data (interviews, corporate reports) to the development of insights about organisational adaptation.
3. **Methodological choice** - Whether the research uses qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. This dissertation adopts a qualitative strategy and focuses on detailed accounts of how organisations responded to crisis, rather than numerical generalisations.
4. **Research strategy** - The design of the study. A multiple case study approach has been adopted, focusing on Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT. This enables comparison across organisations and sectors, while also incorporating interviews with managers from other retail organisations.
5. **Time horizon** - distinguishes between cross-sectional and longitudinal research. This study is cross-sectional, examining organisational responses during the period 2020–2022 to understand the immediate crisis period and its strategic implications.
6. **Techniques and procedures** - Data collection and analysis. This research combines semi-structured interviews with secondary data from company reports, media coverage, and industry documents.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to the set of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge and shapes how the researcher approaches the study, the methods chosen, and how findings are interpreted.

In this study the philosophy is adopts a predominantly interpretivist approach with some elements of pragmatism. Interpretivism is appropriate because the research seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of managers within retail organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. It assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent, meaning that organisational responses cannot be reduced to objective measures alone but must be understood in relation to how actors interpret and give meaning to events (Bryman 2016).

Pragmatism emphasises the usefulness of knowledge in solving real-world problems, and it allows the use of multiple methods to address research questions. Secondary documentary data from Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT are analysed alongside interviews with managers from other retailers. By combining these sources, the research acknowledges that no single philosophical stance is sufficient on its own. Instead, insights are generated by drawing on whichever approach best addresses the research objectives.

This combined stance ,interpretivist at its core but pragmatic in its flexibility, ensures that the study remains both theoretically grounded and practically relevant. It allows for sensitivity to the unique contexts of organisational behaviour while also producing findings that can inform practical recommendations for resilience and strategy in the retail sector.

3.3 Research Approach

This is the second layer of Saunders' research onion and relates to the research approach. Research can follow a deductive, inductive, or abductive approach.

- A **deductive approach** begins with established theory, formulates hypotheses, and tests them using data.
- An **inductive approach** moves from data towards theory, building concepts and insights through analysis.
- An **abductive approach** combines elements of both, iterating between data and theory to develop plausible explanations.

The research follows an inductive approach. It seeks to generate insights grounded in managers' experiences and in the documentary evidence of strategic decisions (Bryman 2016) Induction is appropriate to build an understanding of how resilience and adaptation occurred in practice.

3.4 Research Strategy

A multiple case study design has been adopted which allows for an in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). This also allows for the integration of primary and secondary data.

The case studies of Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT are primarily from secondary sources such as annual reports, corporate statements, and media coverage. These are supplemented by semi-structured interviews with managers from other retail organisations, which provide additional perspectives and highlight the contrasts between large and smaller firms.

A multiple case study offers several advantages:

1. **Comparative Analysis:** Studying organisations from differing segments within the retail sector (For example, supermarkets and telecoms) helps identify sector-specific challenges and responses.
2. **Replication Logic:** Examining multiple cases allows patterns from one organisation to be compared with others. This strengthens insights into how different companies adapted their strategies during the pandemic.
3. **Detailed, Contextual Data:** Case studies provide deep analysis of documents, press releases, interviews, and media coverage.
4. **Theoretical Integration:** The design allows the study to link empirical observations to existing theories, such as Porter's generic strategies, RBV, and dynamic capabilities, demonstrating how organisations adapted resources and capabilities in response to environmental turbulence.

The case study design also supports using multiple sources, methods, or data types to cross-check findings.

3.5 Data Collection Method/Choice

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary form of qualitative data collection because they combine structure with flexibility. This approach ensured that key topics were addressed while also allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on issues that were particularly relevant to their own organisational experiences.

Participants were selected from individuals who held managerial roles in UK retail organisations. The criteria required that interviewees had responsibility for

operational or strategic decision-making during the pandemic. The participants included managers from a range of organisational sizes and sectors.

Questions were focused around six key themes:

1. **Strategic Adaptation** - how organisations adjusted their strategies in response to the pandemic.
2. **Change Management** - the approaches used to implement rapid change.
3. **Resource-Based View (RBV)** - the role of tangible and intangible resources in enabling adaptation.
4. **Dynamic Capabilities** - how organisations reconfigured, integrated, and built new capabilities to respond.
5. **Organisational Resilience** - the strategies that supported continuity and recovery.
6. **Long-Term Impacts** - the extent to which changes have been sustained or institutionalised.

The interviews were conducted with managers from a range of retail organisations other than Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, or BT (as no managers were available from these organisations). The semi-structured interviews were chosen because they strike a balance between comparability and depth and to explore the themes identified in the literature.

By focusing on managers who had been directly involved in navigating the crisis, the researcher was able to obtain organisation-based evidence that complemented the secondary data analysis of larger organisations.

Data was collected from two complementary sources, semi-structured interviews and secondary documentary evidence. Using both forms of data ensured triangulation, strengthened the credibility of the findings, and allowed the research to capture both sector-wide patterns and firm-specific details.

Semi-structured interviews provided primary data in the form of first-hand accounts from retail managers. Participants were selected to ensure they had responsibility for operational or strategic decisions during the pandemic. Interviews followed a guide structured around six key themes, strategic adaptation, change management, resource-based view (RBV), dynamic capabilities, organisational resilience, and long-term impacts. The interviews were conducted remotely using online platforms or conference call, and each lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Detailed transcripts were produced for analysis.

The **secondary data** focused on the four case study organisations, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT. These companies were chosen because they represent large-scale retailers in food and telecommunications. These were two essential sectors that played a critical role during the pandemic. Data sources included annual reports (2020–2022), investor presentations, corporate press releases, government filings, media coverage, and industry reports from trade bodies and consultancy firms.

Sources included:

- Annual reports and financial statements (2020–2022).
- Corporate communications, such as press releases and website updates.
- Media coverage in reputable outlets (e.g., *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*).

- Industry reports from organisations such as the British Retail Consortium and Ofcom.

These documents provided evidence of organisational strategies, financial performance, and operational decisions during the pandemic.

Using multiple sources allowed for triangulation, which strengthens credibility by comparing evidence from different perspectives (Yin, 2018). By integrating these two forms of data, the study was able to draw on both insider perspectives from across the retail sector and publicly available evidence from major organisations. This data collection ensured that the study captured both the organisational responses and the common themes during Covid-19.

3.6 Time Horizon.

Research may be either longitudinal, examining phenomena over an extended period, or cross-sectional, providing a snapshot of experiences and practices at a particular point in time.

This study adopted a cross-sectional time horizon where data was collected within a defined period when COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent between 2020 and 2022. A longitudinal design could have provided valuable insights into how strategies continued to evolve beyond 2022; however the cross-sectional approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the main period when the most significant strategic adaptations and resilience measures were introduced. A cross-sectional approach was sufficient to meet the research objectives (Bryman, 2016).

3.7 Data Analysis

To examine both interview transcripts and secondary documents, Thematic analysis was chosen because it provides a systematic but flexible way of identifying patterns across qualitative data. The analysis followed the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006).

The process began with familiarisation, during which interview transcripts and secondary documents were read multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of their content.

Initial codes were generated. Segments of text that related to the research questions (such as references to digital innovation, supply chain challenges, leadership decisions, or long-term changes) were highlighted and assigned descriptive labels.

The next stage involved searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader categories that corresponded closely with the six areas of the interview guide and the theoretical framework: strategic adaptation, change management, resource-based view (RBV), dynamic capabilities, organisational resilience, and long-term impacts.

Each theme was then defined and named capturing both the descriptive elements (what happened) and the interpretive meaning (why these developments mattered for strategy and resilience).

Patterns in the data were interpreted and linked back to theory with a focus on the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities, resilience theory, and change management frameworks.

The analysis was therefore both deductive and inductive. Deductive coding ensured that data was examined against the six predefined themes. Inductive coding allowed new insights such as dependency on government grants or hybrid working as cultural shift.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations ensure that research is conducted with integrity, respect, and fairness. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the university and was designed to protect both participants and the organisations whose documents were analysed.

For the semi-structured interviews, several steps were taken:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.
- Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Participants were not identified by name, and any organisational identifiers were removed from transcripts.
- Voluntary participation was emphasised, ensuring that participants felt no pressure to take part.
- Data security was maintained by storing digital files on password-protected devices and anonymised transcripts in secure folders.

For the **secondary data**:

- Only publicly available and legitimate sources were used, such as annual reports, press releases, and news articles.

- Care was taken to interpret documents accurately and avoid misrepresentation.
- Where direct quotations or figures are used, these are fully referenced to acknowledge original authorship and avoid plagiarism.

By addressing these ethical concerns, the study safeguarded participants' rights, ensured transparency, and enhanced the credibility of its findings.

3.9 Sampling Strategy

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy which was chosen because it enabled the deliberate selection of participants who could provide informed perspectives on the research questions (Saunders et al 2019). Interviewees were required to hold managerial roles within UK retail organisations and to have had direct responsibility for operational or strategic decision-making during the pandemic.

Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate, focusing on individuals who were directly involved in these processes, and to gain insider knowledge. This sampling strategy also focussed on and included managers from a range of retail organisations differing in size, structure within the sector.

3.10 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity of qualitative research, requires different considerations compared to quantitative approaches and the emphasis is on credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Several measures were taken to strengthen credibility. The use of multiple data sources semi-structured interviews and secondary documents was strengthened through triangulation reducing bias (Patton. 1999). The interview guide was designed directly from the literature review and research objectives, ensuring consistency across interviews.

