

# Unfinished Draft of Final Report



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## Employee Perspectives on Ethical Responsibility and Sales Practices in the Tobacco Retail Sector in UK: A Qualitative Study

### Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how frontline retail employees in the United Kingdom understand and enact ethical responsibility in the sale of tobacco and nicotine products within a highly regulated environment. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with retail staff across different store formats, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach, examining how ethical gatekeeping is experienced, negotiated, and justified in everyday practice. Institutional theory provides an orienting framework, sensitizing analysis to the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures shaping employees' sensemaking. Findings are expected to demonstrate that ethical responsibility is not enacted as a simple compliance task but as a situated, emotionally charged practice shaped by customer interaction, organizational support, and perceived risk. By foregrounding lived experience, the study contributes to institutional theory by illustrating how competing logics are interpreted at the point of sale and offers practical insights to improve training and support for frontline staff responsible for enforcing age-restricted sales.

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## 1. Background and Context

Tobacco retail in the UK represents a crossroads between ordinary commercial practices and public health. The tobacco cigarettes and other nicotine products continue to be sold legally, even though their negative effects are well-established and constantly regulated. This generates a unique frontline service environment where routine interactions such as selling a pack of cigarettes, refusing to sell to a minor, or responding to a complaint about pricing or availability become morally complex situations. In the UK, employees selling tobacco have to contend with a complex regulatory environment, which includes age-of-sale restrictions, limitations on point-of-sale advertising, regulations regarding products and packaging, as well as local enforcement policies.

In practice, retail staff are “the face of regulation to the public”. They are usually the first ones to experience attempts to purchase cigarettes by persons under age, proxy cigarette purchases, and confusion over regulations regarding new products. They have to ensure rapid application of policies without losing the service persona, harnessing queues and ensuring personal safety. A ‘simple’ refusal involves risk assessment (Is the customer drunk? Is there a threat of aggression?), relational judgement (Is this a regular customer who may be embarrassed by a refusal?), and organizational judgement (Is this supported by the manager?).

Tobacco retailing is yet another area of fast-paced transformation in nicotine alternatives, predominantly in vaping. In June 2025 the UK introduced a ban on the sale and supply of single-use (disposable) vapes, targeting the reduction of youth uptake and environmental harms. Policy change of such nature serves as a reminder that frontline staff must be continuously adaptive: they should be knowledgeable about permitted products, be able to interpret new regulations, deal with any confusion or dissatisfaction among customers, and conduct interactions in a safe manner while meeting organizational expectations regarding efficiency and sales.

While compliance may appear to be simple “rule following” at the organizational level, frontline retail is hardly ever that straightforward. Age verification requires discretion (e.g., when presented with obvious borderline identification, proxy purchasing is suspected or having to decide whether to question a known customer). Refusal is the final stage before confrontation and it becomes more apparent when the customer is entitled, rushed and embarrassed. Employees may also have ethical dissonance when selling products which can harm people, even though the sales are legal and routine. Along the way, employees develop individual and collective “rules of thumb,” to which they adapt, which can sometimes be site-specific and inconsistent.

This proposal is based on a case study of the UK's tobacco retail employees, with a focus on the understanding and ethical enactment of pervasive workday responsibility. It does not view employees as dumb pipes for policy transmission but as “sense-makers” of institutional (regulations, norms, and taken-for-granted routings) demands and convert them into action. Critical examination of these lived experiences is essential because tobacco control policy's effectiveness and legitimacy is realized at the counter: successful refusal-consistency, equitable treatment of all customers, and employee wellbeing hinges on the various interpretations and navigation of ethical gatekeeping by employees in situ.

## **2. Research Problem Statement**

Even with strict tobacco control policy in place, there is an overall lack of knowledge concerning the lived experiences and perceptions of ethicality that employees working in tobacco retail outlets face when supplying regulated nicotine products. Existing literature has often focused on compliance outcomes (e.g. test purchasing, observation of signage or display rules, or retailer self-reports) and has treated the “retailer” as a single organizational actor. However, the compliance work, both moral and practical, is done by employees in micro-interactions with the customers, in an environment organized around targets, time pressure, and the risk of confrontation.