Dependability was enhanced by keeping a clear record of how interviews were conducted, and how data were coded and analysed.

Confirmability was supported through reflexivity. The researcher sought to minimise bias by adopting a systematic coding process and cross-checking emerging themes against both primary and secondary data. Interpretations were grounded in evidence, and attention was given to contradictions as well as consistencies in the data.

Transferability was addressed by providing detailed description of the research context and participant roles. The findings offer insights that may be applicable to other retail organisations facing similar disruptions.

The use of triangulation, reflexivity, and detailed documentation provides a robust foundation for the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.11 Limitations of the Methodology

All research designs involve certain limitations, and in this study the following were identified:

- **Access to large organisations.** Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT are the central case study, and interviews were not conducted with managers within those organisations but rather relied on secondary data.
- **Limitations in qualitative research.** Data from semi-structured interviews is interpretive and may be influenced by participant subjectivity or recall bias.
- **Limitation within time period.** The research focuses on the UK retail and telecommunications sectors during the period 2020–2022. It captures the immediate organisational responses to COVID-19, but not longer-term outcomes beyond this period.
- **Limitations of generalisation.** Case studies provide depth rather than breadth. The findings cannot be assumed to represent all organisations in the UK retail sector.
- **Limitations in the use of secondary data.** Corporate reports and media statements may present organisations in a favourable light, downplaying challenges.

The research provides a credible and valuable analysis of how UK organisations responded strategically to the COVID-19 pandemic despite the limitations.

3.12 Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology employed in this study, working systematically through the layers of Saunders' research onion to ensure that philosophical assumptions, methodological choices, and data collection techniques are coherent and aligned with the research objectives.

The study adopted an interpretivist, pragmatic philosophy, and this recognises the importance of understanding managers' subjective experiences whilst also making practical use of multiple sources of evidence. There was an inductive approach, with some abductive elements, guided the connection between data and theory. The research design was based on a multiple case study strategy, focusing on four major organisations, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT, while drawing on interviews from managers in other retail firms to provide wider insights across the sector.

Data was collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews with managers from a range of retail organisations and secondary documents relating to four major case study firms: Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT. Analysis followed a thematic approach using a process that was both deductive (guided by six predefined themes) and inductive (open to new insights). Patterns were collected and linked to the theoretical frameworks. Ethical considerations, issues of reliability, validity, and trustworthiness, as well as key limitations, were also addressed to demonstrate transparency and rigour.

This provides a strong foundation for Chapter 4, which presents the findings and analysis derived from the data.

Chapter 4 Findings/Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, focusing on how UK retailers adapted to the COVID-19 crisis and reports the data collected from both secondary sources and semi-structured interviews.

Data was derived from two sources, primary and secondary. Secondary materials, including annual reports, press releases, and media articles from Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT. Primary data came from interviews with managers in smaller retail companies. These sources combined, captured both sector-wide patterns and organisational diversity.

The analysis is structured around the six core themes that guided the analysis: strategic adaptation, change management, resources and the Resource-Based View (RBV), dynamic capabilities, organisational resilience, and long-term impacts. Each theme is explored by contrasting the experiences of large organisations, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT, with those of the smaller companies represented in the interviews.

The empirical findings are linked with established theories. The discussion relates the findings within the wider literature on crisis management, digital transformation, and strategic renewal, identifying whether this study confirms, challenges, or extends existing knowledge.

4.2 Strategic Adaptation

Strategic adaptation refers to the deliberate and emergent adjustments organisations make in response to shifts in their environment, with the aim of preserving continuity, seizing opportunities, and sustaining long-term competitiveness.

Large Organisations

For Tesco and Sainsbury's, the most urgent challenge was the surge in demand for online grocery shopping. Tesco reported in its 2020 annual review that online sales doubled within weeks of the first lockdown, requiring the rapid scaling of delivery capacity from around 600,000 weekly slots to over 1.5 million by mid-2020.

Sainsbury's experienced a similar escalation, with its digital capacity increasing by 80% between March and May 2020. These adaptations were initially temporary measures but transitioned into changes in operating models, embedding digital channels into long-term strategies.

Both supermarkets also reprioritised their customer bases. Vulnerable customers were identified and given early access to delivery slots. This reinforced trust in the supermarkets' social role and was later formalised in their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies (Sainsbury's Annual Report, 2021).

For Vodafone and BT (telecoms companies), the challenge was ensuring network resilience amid surging digital traffic. Vodafone UK reported a 50% increase in broadband usage during the first lockdown (March 2020), whilst BT recorded a substantially increased daytime network usage level. Both companies responded by fast-tracking investments in broadband capacity and expanding their fibre broadband rollout programmes. Vodafone also launched initiatives such as zero-rated access to

NHS websites. BT accelerated its digital products for businesses, including hybrid work platforms.

For all four organisations, strategic adaptation was the continuation and expansion of established strategies. Tesco and Sainsbury's had invested in online delivery for years, while Vodafone and BT had long-term plans for network expansion. The pandemic compelled the rapid scaling and embedding of existing strategies.

Adaptation consolidated existing market positions by capitalising on their organisational scale and infrastructure.

Interview Findings

Strategic adaptation was more about improvisation and experimentation. A.N. reflected on how digital platforms, suddenly became indispensable: *"We wrote new audit manuals for remote delivery. The cloud became the backbone of our work almost overnight."* The underutilised resources were elevated into core capabilities when circumstances demanded.

M.A. gave a unique illustration of adaption where her travel company pivoted rapidly into new areas with the sudden closure of international travel, *"We went remote next day on 3CX, added PCR partnerships, and even chartered flights."* The company entered into new sectors and seized opportunities outside normal operations.

For S.S. there was a similar dramatic change. *"Our B2B market collapsed overnight, so we pivoted to direct-to-consumer subscriptions."* This was a wholesale change in the customer base and business model, representing strategic renewal under duress.

For others adaptation was transformative but less dramatic. Z.S.-Z. explained “*We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas.*” Adaptation meant technological upgrades with a narrowing of focus to ensure that resources were concentrated on key services.

S.Y. captured how adaptation could operate simultaneously at global and local levels. She recounted how the company’s product and marketing strategies were reshaped to reflect shifting consumer behaviours: “*We pivoted product mix and campaigns to digital-first, lifestyle categories. Loungewear became a core focus because that’s what people wanted during lockdowns.*”

These findings show that large organisations consolidated their market positions by accelerating existing strategies. Smaller companies often adapted through improvisation, diversification, and renewal.

Discussion

The findings align with several strands of strategic management theory. Porter’s (1980, 1985) competitive strategy framework emphasises that established companies often protect their positions by reinforcing existing strengths. Tesco and Sainsbury’s strategies planned, and oriented toward scaling pre-existing investments. Meyer’s (1982) theory of environmental jolts, which argues that sudden shocks accelerate trajectories already in motion, as was in the case of Vodafone and BT.

The behaviour of smaller firms, by contrast, is better explained by theories of emergent strategy. Mintzberg and Waters (1985) argue that strategies often evolve incrementally through improvisation and learning. The pivots undertaken by A.N.,

M.A., and S.S. illustrate this emergent quality, as companies improvised strategies that later became embedded.

The findings on strategic adaptation resonate strongly with Porter's (1980) emphasis on industry positioning and competitive dynamics, but with an important distinction. Large organisations such as Tesco and Sainsbury's adapted by reinforcing scale-driven advantages, consolidating their existing strengths in logistics and multichannel delivery, confirming Porter's view. Smaller companies pursued diversification and business model renewal. This divergence supports Teece's (2007) concept of dynamic capabilities as contextually expressed. Large organisations with market positioning routinised adaptation, whilst smaller companies improvised transformation.

4.3 Change Management

Change management concerns the processes by which organisations implement and embed strategic and operational adjustments in response to internal or external pressures (Burnes, 2017). It is not about the design of new strategies but how these are communicated, enacted, and sustained within organisations. Effective change management requires balancing the technical side of change, restructuring processes, reallocating resources, implementing systems, with the human side of change, including communication, trust, and engagement (Kotter, 1996).

During COVID-19 pandemic, organisations were required to implement changes at unprecedented speed, with limited time for planning or consultation.

Large Organisations

Change management during the pandemic was characterised by the rapid scaling of

systems and the implementation of structured processes to manage disruption at scale. Tesco and Sainsbury's relied heavily on formal planning and communication systems to coordinate thousands of staff across distributed networks. Both organisations introduced daily operational briefings across its stores and distribution hubs.

At Tesco, over 45,000 staff were recruited within the first few months of the pandemic, whilst Sainsbury's made comparable adjustments, retraining in-store staff for logistics roles and checkout operations. These changes were managed through formal training programmes and reinforced by corporate communications. These systematised approaches reflect the structured nature of change management in large organisations.

Vodafone and BT drew on established project management practices to roll out technical upgrades under intense pressure. Vodafone's crisis response included the rapid expansion of broadband capacity and the fast-tracking of 5G rollout. Both organisations emphasised transparency in staff communication, holding frequent virtual meetings to keep employees informed of operational changes and safety measures.

Change management in large organisations combined formal governance structures, centralised oversight, and scaled workforce management. There was coexistence of planned change approaches with elements of rapid, emergent adaptation

Interview Findings

The interviews revealed that smaller organisations and managers often relied on communication, trust, and role flexibility to manage change. A.N. explained how his

company adopted daily meetings *“We had 10-minute meetings every day just to make sure everyone was aligned.”* This illustrates how communication became a substitute for formal structures, creating a rhythm of accountability and shared direction.

P.W. described how oversight was maintained despite the absence of physical supervision: *“We introduced accountability trackers for remote audits. This made sure work was monitored even though staff were not in the office.”* His example highlights how digital tools enabled continuity and reassured clients at a time of uncertainty.

I.T. emphasised the importance of reassurance through regular communication: *“Staff were regularly updated via email and video messages. This built confidence that we were on top of the situation.”* His approach reflects the way trust and clarity provided the foundation for change management.

M.G. described appointing a project manager to oversee remote operations and data security, establishing a focal point for adaptation. S.S. however demonstrated how change was achieved through flexibility in roles: *“Everyone had to adjust their roles. We were doing things we’d never done before.”* His experience illustrates how employees collectively undertook new responsibilities.

Z.S.-Z. explained how her company combined digital upgrades with a review of the business model *“We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas.”* Change was managed through both technical and strategic adjustments. M.A. described how diversification required staff to adapt new lines of work.

These narratives demonstrate that change management in smaller companies was less about formal processes and more about flexibility, communication, and improvisation.

Discussion

The findings illustrate the coexistence of planned and emergent approaches to change, a duality described by Burnes (2017). Large organisations relied on planned, structured models consistent with Lewin's (1951) three-step model and Kotter's (1996) eight-step framework. Change was carefully orchestrated through leadership, communication, and formal systems.

The findings on change management illustrate how organisational context determines whether change is implemented through systematised routines or through collective and engagement-driven methods. Large firms such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT had the resources, infrastructure, and managerial depth to implement highly planned processes. Their ability to redeploy tens of thousands of staff, coordinate complex logistics, or roll out large-scale digital solutions reflects the continued relevance of traditional models of planned change (Lewin, 1951; Kotter, 1996). For these firms, change was routinised and embedded within formal structures of leadership and communication, reflecting a reliance on hierarchy and scale.

Smaller organisations demonstrated that change management could be achieved through simple relationship-based approaches rather than formal systems. Daily short meetings, role flexibility, reassurance through regular updates, or the creation of ad hoc managerial roles reflect a more fluid, emergent mode of change.

Planned and emergent change is a duality that was observed in the findings and is in line with the literature. The structured redeployment and communication strategies of large organisations align with Lewin's (1947) three-step model and Kotter's (1996) staged approach. Smaller companies, however, relied on short meetings, direct coordination, and flexible roles.

The implications for the wider literature are significant. First, the evidence supports Burnes' (2017) argument that planned and emergent change coexist, with their balance shaped by organisational context. Second, it highlights the limitations of universalist models of change management, showing instead that effective approaches are contingent on structure, resources, and culture.

The findings confirm that effective change management during crises is not about adopting one model universally but about aligning approaches with organisational structure, scale, and resources. Large organisations benefited from routinised, planned processes, whilst smaller companies relied on informal trust-driven practices.

4.4 Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) argues that organisations achieve sustainable competitive advantage by controlling resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney 1991). These resources can be tangible, such as logistics infrastructure, or intangible, such as brand reputation, legitimacy, and trust. Examining how firms mobilised and reconfigured resources during the COVID-19 pandemic provides insight into which assets underpinned resilience and adaptation.

Large Organisations

For Tesco and Sainsbury's, logistical infrastructure and scale proved critical. Both retailers had invested in supply chain systems and online distribution long before COVID-19. These resources became decisive once demand for online shopping surged. Tesco's annual report (2020) emphasised its ability to draw on its nationwide distribution centres and fleet of delivery vehicles, enabling a rapid doubling of online slots. Sainsbury's similarly leveraged its Argos logistics network, which had been integrated into its operations following the 2016 acquisition, to expand its digital delivery capacity. These examples highlight how pre-existing infrastructure became strategically valuable under crisis conditions.

For Vodafone and BT, the key resources were digital infrastructure and network capacity. Vodafone's broadband and mobile networks, along with its early investments in 5G, enabled it to absorb a 50% increase in traffic without major service disruption. BT drew on its Openreach subsidiary to continue the rollout of fibre broadband. Both organisations had a large workforce, particularly engineers and IT specialists as resources that could not easily be substituted or imitated.

Intangible assets such as reputation and legitimacy also played a critical role. Tesco and Sainsbury's were able to strengthen their public standing by prioritising vulnerable customers for home delivery slots which reinforced their image as socially responsible organisations. Vodafone and BT similarly enhanced their reputations by zero-rating access to NHS websites and providing free data for schoolchildren.

Interview Findings

Smaller companies relied on different kinds of resources, often less structural but

equally strategic. A.N. described how underused cloud platforms became central:

“The cloud became the backbone of our work almost overnight.”

S.S. highlighted organisational culture and social capital *“Everyone had to adjust their roles. We were doing things we’d never done before.”* Teamwork and flexibility served as rare, inimitable resources.

M.A. credited customer trust with enabling his firm to diversify: *“Clients trusted us to deliver even when we entered new areas like PCR testing.”* Reputation functioned as a resource, allowing strategic pivots to succeed.

S.Y. drew attention to the brand equity *“Loungewear became a core focus because that’s what people wanted during lockdowns.”* Reconfiguring brand identity and marketing around lifestyle needs reflected the strategic importance of intangible assets like brand reputation.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a stress test for the RBV, exposing which resources were genuinely strategic under crisis conditions. For large organisations, physical infrastructure and logistics networks proved decisive. Tesco’s and Sainsbury’s ability to expand delivery capacity illustrates the strategic value of resources that are difficult to replicate quickly. In Vodafone and BT, investment in fibre networks and digital platforms positioned them to absorb demand surges.

Smaller companies relied on intangible resources, trust, cultural cohesion, reputation, and flexibility to maintain performance. For example, M.A. emphasised that customer trust gave her company legitimacy when diversifying into PCR (Covid)

testing, whilst S.S. underscored the importance of team adaptability. These findings highlight the resilience value of intangible resources.

The findings highlight the complementarity of tangible and intangible resources in sustaining organisations. Large organisations leveraged scale, logistics, and infrastructure, as well as reinforced legitimacy and reputation. Smaller firms lacked structural buffers however mobilised trust, culture, and relationships as strategic assets.

The findings show that variation in resources determined organisational responses, which is consistent with Barney's (1991) Resource-Based View. Large organisations leveraged VRIN resources such as logistics and financial reserves to consolidate advantage. Smaller businesses relied on intangible resources like trust and reputation. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) emphasise that resources hold value not in isolation but in relation to dynamic environments. This became apparent in how digital tools became strategically indispensable during the crisis.

Within the wider literature, the analysis demonstrates that RBV remains a powerful lens for explaining resilience and adaptation during crises. In crises, both tangible (logistics, digital infrastructure) and intangible (trust, legitimacy, reputation) resources can underpin resilience.

4.5 Dynamic Capabilities

The Dynamic Capabilities framework, advanced by Teece et al. (1997) and refined by Teece (2007), focuses on how firms integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. Dynamic capabilities consist of three core processes, sensing opportunities and threats,

seizing them through strategic action, and transforming or reconfiguring organisational assets and structures. During the COVID-19 pandemic organisations faced immediate operational breakdowns and shifting customer behaviours.

Large Organisations

For Tesco and Sainsbury's, dynamic capabilities were expressed through the acceleration of digital and logistical strategies that had been in place before the crisis. Tesco's rapid expansion of online delivery slots demonstrates the firm's capacity to sense surging consumer demand, seize it by redirecting staff into other roles, and reconfigure existing infrastructure to scale operations. Sainsbury's leveraged its Argos network to enhance its delivery capacity.

Both organisations also demonstrated sensing in relation to customer vulnerabilities. By identifying the needs of elderly and shielding customers, they seized the opportunity to reinforce legitimacy through priority delivery slots.

Vodafone reported the ability to respond to a 50% increase in broadband traffic within days, an outcome that reflects years of investment in sensing and forecasting network demand. It seized this opportunity to reinforce its role as a critical utility provider, expanding broadband capacity and prioritising health and education services through measures such as zero-rating NHS websites. BT, through Openreach, accelerated fibre rollouts and expanded digital solutions for businesses. Both organisations reconfigured their human resources by reallocating engineers and technical staff to priority projects.

In large organisations, dynamic capabilities manifested through established routines such as the ability to mobilise large-scale logistics or infrastructure and reallocate resources.

Interview Findings

Smaller organisations expressed dynamic capabilities in highly entrepreneurial and often improvised ways. For A.N., the pandemic prompted a rapid shift from improvisation to institutionalisation. He explained that remote audits, initially introduced out of necessity, were quickly codified into manuals: *“We wrote new audit manuals for remote delivery. The cloud became the backbone of our work almost overnight.”* His experience demonstrates how dynamic capabilities can evolve from ad hoc experimentation into repeatable, embedded routines.

M.A. described a more dramatic approach, and diversification. Her travel company, was severely affected by the ban on international travel, pivoted into entirely new service areas: *“We went remote next day on 3CX, added PCR partnerships, and even chartered flights.”* This pivot highlighted dynamic capabilities through improvisation and seizing opportunities.

For S.S. there was a similar radical adaptation: *“Our B2B market collapsed overnight, so we pivoted to direct-to-consumer subscriptions.”* This pivot illustrates the sensing of collapse in one market, the seizing of opportunity in another, and the reconfiguration of the firm’s business model in real time. For Z.S.-Z., adaptation took the form of a combined approach. She explained: *“We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas.”* Her company strengthened their digital

infrastructure and narrowed its service portfolio, demonstrating technical and strategic adaptation.