Existing research on tobacco retail has largely focused on compliance rates, enforcement outcomes, or retailer perspectives at the organizational level. While this work is valuable, it provides limited insight into how employees themselves experience and interpret ethical responsibility as it is enacted in real-time interactions with customers. Ethical responsibility in this context cannot be adequately understood through quantitative indicators alone; it is shaped through lived experience, situational judgement, and emotional response. As Creswell and Poth (2018) argue, phenomenological inquiry is particularly appropriate when research seeks to understand how individuals make sense of significant experiences and how meaning is constructed through everyday practice.

This study addresses a clear gap in the literature by adopting an interpretivist qualitative design to explore how UK tobacco retail employees understand their ethical role, negotiate competing expectations, and construct professional identity within a highly regulated sales environment. By foregrounding employee voice, the research moves beyond compliance metrics to examine how regulation is enacted, resisted, or accommodated at the frontline of retail practice. This study adopts an interpretivist qualitative design based on employees' lived experience. It does not focus on the “compliance rates,” but “how do employees describe psychological contract of ethics and responsibility, how do employees make sense of competing expectations, and how do the employees ‘actualize’ institutional pressures” (Nixon & Burns, 2012, p.92). The result will be a context-sensitive account of ethical gatekeeping that can be used to inform training, organizational support and policy

implementation in UK tobacco retail contexts, with a focus on the practical tensions experienced by staff at the point-of-sale counters.

The effects of this gap are not just theoretical. At the employee level, uncertainty and repeated conflict act as sources of stress, avoidance, and turnover intentions. At an organizational level, inconsistent gatekeeping exposes businesses to risk of penalties and reputational damage, and results in inequitable customer experience. At the policy level, the intended protective effects of age-of-sale laws and retail restrictions are dependent on consistent enactment as “patchy enforcement of rules undermines their social legitimacy.” Given these consequences, there is an urgency to study not only what employees are doing but also how they make sense of what they are doing and why.

### **3. Research Questions and Objectives**

Central aim: The study is “to explore sensemaking, negotiation and enactment of ethical responsibility by tobacco retail employees in a highly regulated sales environment” (UK Sales of Tobacco Products). Ethical responsibility is conceptualized as a form of ‘situated sensemaking’ under institutional pressures and everyday interactions with customers.

Research Questions:

- How do retail staff understand and interpret their role and responsibilities in the sale of tobacco?
- What kind of difficulties do the employees face when there is a need to balance between sales targets and ethical concerns?
- How do employees characterize their sense of professional identity and workplace relationships regarding selling tobacco products?

These interpretive questions focus on the way employees describe, interpret, and justify practice instead of “compliance” based on an external reference. They also include middle range linkages between the micro level experience to the institutionalized conditions. For instance, the same refusal practice can have different meaning depending on enforcement context, organizational training, customer demographics, and local smoking and vaping norms.

To ensure that the study remains aligned to an interpretivist paradigm, the research questions are created around the process of meaning-making rather than measuring compliance rate. The emphasis is on the employee narration of the collective construction of “good practice”, the justifications behind refusals and age-verification challenges and the reconciliation of personal values with organizational targets and client expectations. These framing present retail workers as frontline regulatory agents with discretionary authority in practice rather than passive rule followers.

Objectives:

- To explore the perceptions of employees on ethical responsibility in tobacco sales.
- To reveal tensions between organizational performance expectations and considerations from a public health perspective.
- To understand how the employees experience and respond to various customer interactions about tobacco products

#### 4. Significance of the Research

This research matters for four reasons: it affects how employees feel and work, how ethical companies are run and managed, how policies are put into action, and new ideas.