Others highlighted organisational redesigns. M.G. described how his company appointed a project manager to oversee remote operations. This created a new governance structure that stabilised operations. I.T. emphasised the speed with which processes were transformed: *“Audits were flipped online within days. We had to reassure staff and clients that the process was secure and reliable.”* The company reconfigured processes and also reinforced confidence through communication.

The study illustrate that dynamic capabilities were expressed differently across organisational contexts during the pandemic. Large organisations like Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Vodafone, and BT demonstrated routinised dynamic capabilities, reconfiguring resources and strategic planning. Tesco scaled online operations through supply chain systems, whilst Vodafone and BT expanded digital infrastructure using pre-existing investment plans. These are in line with Teece’s (2007) framework of sensing, seizing, and transforming in a routinised form.

Smaller companies’ dynamic capabilities were more improvised and entrepreneurial. M.A.’s diversification into PCR (Covid) testing and chartering flights, or S.S.’s pivot from B2B to direct-to-consumer models, exemplify dynamic capabilities as emergent practices.

Discussion

Dynamic capabilities were expressed differently across organisational contexts during the pandemic. Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Vodafone, and BT demonstrated routinised dynamic capabilities, reconfiguring resources with established processes.

Tesco scaled online operations through developed supply chain systems, whilst Vodafone and BT expanded digital infrastructure using pre-existing investment plans. These actions reflect Teece's (2007) framework of sensing, seizing, and transforming but in a routinised, incremental form, embedded in existing capabilities as opposed to new.

Dynamic capabilities in smaller firms manifested in more improvised and entrepreneurial ways. M.A.'s diversification into PCR testing and chartering flights, or S.S.'s pivot from B2B to direct-to-consumer models, exemplify dynamic capabilities as emergent practices. Similarly, A.N.'s codification of remote audit practices illustrates how improvisations under pressure can evolve into structured capabilities.

The evidence supports a contingent view of dynamic capabilities. In stable environments, dynamic capabilities may be routinised, but in high-velocity contexts like COVID-19, they emerge through improvisation, rapid learning, and network mobilisation. This duality is also reflected in S.Y.'s account of a multinational response, where routinised global processes coexisted with local improvisations, confirming the coexistence of planned and emergent approaches to reconfiguration.

The broader implication is that dynamic capabilities cannot be understood as uniform processes but must be defined by organisational settings. For large organisations, they were path-dependent and structured. In smaller companies, they were improvised and transformative. This distinction extends the literature by showing how the nature of dynamic capabilities shifts with organisational scale and crisis conditions, reinforcing Teece et al.'s (1997) emphasis on adaptability.

The study's findings align closely with Teece's (2007) triad of sensing, seizing, and transforming but demonstrate that capabilities are expressed differently across contexts. Large organisations exhibited routinised capabilities, consistent with Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) observation that dynamic capabilities in moderately dynamic markets tend to take the form of structured processes. Smaller companies, which engaged in improvisational reconfiguration, showed consistency with the argument that in rapidly changing environments capabilities are experiential and adaptive.

Overall, the evidence suggests that dynamic capabilities are not fixed but adaptive in nature. Large firms exhibited routinised, structural capabilities, while smaller firms enacted entrepreneurial and improvisational capabilities. Both pathways reflect the central tenet of the framework: the capacity to reconfigure resources in rapidly changing environments.

4.6 Organisational Resilience

Organisational resilience is the capacity to absorb shocks, adapt to disruption, and sustain or even enhance performance in turbulent conditions (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Resilience can be expressed through structural robustness, such as financial slack and operational buffers. It can also be through cultural and relational strengths, including trust, adaptability, and shared purpose. Resilience is shaped by structures, resources, and culture.

COVID-19 was an extreme test of resilience across the UK retail sectors. Large organisations, with deep resources, were able to create structural buffers and extend

redundancy in systems. Smaller companies demonstrated resilience through cultural cohesion, relational trust, and improvisation.

Large Organisations

Tesco and Sainsbury's demonstrated resilience through redundant systems and organisational reserves. Both organisations had the financial reserves, logistics infrastructure, and workforce scale to absorb sudden surges in demand and supply chain disruption. Tesco's rapid recruitment of 45,000 temporary staff and redeployment of existing employees provided the organisational slack for maintaining operations. Sainsbury's leveraged its subsidiary Argos logistics network to buffer disruption and maintained continuity.

By prioritising vulnerable customers for delivery slots and supporting food banks, the supermarkets reinforced trust whilst securing their role as essential services. This was alignment of structural resilience with cultural legitimacy which highlights that resilience is not just about operational strength.

Vodafone and BT showed structural resilience when their network infrastructure and financial capacity allowed them to absorb unprecedented demand for digital services. Vodafone was able to manage a 50% increase in traffic without major outages, whilst BT emphasised the resilience of its Openreach operations in continuing fibre rollout projects.

Additionally, resilience shaped by organisational culture was evident in employee support. BT introduced additional wellbeing resources and flexible working policies, recognising that resilience was human. Vodafone launched mental health support

initiatives. These efforts suggest that resilience in large organisations was constructed as a blend of structure and culture.

In large organisation's resilience was structural and resource-based, reflecting the advantages of size and established capacity.

Interview Findings

Resilience was enacted not through structural capacity but more through collective culture and improvisation. S.S. highlighted how persistence and teamwork sustained his firm: *"Everyone had to adjust their roles. We were doing things we'd never done before."* His account reflects resilience built on flexibility and mutual support.

M.A. explained that **client trust** was important to her company's *"Clients trusted us to deliver even when we entered new areas like PCR testing."* This illustrates resilience as a function of credibility and relational resources.

A.N. emphasised how his company formalised improvisations into long term practices: *"We wrote new audit manuals for remote delivery."* What began as initial response to covid-19 became a resilience drill and embedded preparedness for future disruptions.

Z.S.-Z. described resilience as digital upgrades and rationalisation of services: *"We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas."* This shows how resilience can emerge from focus and investing in scalable systems.

M.G. noted that resilience was supported by introducing new governance structures, such as appointing a project manager to oversee remote operations and ensuring continuity.

S.Y. explained how resilience was multi-layered: *“A crisis team coordinated globally with local tailoring.”* Her company demonstrated structural resilience at the global level whilst enabling adaptive responses at the local level.

These accounts highlight that resilience in large firms was structural and systemic, while in smaller organisations it emerged through shared identity and trust-based relations.

Discussion

The findings confirm resilience as a multidimensional construct (Duchek, 2020). Large organisations relied on structural buffers highlighting the role of surplus capacity in maintaining stability.

Resilience appears as a multidimensional construct shaped by organisational scale and resource base. Large incumbents such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT expressed resilience primarily through structural robustness. Tesco's recruitment of 45,000 temporary staff and Sainsbury's use of Argos logistics illustrate Cyert and March's (1963) notion of organisational slack, where excess capacity is mobilised to absorb shocks. Similarly, Vodafone and BT leveraged their digital infrastructure to handle surging demand, highlighting redundancy and systemic capacity as critical enablers of resilience. These examples align with Tierney's (2003) systems-based view of resilience, which emphasises redundancy and robustness in complex organisations.

Smaller firms, however, demonstrated resilience through cultural and relational strengths rather than structural buffers. S.S.'s account of employees taking on

unfamiliar roles, M.A.'s reliance on client trust, and Z.S.-Z.'s streamlining of services all highlight how resilience was built through adaptability, credibility, and cohesion.

The interviews illustrate resilience rooted in social capital and trust, consistent with Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) who argued that organisational resilience is more than just structural elements. It also encompasses cultural and relational capabilities, which are developed through strategic human resource management practices, enabling a firm to adapt and thrive amidst change

The findings confirm that there is no one path to resilience, but it is a contingent process shaped by organisational context. Large organisations rely on financial slack and systemic redundancy. Smaller companies depend on trust, culture, and improvisation. The evidence demonstrates that structural and cultural resilience is complementary. Large organisations consolidated resilience through buffers whilst smaller companies demonstrated that intangible resources could provide equally effective for survival and renewal.

The divergence in resilience pathways reflects debates in the literature about the structural versus cultural bases of resilience. Large organisations demonstrated resilience through redundancy, slack, and systemic capacity, supporting Christopher and Peck's (2004) contention that supply chain resilience depends on redundancy and visibility. Smaller companies demonstrated resilience through cultural cohesion, trust, and adaptability, aligning with Lengnick-Hall et al.'s (2011) view of resilience as socially constructed.

Resilience theory is extended by demonstrating that crises generate divergent but equally valid resilience pathways. Large organisations consolidate resilience through

buffers and systemic capacity. Smaller companies sustain it through culture, relationships, and improvisation. Both pathways underscore the contextual and multifaceted nature of organisational resilience.

4.7 Long-Term Impacts

Long-term strategic impacts refer to the enduring changes that organisations continue after a crisis, to shape their future direction and competitive position. Crises can act either as accelerators of existing trajectories, embedding and deepening ongoing strategies, or as turning points that drive radical reinvention. Examining these long-term impacts reveals how different types of firms translated short-term responses into long term change.

Large Organisations

Both Tesco and Sainsbury's, reported that the surge in online demand had a permanent effect on consumer behaviour. Tesco's 2021 annual report highlighted that online grocery sales had grown by over 70% year-on-year and were expected to remain at a higher level. Sainsbury's also reported that online sales had doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels. This embedding digital commerce into the long-term growth strategy. Investments in online infrastructure were repositioned as central pillars of competitive strategy.

Tesco also introduced hybrid shopping models which combined digital and physical channels (e.g Click and collect services). These services became permanent features of its retail model. Sainsbury's integrated Argos more deeply into its operations, using the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate its transformation

into a digital-first retailer. The pandemic did not just disrupt operations but acted as a catalyst that reshaped strategic direction.

Vodafone's expansion of broadband capacity and digital services established a stronger foundation for its role as a critical infrastructure provider. Initiatives, such as zero-rating NHS websites and providing data access for schoolchildren, became part of its long-term commitment to social responsibility. BT embedded hybrid work practices and accelerated the rollout of fibre broadband. These changes demonstrate how the organisations reinforced resilience accelerated strategic priorities. The resources of large organisations allowed them to absorb shocks and then transform accelerated responses into permanent features of their strategies

Interview findings

Long-term impacts were often more transformative. A.N. explained how resilience drills and codified remote audit manuals, introduced under pressure, were institutionalised into everyday practice: *"What began as an emergency response became part of our permanent system."* His experience shows how improvisations evolved into embedded routines.

S.S. reflected on the embedding of his company's business model pivot.

"Subscriptions are now part of our business model. That's here to stay." His example demonstrates how necessity-driven change can trigger durable strategic renewal.

M.A. emphasised the adoption of contingency planning as an enduring impact: *"We always have a contingency plan now. That wasn't the case before COVID."* His account shows how the crisis reshaped organisational mindset and incorporated preparedness as a strategic priority.

Z.S.-Z. described how system upgrades and service rationalisation became part of her firm's long-term trajectory: *"We streamlined to focus on what we could deliver well, and that's stayed with us."* Her case highlights how narrowing focus and upgrading infrastructure created a more resilient business model.

These findings show that large organisations consolidated existing strengths. Smaller companies improvised and adopted new practices as enduring features.

Discussion

The findings also support Duchek's (2020) process model of resilience, where resilience is sustained through learning and adaptation. A.N.'s institutionalisation of remote audits illustrates how improvisations can be codified into long-term routines, with capabilities learned and retained through practice. (Zollo and Winter 2002)

The findings highlight that crises can generate long-term pathways depending on organisational scale and context. For Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT, the pandemic primarily reinforced the consolidating of existing strengths. Online grocery operations, fibre rollout, and hybrid work models were not radical innovations but accelerations of existing strategies.

Smaller companies experienced the pandemic as a turning point that produced lasting renewal. S.S.'s adoption of subscription models, M.A.'s embedding of contingency planning, and A.N.'s codification of remote audits, illustrate how improvisations became their new strategies.

For strategic management theory, the findings demonstrate that crises do not have a uniform long-term effect. Instead, they can act as accelerators of continuity for large

organisations while serving as catalysts of reinvention for smaller ones. Additionally, they highlight the contingent role of resources, scale, and sectoral context in shaping whether companies consolidate or renew. This supports the argument that resilience and renewal are not static outcomes, but evolving processes shaped by context and learning (Duchek 2020)

The evidence reflects the dual trajectories described in the literature. For large organisations, the enduring effects of the pandemic strengthened existing strategic trajectories, consistent with Barney's (1991) emphasis on sustaining competitive advantage through existing VRIN resources. In smaller companies, the permanence of improvised practices, supports Agarwal and Helfat's (2009) theory of strategic renewal, that disruption acts as a catalyst for lasting change.

This divergence highlights the role of scale, resources, and organisational context in shaping whether crises consolidate existing market position or drive reinvention.

4.8 Summary

This chapter examined how UK retail organisations responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on secondary data from four major corporations and interviews with managers from smaller companies. The findings were organised around six themes: adaptation, change management, resources, dynamic capabilities, resilience, and long-term impacts.

The evidence shows a clear divergence in how organisations adapted. Large organisations such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT pursued continuity through consolidation, accelerating digitalisation and scaling existing logistics and infrastructure. Their strategies were largely path-dependent, building on VRIN

resources and routinised processes (Barney 1991). Smaller companies, in contrast, relied on renewal through improvisation, experimenting with diversification, digital tools, and flexible practices. Their adaptation was more radical, reflecting dynamic capabilities enacted in real time which was consistent with Teece's (2007) framework of sensing, seizing, and transforming.

Change management also differed by scale. Large organisations managed change through formal frameworks and structured redeployment, consistent with classical consistent with Lewin's (1947) unfreeze-change-refreeze model and Kotter's (1996) eight-step process. Smaller companies employed lightweight, relational approaches, relying on communication, role flexibility, and informal coordination. This duality reflects Burnes' (2017) view that planned and emergent approaches to change often coexist, shaped by organisational context.

The Resource-Based View offered a useful lens for understanding survival strategies. Large firms depended on tangible assets, logistics, networks, and infrastructure, while smaller companies leveraged intangible resources such as trust, reputation, and culture. The value of resources was shown to be fluid and context-dependent, gaining strategic relevance as conditions shifted.

Dynamic capabilities were evident across organisations but expressed differently. For incumbents, they were routinised and incremental, enabling the scaling of established strengths. For smaller firms, they were emergent and improvisational, enabling rapid pivots and business model renewal aligning with Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) view that dynamic capabilities are not rigid routines but context-dependent processes.

Resilience was also multidimensional. Large organisations displayed structural resilience through redundancy, buffer stocks, and systemic slack, which aligns with Christopher and Peck's (2004) argument that resilience in supply chains is dependent on redundancy and flexibility. Smaller organisations enacted cultural resilience, relying on cohesion, adaptability, and trust. This supports Lengnick-Hall et al.'s (2011) contention that resilience can be socially constructed through relational resources and cultural cohesion.

The long-term implications are that large organisations institutionalised digital transformation and hybrid work as part of consolidated strategies. This showed path dependency and reinforced incumbency (Porter, 1980; Barney, 1991). Smaller companies embedded improvised practices into their business models, demonstrating renewal in line with Agarwal and Helfat's (2009) concept of strategic renewal. That being the intentional efforts to adapt to environmental change by revitalising, reconfiguring or creating resources. This suggests that crises can act both as accelerators of pre-existing trajectories and as pivots for transformative reinvention.

The findings demonstrate that the pandemic did not produce uniform outcomes, but rather divergent trajectories shaped by scale, resources, and context. Large firms consolidated their existing positions, whilst smaller companies renewed themselves through adaptive experimentation. These patterns highlight the contingent, multidimensional nature of organisational adaptation and resilience in times of crisis.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This study examined how UK retailers navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on large organisations, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT, as well as smaller firms. Using the Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capabilities theory, and resilience frameworks, the research sought to understand adaptation, change management, crisis response, digital transformation, sectoral variations, and long-term impacts.

The findings demonstrate that responses were not uniform but strongly conditioned by organisational scale, resource availability, and context. Large firms consolidated their positions through digital acceleration and reliance on structural resources, while smaller companies renewed themselves through diversification, improvisation, and cultural strengths.

5.2 Addressing the Research Questions

1. Strategic Adaptation

UK retailers adapted in divergent ways. Large firms such as Tesco and Sainsbury's expanded logistics and delivery, while Vodafone and BT scaled digital infrastructure. These actions reflected path dependency and reliance on VRIN resources, confirming Barney's (1991) argument that resource endowments shape competitive advantage. Smaller firms adapted more radically, shifting business models or codifying improvised practices, demonstrating Teece's (2007) concept of dynamic capabilities in action. Thus, strategic adaptation during COVID-19 was expressed as continuity for incumbents and renewal for challengers.

2. Change Management

Large organisations employed structured processes such as workforce redeployment and formal communication, aligning with Lewin's (1947) and Kotter's (1996) models of planned change. Smaller firms relied on emergent approaches, including short meetings, trust-based coordination, and flexible role adjustments. This supports Burnes' (2017) view that planned and emergent change can coexist and highlights that context determines whether change is best achieved through systematised frameworks or adaptive, relational practices.

3. Crisis Management and Resilience

Crisis management during COVID-19 was not just about reactive measures but also about embedding resilience into organisational routines. Large retailers such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Vodafone, and BT primarily relied on structural resilience maintaining continuity through financial resources, diversified supply chains, and organisational reserve capacity. This reflects what Fink (1986) describes as the capacity to manage the different phases of a crisis through robust contingency planning. In contrast, smaller retailers emphasised cultural and relational resilience, reliant upon trust, flexibility, and workforce collaboration to sustain operations. This resonates with Vogus and Sutcliffe's (2007) argument that resilience is not solely structural but also socially constructed, dependent on shared values and adaptability at the organisational level.

These dual approaches illustrate that resilience frameworks are contextually expressed. For large organisations, crisis management reinforced existing strengths and path dependency, consistent with Tierney's (2003) conception of organisational resilience as an extension of established systems. For smaller firms, crisis conditions

became a catalyst for renewal, reflecting Mitroff's (2005) view that crises can serve as opportunities for reinvention.

The evidence shows that effective crisis management requires a blending of structural and cultural resources. Large organisations may secure stability through buffers, but without adaptability they risk rigidity in the face of future shocks. Smaller companies demonstrated the value of flexibility and improvisation, but lack of systemic resources increased vulnerability. A balanced approach is therefore central to long-term resilience.

4. Digital Transformation and Innovation

Digital technologies were critical across the sector. For large organisations, they reinforced incumbency, embedding e-commerce, hybrid working, and infrastructure expansion into long-term strategy. For smaller companies, digitalisation was transformative, enabling remote working or hybrid working, enhanced services, and new forms of customer engagement. This supports Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) view that dynamic capabilities in volatile environments are experiential and improvisational, and highlights digitalisation as both a structural enabler and a catalyst for innovation.