- **Employee Level:** This study puts the spotlight on what workers think in a field where doing the right thing is important, but their everyday experiences often go unnoticed. By writing down how workers talk about feeling uneasy, facing problems, and how they say no, the study can show the hidden stress and possible moral problems that come with selling things that can cause harm when dealing with customers. This info can back up better training, ways to calm tense situations, and resources for workers who often deal with conflict, embarrassment, or fear when selling regulated products.
- **Organizational Level:** This study gives proof of how following the rules happens through everyday actions and workplace situations. Knowing how employees understand sales targets, what managers say, and how things are normally done can aid companies to be more consistent, keep workers safe, and put systems in place that not only follow the rules but also support doing what's right. The research also adds to discussions about selling things that are harmful or restricted, showing how being responsible is worked out in everyday work instead of just in company statements.
- **Policy Level:** This study adds to know-how about putting policies in place. How well tobacco control works depends on how it's done at the street level. Proof about what employees choose to do, the problems of enforcing age limits, and unexpected things that happen because of policy changes (like customer conflict after product bans or changes in vaping rules) can tell us about enforcement guidance, public communication, and ways to support sellers. The results may also be related to controlling other harmful products where workers are asked to enforce limits without enough power or protection.
- **Theoretical Level:** This study adds a new way of thinking by using institutional theory. By watching how rules, expectations, and routines create clashing ideas (selling versus protecting public health), the research grows how we understand ethical gatekeeping. Adding other ideas (emotional stress, role conflict, moral

trouble) can push institutional theory toward real-life experience and show how institutions are acted out, worked out, or fought against in everyday selling.

In addition, the study could be helpful in designing ways to aid following the rules. A lot of ways focus on signs, warnings, or checklists, but employees might need other things: clear ways to say no, support from managers, staffing and security that lowers fear, and training that makes gatekeeping a valid job instead of a personal fight. By spotting what employees see as helping or hurting ethical action, the study can point toward company actions that make following the rules better and boost how workers feel.

## **5. Literature Review**

### **5.1 Overview and approach**

The objective of the literature review presented here is to combine both empirical and conceptual research regarding the retail distribution of tobacco; frontline compliance; employee's ethical responsibilities to support the implementation of a qualitative interpretative research project. The review highlights where regulation impacts retail practice; where employees implement gatekeeping responsibilities in relation to, for example, refusing customers of a certain age, refusing to serve them, and restricting sales; and where these tasks meet with customer service requirements and commercial imperative. The importance lies in employee meaning construction, where policy translation and reality meet. It is here that front-line workers decide ambiguous realities, resolve conflict, and use discretion to determine responsible behavior in specific situations.

The literature review is organized and conducted over six thematic headings. First, regulation and compliance are analyzed for their constituent parts within retail rather than within the domain of law itself. Second, the role of staff awareness and perceptions of regulation and barriers for implementation are examined. Third, evidence is sought that is specifically relevant within the context of the UK so that the impact of regulatory change on the everyday practices on the shop floor might better be understood. Fourth, the literature about ethical responsibility and the 'ethical gatekeeper tension' that gives rise to the problem situation is examined for the current study. Fifth, the literature about emotional labor and 'role conflict' is outlined so that the pressures of enforced encounter might better be understood through the lens of this literature. Sixth, institutional theory and the concepts of street level discretion are incorporated so that the resulting variations on the frontline might better be understood through these models.

The literature review also informs the study's sampling and interview strategy. Where existing studies focus on retailer-owner data or compliance with existing rules, gaps in employee voice and workplace interaction are highlighted. These help justify conducting interviews with employees in various retail outlet categories (including independent convenience stores, supermarkets, and specialist retail outlets) to account for differences

in levels of organizational support, customer demand, and social norms. The reviewer adopts an interpretive approach to this literature review in its awareness of assumptions made in analysis, points of contention in current studies, and how this study might respond to these points.

## **5.2 Regulation, compliance and the tobacco retail environment**

The articles begin by citing research in which retailers, together with retail employees, are identified as key actors in implementing tobacco control. Although regulatory provisions are formally delineated in many instances, compliance with these regulations is implemented by practices like checking identity, understanding product restrictions, queue management, and providing explanations to customers in an appropriate manner. Evidence in the UK, in turn, indicates that retailers perceive regulatory outcomes in terms of adjustment tasks in responding to considerable policy shifts. Purves, Moodie, Eadie and Stead (2019), for example, show that standardized packaging and the Tobacco Products Directive required retailers to reorganize stock, adapt transaction routines, and manage customer confusion and complaint as part of everyday work.