5. Variations Across Sectors and Business Sizes

Responses differed significantly by scale. Large organisations consolidated market positions by extending existing strengths, while smaller companies renewed themselves through diversification and experimentation. These findings confirm that dynamic capabilities are varied in nature and application, contextually expressed and shaped by sectoral environment and organisational resources.

6. Long-Term Impacts

The pandemic produced dual trajectories. For large organisations, long-term changes reinforced existing strategies, embedding digital platforms and infrastructural investments into established models, indicating continuity with past strategic directions. For smaller companies, improvised practices such as remote/hybrid working, business model pivots, and improved digital tools became permanent, consistent with Agarwal and Helfat's (2009) theory of strategic renewal. Overall, COVID-19 acted as both an accelerator of continuity and a catalyst for reinvention, depending on organisational context.

5.3 Recommendations

For Retail Organisations

- Balance structural and cultural resilience, coupling responsiveness with spare capacity.
- Invest in digital transformation as a long-term strategic priority, not just a crisis response.
- Codify pandemic responses into contingency plans for future disruptions.
- Reinforce stakeholder legitimacy through CSR, sustainability, and ethical practices.

For Policymakers

- Support SME resilience through digital infrastructure investment, training, and grants.
- Facilitate supply chain diversification and resilience at sectoral level.

For Researchers

- Explore resilience as a multilevel construct combining structural, cultural, and relational dimensions.
- Investigate how improvisations evolve into institutionalised capabilities in Small and medium organisations.
- Conduct comparative international studies to identify context-specific and generalisable lessons.

5.4 Final Reflection

This study demonstrates that COVID-19 reshaped the UK retail sector in divergent ways. Large organisations consolidated market positions by embedding existing strengths, whilst smaller companies renewed themselves through experimentation and cultural resilience. Digitalisation was both an accelerator of continuity and a catalyst of innovation.

By linking empirical evidence to strategic management theories, the study highlights resilience as multidimensional and dynamic capabilities as contextually expressed. The pandemic served as both a stress test and a turning point, offering valuable insights into how organisations can prepare for future disruptions by combining robust infrastructures with adaptive practices.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Consent Form



Carmarthen Business School

Interview Consent Form

Dissertation research project title: The Impact of COVID-19 on Organisational Strategy: Adaptation and Resilience on the retail sector in the UK

Research course: MBA part-time

Research investigator: Aurang Zeb

Research Participants' name:

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Attached to this letter are the interview questions that I have developed, which will assess The Impact of COVID-19 on Organisational Strategy: Adaptation and Resilience on the retail sector in the UK, through the answers you provide to the questions posed. There are no right, or wrong answers and your opinion will be valuable to knowledge building around income generation activity in the cultural sector.

The interview should take approximately 30 minutes but there is no time constraint. Interviews will be conducted in a private meeting space and answers will remain confidential. Information recorded will contain nothing of a personal nature that would identify you, and you will not be expected to provide any personal information such as income bracket, home address, date of birth, etc. You are free to withdraw from the interview process at any time.

Academic research undertaken at UK universities require adherence to ethical procedures, which includes seeking explicit agreement from participants to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. The following information outlines the conditions of your participation and the purpose of your involvement. I would be grateful if you would read through this, then sign the consent form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced
- All answers will be anonymised, and no identifiable information will be requested from the interviewee
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by AURANG ZEB as research investigator
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to the research investigator and dissertation tutor

- any direct quotations from the interview, or summary content, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized and care will be taken to ensure that no identifiable information will be made public
- the interview will be recorded on a personal device, accessible only to the research investigator. The recording will be deleted as soon as the interview has been transcribed
- The transcript of the interview will be stored on the research investigator's personal OneDrive for Business application within his personal computer. The transcript will be deleted on completion of the dissertation
- The storage of information will comply with UWTSD's data protection regulations, in line with national GDPR guidance

By signing this form, I agree that:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above
3. I have read the Information sheet
4. I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation
5. I am comfortable with the arrangements outlined, and I understand that I am able to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future

Printed Name

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

If you would like me to share details of my findings on completion of the research, please let me know.

I thank you for your time and participation. If any questions do arise, feel free to contact me at your convenience.

Researcher Name: Aurang Zeb

Tel:

Email:

Appendix 2 - Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe the main challenges your organisation faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these shaped your strategic priorities?
2. What specific changes were introduced to ensure the organisation could continue operating effectively?
3. Looking back, which strategic responses do you consider most effective, and why?
4. How did your organisation manage the process of change during the pandemic? (e.g., communication, involvement of staff, speed of implementation)
5. Were there any particular barriers to implementing change, and how were these overcome?
6. What lessons about managing change do you think your organisation will take forward from the pandemic?
7. Which resources (e.g., people, technology, brand reputation, culture, financial capacity) proved most valuable to your organisation during the crisis?
8. Were there any resources you felt were lacking or underdeveloped that hindered your response?
9. How did your organisation leverage its unique strengths to gain advantage or stability during the pandemic?
10. How did your organisation identify and respond to new opportunities or threats as the pandemic unfolded?
11. Can you give examples of how the organisation reconfigured its resources or processes to adapt quickly?
12. Do you feel your organisation developed new capabilities during this time that will remain useful in the future?
13. In what ways did your organisation demonstrate resilience during the crisis?
14. Were there systems or practices already in place that made the organisation more resilient?
15. How has your organisation prepared for potential future disruptions or crises?
16. What lasting changes has the pandemic brought to your organisation's strategy, operations, or culture?
17. How has the experience of the pandemic influenced the way your organisation views risk and uncertainty?
18. Do you believe your organisation is now stronger or better prepared as a result of this experience?

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

In order for research to result in benefit and minimise risk of harm, it must be conducted ethically.

The University follows the OECD Frascati manual definition of **research activity**: “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications”. As such this covers activities undertaken by members of staff, postgraduate research students, and both taught postgraduate and undergraduate students working on dissertations/projects.

The individual undertaking the research activity is known as the “principal researcher”.

This form must be completed and approved prior to undertaking any research activity.

SECTION A: About You (Principal Researcher)

1	Full Name:	AURANG ZEB
2	Student Number:	1906993
3	Email address:	1906993@student.uwtsd.ac.uk
4	Programme of Study:	MBA
5	Supervisor:	GLENN BEHENNA

SECTION B: Internal and External Ethical Guidance Materials

	Please list the core ethical guidance documents that have been referred to during the completion of this form (including any discipline-specific codes of research ethics, location-specific codes of research ethics, and also any specific ethical guidance relating to the proposed methodology). Please tick to confirm that your research proposal adheres to these codes and guidelines. You may add rows to this table if needed.		
1	UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice		☒
2	UWTSD Research Data Management Policy		☒

SECTION C: Details of Research Activity

1	Indicative title:	The Impact of COVID-19 on Organisational Strategy: Adaptation and Resilience in the UK Telecoms and Retail Sectors		
2	Proposed start date:	11 MARCH 2025	Proposed end date:	30 SEPTEMBER 2025
	Introduction to the Research (maximum 300 words in each section) Ensure that you write for a <u>Non-Specialist Audience</u> when outlining your response to the three points below: • Purpose of Research Activity • Proposed Research Question • Aims of Research Activity • Objectives of Research Activity Demonstrate, briefly, how <u>Existing Research</u> has informed the proposed activity and explain • What the research activity will add to the body of knowledge			

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	How it addresses an area of importance.
3	Purpose of Research Activity The research will delve into the strategic adaptations implemented by organisations in the retail and telecoms sectors, examining how they navigated the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic, and how these adaptations have shaped their long-term strategies. The core focus will be on strategy and change management, exploring the processes and frameworks employed by organisations to implement these changes effectively. (this box should expand as you type)
4	Research Question <u>The Impact of COVID-19 on Organisational Strategy: Adaptation and Resilience in the UK Telecoms and Retail Sectors</u> (this box should expand as you type)
5	Aims of Research Activity to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organisational strategy in the UK telecoms and retail sectors, with a specific focus on adaptation and resilience. (this box should expand as you type)
6	Objectives of Research Activity * Identify the key strategic challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic for organisations in the UK telecoms and retail sectors. * Analyse the specific strategic adaptations implemented by organisations in these sectors in response to the pandemic, including changes in business models, operational processes, and market positioning. * Evaluate the effectiveness of these strategic adaptations in terms of organisational resilience, performance, and long-term sustainability. * Compare the strategic responses and outcomes of organisations in the telecoms sector with those in the retail sector, identifying key differences and similarities. * Investigate the role of change management processes and frameworks in facilitating successful strategic adaptation during the pandemic. * Explore the long-term implications of the pandemic for organisational strategy in the (this box should expand as you type)
	Proposed data collection methods (maximum 600 words) Provide a brief summary of all the methods that may be used in the research activity to collect data, making it clear what specific techniques may be used. If methods other than those listed in this section are deemed appropriate later, additional ethical approval for those methods will be needed. You do not need to justify the methods here, but should instead describe how you intend to collect the data necessary for you to complete your project.
7	This dissertation will adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. * Qualitative Data: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with senior managers and executives in selected telecoms and retail organisations in the UK. These interviews will explore their experiences of the pandemic, the strategic adaptations they implemented, the challenges they faced, and their perspectives on the long-term implications for their organisations. The interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. Case studies of specific organisations in each sector may also be developed to provide in-depth insights into their strategic responses. * Additional Qualitative Data: if there are insufficient interview results then questionnaires will be sent to will be senior managers and executives in selected telecoms and retail organisations in the UK. These questionnaires will be tailored to raise questions about the pandemic, the strategic adaptations they implemented, the challenges they faced, and their