Across the wider empirical compliance literature, considerable variation is observed. Store type, neighborhood context, staffing levels, and managerial support influence how consistently rules are applied and how confidently employees enforce them. Audit-based and surveillance studies are valuable for identifying patterns of compliance and exposure, but they offer limited insight into the interpretive processes that precede a refusal, the emotions generated by confrontation, or the compromises made under customer pressure. This methodological limitation supports the use of in-depth interviews to access employees' accounts of how regulatory work is understood, justified, and enacted.

A lot of this research operationalizes compliance not as a behavioral outcome (e.g. age checks or product display) but as a process of negotiation between actors. While from an analytical perspective this difference is very important because two retail establishments could rate equally on compliance but vastly differently on enforcement experiences of employees, from an interpretive perspective, what fundamentally matters is how employees are capable of actionable compliance. Observational and audit findings therefore provide necessary contextual background, but qualitative accounts that reveal the reasoning and interactional work behind compliance or non-compliance are prioritized (e.g. Purves et al., 2019; Eadie et al., 2016).

## **5.3 Awareness, perceptions and implementation barriers**

The review then examines data related to knowledge, perceptions, and perceived feasibility of tobacco retail regulations. Research indicates that compliance could be impaired by uncertainty with regard to age categories or products, inconsistencies related to training, and mixed signals from management. This could also be explained from a meaning-making perspective. Employees are faced with the task of not only understanding or complying

with a particular rule but also understanding whether it is worth going to war with a customer and whether their superiors will back them when a complainant emerges.

A recurring theme in the literature concerns risk management. For the frontline employees, risk extends beyond legal sanctions into the areas of interpersonal and emotional risks such as embarrassment during refusals, the fear of escalation, and the stress associated with public confrontation. These findings suggest that ethical responsibility is enacted within interaction rather than held solely as an abstract attitude. Understanding ethical responsibility in tobacco retail therefore requires attention to how employees evaluate competing risks and justify trade-offs when public health obligations collide with customer service expectations.

Organizational controls also have an important part to play in framing compliance. Practices such as Challenge 25 policies, till prompts, managerial monitoring, and informal peer norm's structure what workers regard as safe or expected behaviour. The literatures tend, however, to treat such arrangements as a black box. This underlines the utility of an interview-based design able to probe how training, managerial support, and complaint handling influences employees' propensity to refuse sales and shapes their sense of ethical responsibility in everyday work.

#### **5.4 UK-relevant evidence and regulatory change**

Given the UK focus of the study, particular weight is placed on UK and UK-adjacent evidence addressing major regulatory shifts. Purves et al. (2019) is especially significant as a genuinely qualitative, interview-based study documenting how Scottish retailers responded to standardized packaging and the Tobacco Products Directive. The study demonstrates how regulatory change is experienced as lived practice: retailers describe changes to stock management, sales routines, and the relational work required to manage customer suspicion, frustration, and confusion.

Additional UK research on the retail environment and compliance illustrates how policy change reshapes point-of-sale settings and retailer practices over time (e.g. Eadie et al., 2016; Evans-Reeves et al., 2019). Collectively, this body of work suggests that tobacco retail operates within a continuously evolving regulatory landscape. Employees must repeatedly translate new requirements into workable routines while maintaining legitimacy with customers. This reinforces the timeliness of the present study and supports a focus on employees as active interpreters of regulation rather than passive rule-followers.

Recent research further indicates that the boundary between tobacco and vaping retail is increasingly important for understanding contemporary UK practice. Especially, vape retailers and mixed-product stores may experience different organizational incentives and customer expectations, yet both operate under shifting restrictions and public debate. This insight supports the inclusion of vaping-related experiences within the interview design

and enables exploration of how employees interpret harm, responsibility, and legitimacy across product categories (e.g. Ball et al., 2024).

An additional implication of the UK-focused literature concerns continuous learning. As product categories evolve and new restrictions are introduced, employees require practical guidance on what is permitted, what constitutes a violation, and how regulatory changes should be communicated to customers. Yet rule knowledge is often treated as a background assumption rather than a topic of analysis. Building on the adaptation narratives reported by Purves et al. (2019), knowledge updating and sensemaking are treated as central empirical questions in the present study.

### **5.5 Frontline work in regulated industries**

Qualitative studies have increasingly investigated the experiences of frontline workers in managed and emotionally demanding conditions. In the various sectors, there are shared concerns related to the emotional labor, role conflict, discretionary judgments, and sense-making as the main aspects of working in the frontlines.

Healthcare has been a central site for qualitative inquiry into how frontline workers experience regulation and risk. During the COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenological and interpretive studies documented how nurses and other healthcare professionals made sense of their responsibilities in conditions of uncertainty, rapidly changing guidance, and heightened personal risk (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2021; Lewis, Willis and Smallwood, 2025). Rather than encountering regulation as a neutral framework, participants described it as something encountered through emotionally charged interactions that required ongoing judgement. Ethical responsibility was experienced not only as a professional duty, but as something felt in relation to personal safety, professional identity, and accountability to others.

UK-based qualitative research further demonstrates that frontline experiences of regulation are shaped by organizational contexts, particularly communication practices, leadership, and support structures. Interview studies with health and social care professionals indicate that workers' ability to manage emotional demands and role conflict is closely tied to how supported they feel by their organization (Aughterson et al., 2021). Where guidance was perceived as inconsistent or support as limited, ethical responsibility became more difficult to navigate, intensifying feelings of stress, uncertainty, and risk. Comparative qualitative research across national contexts identifies similar patterns, including unclear expectations, emotional fatigue, and the pressure placed on frontline staff to exercise discretion in situations where formal rules offer limited guidance (Denning et al., 2022).

Comparable dynamics are evident beyond healthcare in qualitative studies of frontline service and retail work. Research examining retail employees' engagement with self-checkout technologies shows how frontline roles are reshaped through interactions

between customers, technology, and informal rule enforcement, placing additional interpretive and emotional demands on workers (Moradi et.al, 2024). Hospitality research similarly highlights how stress and coping strategies are shaped by organizational norms and customer expectations, underscoring the relational and affective nature of frontline labour (Chehab, Ilkhanizadeh and Bouzari, 2021; Cheung et.al, 2021). Together, these studies illustrate how frontline work routinely involves managing emotions, exercising judgement, and responding to competing expectations in real time.

Qualitative examinations of role conflict across service delivery settings further demonstrate how frontline workers are positioned at the intersection of organizational priorities, regulatory requirements, and customer demands. These competing pressures frequently generate feelings of powerlessness and emotional dissonance, particularly where workers are expected to resolve tensions that policy itself leaves ambiguous (Liberati et al., 2021). Importantly, these tensions are not experienced as abstract structural conditions; they are actively interpreted and managed in situ, shaping how regulation is translated into everyday practice.

Collectively this body of qualitative research suggests that frontline workers across regulated sectors do not simply implement policy as written. Instead, regulation is enacted through situated judgement, emotional engagement, and, at times, resistance. Emotional labor and role conflict emerge as key processes through which regulatory expectations are realized at the point of service delivery. This comparative scholarship provides a valuable foundation for examining ethical responsibility in UK tobacco retail, indicating that ethical gatekeeping is better understood as a lived and interpretive practice shaped by context, organizational support, and individual sense-making, rather than as a purely procedural task.

Research on tobacco retail has traditionally prioritized regulatory effectiveness, compliance rates, and public health outcomes. While this work has been essential for policy development, it offers limited insight into how regulation is actually experienced by those responsible for enforcing it at the point of sale. In contrast, qualitative research across a range of regulated sectors has demonstrated that frontline enforcement is an interpretive and emotionally demanding form of work.

Studies of healthcare professionals, alcohol retailers, social care workers, and police officers show that regulatory responsibilities are often experienced as ethical dilemmas rather than technical tasks. Frontline workers describe navigating competing expectations, managing emotional reactions from service users, and exercising discretion in ambiguous situations. These findings are directly relevant to tobacco retail, where employees must refuse sales while maintaining customer relations and personal safety.

Interpretative phenomenological approaches are particularly well suited to examining these dynamics because they prioritize how individuals understand and give meaning to significant experiences. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) argue that IPA enables detailed exploration of sense-making in contexts involving moral judgement and emotional complexity. Phenomenological perspectives, including those advanced by Van Manen (2016), further draw attention to the embodied and affective dimensions of experience, such as discomfort, anxiety, or resolve, that accompany ethical decision-making. In the context of tobacco retail, this approach allows for close examination of how responsibility is felt and sustained in everyday encounters rather than inferred from observable behavior alone.