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	perspectives on the long-term implications for their organisations. The questionnaire data will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. * Quantitative Data: Secondary data analysis will be conducted using publicly available data sources, such as company annual reports, industry reports, and government statistics. This data will be used to analyse trends in financial performance, market share, and other relevant metrics for organisations in the telecoms and retail sectors. This will provide a broader context for the qualitative findings and allow for comparisons across the sectors.
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SECTION D: Scope of Research Activity

	Will the research activity include:	YES	NO
1	Use of a questionnaire or similar research instrument?	☒	☐
2	Use of interviews?	☒	☐
3	Use of focus groups?	☐	☒
4	Use of participant diaries?	☐	☒
5	Use of video or audio recording?	☒	☐
6	Use of computer-generated log files?	☒	☐
7	Participant observation with their knowledge?	☒	☐
8	Participant observation without their knowledge?	☐	☒
9	Access to personal or confidential information without the participants' specific consent?	☐	☒
10	Administration of any questions, test stimuli, presentation that may be experienced as physically, mentally or emotionally harmful / offensive?	☐	☒
11	Performance of any acts which may cause embarrassment or affect self-esteem?	☐	☒
12	Investigation of participants involved in illegal activities?	☐	☒
13	Use of procedures that involve deception?	☐	☒
14	Administration of any substance, agent or placebo?	☐	☒
15	Working with live vertebrate animals?	☐	☒
16	Procedures that may have a negative impact on the environment?	☐	☒
17	Other primary data collection methods. Please indicate the type of data collection method(s) below.	☐	☒
	Details of any other primary data collection method:		
	(this box should expand as you type)		

If you have ticked NO to every question then the research activity is (ethically) low risk and you may skip section E and continue to section F.

If YES to any question, then no research activity should be undertaken until full ethical approval has been obtained.

SECTION E: Intended Participants

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Who are the intended participants:		YES	NO
1	Students or staff at the University?	☐	☒
2	Adults (over the age of 18 and competent to give consent)?	☒	☐
3	Vulnerable adults?	☐	☒
4	Children and Young People under the age of 18? (Consent from Parent, Carer or Guardian will be required)	☐	☒
5	Prisoners?	☐	☒
6	Young offenders?	☐	☒
7	Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator or a gatekeeper?	☐	☒
8	People engaged in illegal activities?	☐	☒
9	Others. Please indicate the participants below, and specifically any group who may be unable to give consent.	☐	☒
	Details of any other participant groups: Complete this only if your participants cannot give consent. This includes animals. If students choose individuals under the age of 18 and or vulnerable individuals, a DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check is essential. (this box should expand as you type)		

Participant numbers and source		
Provide an estimate of the expected number of participants. How will you identify participants and how will they be recruited?		
10	How many participants are expected?	Approximate figures are fine, but make sure that you explain how you will identify and contact your participants. 10-20 (this box should expand as you type)
11	Who will the participants be?	Managers within organisations in the relevant sectors (this box should expand as you type)
12	How will you identify the participants?	Some will be known to the writer and others by contacting the organisations (this box should expand as you type)

Information for participants:		YES	NO	N/A
13	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	☒	☐	☐
14	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☒	☐	☐
15	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	☒	☐	☐
16	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?	☒	☐	☐
17	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☒	☐	☐
18	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☒	☐	☐

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19	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☒	☐	☐
20	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	☒	☐	☐
21	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation, in a way appropriate to the type of research undertaken?	☒	☐	☐
22	If NO to any of above questions, please give an explanation			
You should be able to tick YES for all of these questions. If not, then explain why not in this box. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>				

	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
24	Will participants be paid?	☐	☒	☐
25	Is specialist electrical or other equipment to be used with participants?	☐	☒	☐
26	Are there any financial or other interests to the investigator or University arising from this study?	☐	☒	☐
27	Will the research activity involve deliberately misleading participants in any way, or the partial or full concealment of the specific study aims?	☐	☒	☐
28	If YES to any question, please provide full details			
You should be able to tick NO for most of these questions. For any cases that you have ticked YES then provide details in this box. If you are using cameras/voice recorders to record interviews then please state that in this box. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>				

SECTION F: Anticipated Risks

	Outline any anticipated risks that may adversely affect any of the participants, the researchers and/or the University, and the steps that will be taken to address them.	
1	Risks to participants For example: sector-specific health & safety, emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information. If you have identified in section D that there are no participants then enter N/A and go skip to question 3.	
	Risk to participants: Personal data and sensitive organisation information <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How you will mitigate the risk to participants:</i> Will only collect information that is available publicly or ensure that sensitive data is redacted <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
2	If research activity may include sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use) or issues likely to disclose information requiring further action (e.g. criminal activity), give details of the procedures to deal with these issues, including any support/advice (e.g. helpline numbers) to be offered to participants. Note that where applicable, consent procedures should make it clear that if something potentially or actually illegal is discovered in the course of a project, it may need to be disclosed to the proper authorities	
	Data will be limited to general data about management and strategies <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
3	Risks to the investigator For example: personal health & safety, physical harm, emotional distress, risk of accusation of harm/impropriety, conflict of interest	
	Risk to the investigator:	<i>How you will mitigate the risk to the investigator:</i>

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	Possible risk that I could be obtaining data which is confidential <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	Ensure that data is not confidential or ensure that sensitive data is redacted <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
4	University/institutional risks For example: adverse publicity, financial loss, data protection	
	Risk to the University: Data protection <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	How you will mitigate the risk to the University: Ensure that all data is obtained with consent and there no breaches of GDPR <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
5	Environmental risks For example: accidental spillage of pollutants, damage to local ecosystems	
	Risk to the environment: n/a <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	How you will mitigate the risk to environment: <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

SECTION G: Feedback, Consent and Confidentiality

If you have identified in section D that there are no participants then enter skip this section and continue to section H.

1	Feedback What de-briefing and feedback will be provided to participants, how will this be done and when?	
	to set up an email address at the outset so that they will be able to contact for further details or results <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
2	Informed consent Describe the arrangements to inform potential participants, before providing consent, of what is involved in participating. Describe the arrangements for participants to provide full consent before data collection begins. If gaining consent in this way is inappropriate, explain how consent will be obtained and recorded in accordance with prevailing data protection legislation.	
	I will have the participants sign an appropriate consent form. The question is likely to be a paper or pdf type questionnaire which will contain a consent section <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
3	Confidentiality / Anonymity Set out how anonymity of participants and confidentiality will be ensured in any outputs. If anonymity is not being offered, explain why this is the case.	
	I will collect names, but these will be kept anonymous and will not name participants or organisations in any research publications without their explicit permission. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	

SECTION H: Data Protection and Storage

	Does the research activity involve personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 “GDPR” and the Data Protection Act 2018 “DPA”)?	YES	NO
1	“Personal data” means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (‘data subject’). An identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in	☒ x	☐

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	<i>particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person. Any video or audio recordings of participants is considered to be personal data.</i>		
	If YES, provide a description of the data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
2	I will need to collect Names, addresses and emails in order to conduct the research. It will be necessary as I will need to reach out to the participants to send questionnaire or conduct interviews <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
	Does it involve special category data (as defined by the GDPR)?	YES	NO
3	“Special category data” means sensitive personal data consisting of information as to the data subjects’ – (a) racial or ethnic origin, (b) political opinions, (c) religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature, (d) membership of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992), (e) physical or mental health or condition, (f) sexual life, (g) genetics, (h) biometric data (as used for ID purposes),	☐	☒
	If YES, provide a description of the special category data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
4	What counts as ‘sensitive’ will differ between cultures. Any information on behaviour that is not in accordance with cultural norms would count as sensitive personal data. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		

	Will data from the research activity (collected data, drafts of the thesis, or materials for publication) be stored in any of the following ways?	YES	NO
5	Manual files (i.e. in paper form)?	☒	☐
6	University computers?	☐	☒
7	Private company computers?	☐	☒
8	Home or other personal computers?	☒	☐
9	Laptop computers/ CDs/ Portable disk-drives/ memory sticks?	☒	☐
10	“Cloud” storage or websites?	☒	☐
11	Other – specify:	☐	☐
12	For all stored data, explain the measures in place to ensure the security of the data collected, data confidentiality, including details of backup procedures, password protection, encryption, anonymisation and pseudonymisation:		
	<i>All data will be kept in password protected cloud storage on the University Office 365 system which will not be shared. Audio/visual data will be transcribed and would be shown to participants to check accuracy of reporting. Any USB sticks used to store or transfer data will be password protected. All participants will be given a unique identifier to ensure confidentiality and this list will be kept securely in the password protected folder.</i>		