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, qualitative inquiry is most appropriate when the aim is to understand meaning rather than to measure behavior. This distinction is particularly important in tobacco retail. While compliance data can indicate whether a sale was refused, it cannot capture how employees interpreted the situation, how confident they felt in their judgement, or how repeated refusals influence their sense of professional identity. Creswell and Poth (2018) similarly emphasize the value of phenomenological research where the focus is on lived experience rather than outcomes, reinforcing the relevance of IPA for this study.

Despite this growing body of qualitative research, the ethical experiences of UK tobacco retail employees remain underexplored. Existing studies rarely center frontline voices or examine how responsibility is constructed in everyday practice. This study addresses that gap by using IPA to explore how ethical responsibility is lived, interpreted, and sustained within institutional constraints.

### **5.6 Employee ethical experience and the ethical gatekeeper tension**

Central to this review is the ethical gatekeeper tension experienced by tobacco retail employees. Staff are expected to contribute to sales and customer satisfaction while simultaneously restricting access to a harmful product through refusals and compliance actions. Research on retailers that voluntarily discontinued tobacco sales demonstrates that ethical responsibility is negotiated and contested and may be framed in terms of public health stewardship, community protection, reputational strategy, or moral discomfort with profiting from harm (McDaniel and Malone, 2014). More recent evidence from early adopter sales-ban contexts further shows that policy change generates new forms of frontline work and new ethical narratives concerning the retailer's role in harm reduction (McDaniel, Smith and Malone, 2024).

These studies suggest two key insights. Firstly, ethics as a position is dynamic rather than static and ostensibly shaped through workplace interaction and customer contact. Secondly, policy implementation can put frontline personnel in ethics-related situations where they must justify refusal, handle customer anger, and integrate expectations with

personal ethics. Nevertheless, most of the previous research has emphasized either the perspective of the retailers or the organization rather than frontline personnel's experience of ethics as it is enacted through micro-interactions. That is a crucial omission that this research study fills using interviews with personnel based on specific events.

### **5.7 Emotional labor, role conflict and moral strain**

To further develop understanding of employee experience, emotional labor and role conflict scholarship is integrated. In regulated sales interactions, employees are often required to display calm professionalism while managing irritation, fear, or moral discomfort. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor provides a useful framework for conceptualizing this hidden work, in which feelings are managed as part of service performance and shaped by organizational expectations.

In the context of tobacco retail, emotional labor is heightened since employees are not only providing service but also denying service, referring to restrictions, and sometimes experiencing hostility or deception. Repeated encounters over enforcement may thus create moral strain, especially when staff perceive themselves as torn between public health responsibilities and commercial logics. Empirical attention is needed that might tease out when these tensions are experienced as a form of manageable professionalism, and when they become sources of chronic moral stress.

Methodologically, emotional labor is poorly captured by compliance metrics alone. Narrative interviewing is particularly well suited to eliciting accounts of difficult refusals, de-escalation strategies, and lingering emotional effects of confrontation. A phenomenological orientation allows these accounts to be treated as descriptions of lived experience and supports analysis of how employees make sense of the emotional demands of ethical gatekeeping (Hochschild, 1983).

### **5.8 Institutional perspectives and street-level discretion**

Scott's (2014) institutional theory conceptualizes organizations as shaped by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars, each exerting distinct but overlapping pressures on organizational life. Whilst Scott's (2014) framework identifies institutional pressures, scholars critique its structural determinism that may understate individual agency. Employees do not passively absorb pressures; they actively interpret and resist them through discretionary judgements. This critique is particularly relevant in tobacco retail, where frontline staff exercise discretion in ambiguous situations such as borderline age assessments or confrontational customer interactions, making sense of competing commercial and public health logics in situated ways. Institutional complexity further highlights the coexistence of competing logics, particularly between commercial imperatives and public health objectives (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014).