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	(this box should expand as you type)		
	Data Protection		
	Will the research activity involve any of the following activities:	YES	NO
13	Electronic transfer of data in any form?	☒	☐
14	Sharing of data with others at the University outside of the immediate research team?	☐	☒
15	Sharing of data with other organisations?	☐	☒
16	Export of data outside the UK or importing of data from outside the UK?	☐	☒
17	Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, emails or telephone numbers?	☒	☐
18	Publication of data that might allow identification of individuals?	☐	☒
19	If YES to any question, please provide full details, explaining how this will be conducted in accordance with the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018) (and/or any international equivalent):		
	<i>All data will be encrypted and kept in password protected cloud storage on the University Office 365 system which will not be shared. Any USB sticks used to store or transfer data will be password protected. All data transfers will be encrypted and password protected. All participants will be given a unique identifier to ensure confidentiality and this list will be kept securely in the password protected folder. The data will be stored until the completion of the project and then deleted. In accordance with the DPA2018, participants will have the right to ask to see what data is held relating to them, and this data will be deleted immediately if the participant requests this, in which case the data will not be used in the project.</i> (this box should expand as you type)		
20	List all who will have access to the data generated by the research activity:		
	The principal researcher, and possibly also external examiner or second marker? (this box should expand as you type)		
21	List who will have control of, and act as custodian(s) for, data generated by the research activity:		
	The principal researcher. (this box should expand as you type)		
22	Give details of data storage arrangements, including security measures in place to protect the data, where data will be stored, how long for, and in what form.		
	<i>All data will be encrypted and kept in password protected cloud storage on the University Office 365 system which will not be shared. Any USB sticks used to store or transfer data will be password protected, and will be reformatted at the end of the project in order to destroy the data. The data will be stored until the completion of the project and then deleted.</i> (this box should expand as you type)		
22	Confirm that you have read the UWTSD guidance on data management (see https://www.uwt.ac.uk/library/research-data-management/)	☒	
23	Confirm that you are aware that you need to keep all data until after your research has completed or the end of your funding	☒	

SECTION I: Declaration

ETHICS FORM – IMH LEVELS 4 TO 6 & TAUGHT MASTERS 7 STUDENTS ONLY

	The information which I have provided is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge. I have attempted to identify any risks and issues related to the research activity and acknowledge my obligations and the rights of the participants. In submitting this application I hereby confirm that I undertake to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice which is published on the website: https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/research/research-ethics/		
1	Signature of applicant:		Date: 13 March 2025
2	Director of Studies/Supervisor:	Glenn Behenna	Date: 13/03/2025
3	Signature:	G. Behenna	

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY:

	Ethical approval given		
1	Signature of assessor:		Date:
2	Name:		
3	Role:		

Appendix 4 - Analysis of Emergent Themes

Voices of the Participants (Interviewee)	Meaning Interpretation (Researcher)	Concepts / Themes Identified
"We wrote new audit manuals for remote delivery. The cloud became the backbone of our work almost overnight." (A.N.)	Digital platforms that were previously peripheral became central to operations, showing improvisation and rapid capability elevation under crisis conditions.	Improvisation; Digital adaptation; Reconfigured resources
"We went remote next day on 3CX, added PCR partnerships, and even chartered flights." (M.A.)	The pivot of a travel company into new services demonstrated agility, opportunism, and the capacity to diversify under extreme disruption.	Strategic pivot; Opportunity seizing; Dynamic capabilities
"Our B2B market collapsed overnight, so we pivoted to direct-to-consumer subscriptions." (S.S.)	A wholesale change in customer base and business model illustrated strategic renewal and transformation under pressure.	Business model renewal; Market reorientation
"We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas." (Z.S.-Z.)	Adaptation through efficiency and technological upgrades concentrated resources, reflecting resilience through focus and system improvement.	Streamlining operations; Technological adaptation
"We pivoted product mix and campaigns to digital-first, lifestyle categories. Loungewear became a core focus because that's	Responding to shifting consumer behaviours by reconfiguring product strategy showed market-driven adaptation and	Product innovation; Market responsiveness; Strategic renewal

what people wanted during lockdowns.” (S.Y.)

customer-centred innovation.

Voices of the Participants (Interviewee)	Meaning Interpretation (Researcher)	Concepts / Themes Identified
“We had 10-minute meetings every day just to make sure everyone was aligned.” (A.N.)	Daily meetings provided rhythm and accountability, substituting for formal structures and sustaining alignment in a fast-moving environment.	Informal coordination; Communication as control
“We introduced accountability trackers for remote audits. This made sure work was monitored even though staff were not in the office.” (P.W.)	Digital accountability tools replaced physical oversight, ensuring continuity and maintaining client trust.	Remote monitoring; Digital oversight mechanisms
“Staff were regularly updated via email and video messages. This built confidence that we were on top of the situation.” (I.T.)	Reassurance through consistent updates built trust and reduced uncertainty, supporting morale during change.	Communication; Trust-building; Change facilitation
“A project manager was appointed to oversee remote operations and data security.” (M.G.)	Formalising change through a dedicated role provided structure and accountability during transition.	Formal coordination; Change leadership
“Everyone had to adjust their roles. We were doing things we’d never done before.” (S.S.)	Flexibility in role boundaries allowed adaptation, with employees undertaking new responsibilities to maintain operations.	Workforce adaptability; Role flexibility

“We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas.” (Z.S.-Z.)	Technical improvements combined with strategic focus enabled change to be implemented efficiently.	System upgrades; Strategic alignment
“Diversification required staff to adapt new lines of work.” (M.A.)	Staff adaptation was essential for diversification, showing how people underpinned organisational change.	Workforce learning; Adaptive capacity
Voices of the Participants (Interviewee)	Meaning Interpretation (Researcher)	Concepts / Themes Identified
“The cloud became the backbone of our work almost overnight.” (A.N.)	Underutilised digital infrastructure was reconfigured into a core operational resource, demonstrating how intangible assets can be repurposed for resilience.	Digital resources; Improvisation; Strategic reconfiguration
“Everyone had to adjust their roles. We were doing things we’d never done before.” (S.S.)	Cultural cohesion, teamwork, and role flexibility acted as rare and inimitable resources, underpinning resilience during uncertainty.	Organisational culture; Social capital; Workforce adaptability
“Clients trusted us to deliver even when we entered new areas like PCR testing.” (M.A.)	Reputation and customer trust operated as strategic resources, enabling diversification and legitimising expansion into new areas.	Customer trust; Legitimacy; Resource-based resilience
“Loungewear became a core focus because that’s what people wanted during lockdowns.” (S.Y.)	Brand equity and market responsiveness were leveraged to reconfigure product strategies, showing the importance of intangible assets in resilience.	Brand reputation; Market adaptation; Intangible resources

Voices of the Participants (Interviewee)	Meaning Interpretation (Researcher)	Concepts / Themes Identified
“We wrote new audit manuals for remote delivery. The cloud became the backbone of our work almost overnight.” (A.N.)	Shows how improvised practices (remote audits) became institutionalised into manuals, demonstrating the evolution of ad hoc responses into embedded routines.	Improvisation → Institutionalisation; Process reconfiguration
“We went remote next day on 3CX, added PCR partnerships, and even chartered flights.” (M.A.)	Illustrates diversification into new services, showing entrepreneurial sensing and seizing of opportunities during disruption.	Improvised diversification; Opportunity seizing; Reconfiguration
“Our B2B market collapsed overnight, so we pivoted to direct-to-consumer subscriptions.” (S.S.)	Demonstrates sensing market collapse, seizing consumer demand, and reconfiguring the business model under crisis conditions.	Market reorientation; Business model renewal
“We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas.” (Z.S.-Z.)	Combined digital upgrades with strategic narrowing of focus, strengthening infrastructure while reallocating resources.	Technical adaptation; Streamlining for efficiency
“A project manager was appointed to oversee remote operations.” (M.G.)	Formalised governance stabilised operations, reflecting reconfiguration of organisational structure to manage disruption.	Structural adaptation; Change governance
“Audits were flipped online within days. We had to reassure staff and clients that the process was secure and reliable.” (I.T.)	Demonstrates rapid reconfiguration of processes with an emphasis on trust-building and credibility.	Process innovation; Communication as assurance

Voices of the Participants (Interviewee)	Meaning Interpretation (Researcher)	Concepts / Themes Identified
"Everyone had to adjust their roles. We were doing things we'd never done before." (S.S.)	Teamwork and persistence created resilience through role flexibility and collective adaptation.	Cultural cohesion; Workforce adaptability
"Clients trusted us to deliver even when we entered new areas like PCR testing." (M.A.)	Resilience was enabled by client trust and credibility, allowing diversification into unfamiliar markets.	Relational resources; Reputation as resilience
"We wrote new audit manuals for remote delivery." (A.N.)	Improvised practices were codified into long-term procedures, embedding resilience into organisational routines.	Institutionalised preparedness; Learning from crisis
"We upgraded systems and streamlined our practice areas." (Z.S.-Z.)	Resilience was built through digital investment and rationalisation, ensuring scalability and focus.	System upgrades; Strategic concentration
"A project manager was appointed to oversee remote operations." (M.G.)	Governance changes created oversight and continuity, showing resilience through organisational restructuring.	Governance adaptation; Continuity planning
"A crisis team coordinated globally with local tailoring." (S.Y.)	Resilience was multi-layered: global structural coordination balanced with localised adaptive responses.	Structural resilience; Local adaptability

Voices of the Participants (Interviewee)	Meaning Interpretation (Researcher)	Concepts / Themes Identified
“What began as an emergency response became part of our permanent system.” (A.N.)	Practices developed under pressure, such as remote audit manuals, became institutionalised, turning improvisations into permanent routines.	Institutionalisation of resilience; Learning and embedding
“Subscriptions are now part of our business model. That’s here to stay.” (S.S.)	The pivot to subscriptions, originally a survival measure, was embedded as a durable feature of the business model.	Strategic renewal; Business model evolution
“We always have a contingency plan now. That wasn’t the case before COVID.” (M.A.)	The crisis shifted organisational mindset toward preparedness, with contingency planning embedded into strategy.	Contingency planning; Organisational mindset change
“We streamlined to focus on what we could deliver well, and that’s stayed with us.” (Z.S.-Z.)	Service rationalisation and system upgrades were consolidated into a long-term strategy of focus and efficiency.	Streamlining; Resilient business modelling