Street-level bureaucracy research strengthens this analysis by foregrounding discretion. Lipsky (2010 [1980]) demonstrates that frontline workers translate policy into practice under conditions of constraint and ambiguity, often developing routines that are locally rational. Applied to tobacco retail, this perspective conceptualizes employee gatekeeping as frontline regulatory work in which staff decide whom to challenge, how to manage confrontation, and how strictly to apply rules in uncertain situations.

Institutional complexity thus serves as an explanatory bridge between macro-level regulation and micro-level experience. Tobacco retail operates within competing logics that become personal and interpersonal tensions for employees at the counter. By combining Scott's (2014) institutional pillars with insights on field pressures and isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), the present study is sensitized to how organizations communicate compliance expectations and how employees internalize, resist, or pragmatically accommodate them.

### **5.9 Summary and explicit gap**

The reviewed literature illustrates that tobacco control is exercised by retail practice and that regulatory transformation impacts upon store routine and interaction. In addition, it illustrates a developing concern with ethical formulation and retailer reaction to control. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of existing qualitative research which primarily focuses upon lived experiences of enforcing regulation whilst appraised for customer service and sales achievement for UK tobacco retail workers. Most of the existing literature either tests for compliance or reveals retailer insight without holistically probing at micro-level sense-making and emotions. The synthesis finds a clear research gap: a lack of understanding about the UK tobacco retail worker's understanding of ethical responsibility as frontline actors implementing policy; the worker's experience of role conflict as service provider and sales contributor and gatekeeper; and the implications thereof for worker well-being and consistency of practice. The current study will fill this gap through an interpretive and phenomenological interview methodology that places a focus on meaning and context.

## **6. Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on Scott's (2014) institutional theory to conceptualize the multiple pressures shaping frontline tobacco retail work. While this framework is valuable for identifying regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive influences, it has been criticized for privileging structure over agency and for underplaying how individuals actively interpret and negotiate institutional demands. To address this limitation, the study adopts an interpretive qualitative methodology that foregrounds lived experience and sensemaking.

Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) typology of qualitative approaches, several methodological options were considered and critically evaluated before selecting

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The comparison below demonstrates the rationale for this choice and clarifies why alternative approaches were not adopted.

| Qualitative Approach                           | Primary Focus                           | Suitability for This Study | Rationale for Selection or Rejection                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) | Lived experience and meaning making     | Selected                   | IPA enables in-depth exploration of how frontline employees make sense of ethically charged experiences, such as refusing tobacco sales. Its idiographic focus is well suited to examining moral judgement, emotional labor, and identity negotiation within institutional constraints. |
| Narrative Research                             | Individual life stories and biographies | Rejected                   | Narrative inquiry prioritizes whole life stories and temporal plots. This study focuses instead on shared experiential patterns across participants rather than complete personal biographies.                                                                                          |
| Grounded Theory                                | Theory generation from data             | Rejected                   | The study does not seek to generate a new formal theory. Institutional theory already provides a sensitizing framework, making grounded theory's inductive theory-building aim unnecessary.                                                                                             |
| Ethnography                                    | Cultural patterns within a group        | Rejected                   | Ethnography requires prolonged immersion and observation. Practical and ethical constraints in regulated retail environments, and the study's focus on experience rather than culture, limit its suitability.                                                                           |
| Case Study                                     | In-depth analysis of a bounded system   | Rejected                   | Case study would restrict analysis to a single organization or site. This study seeks to identify experiential patterns across multiple retail contexts rather than within one bounded case.                                                                                            |

**Table 1: Comparison of Qualitative Approaches (Adapted from Creswell & Poth, 2018)**

This comparison demonstrates that IPA is the most appropriate methodological approach for addressing the research questions, as it aligns with the study's interpretivist paradigm and its focus on lived ethical experience.

However, institutional theory has been critiqued for its tendency towards structural determinism, potentially underplaying individual agency and interpretive flexibility. Critics argue that focusing on institutional pressures alone risks portraying frontline

workers as passive recipients of rules rather than active agents who interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist institutional demands. This limitation is particularly relevant in retail environments, where employees exercise discretion in ambiguous situations such as borderline age assessments or confrontational customer interactions.

To address this limitation, the present study integrates institutional theory with phenomenological analysis. While institutional theory identifies the sources and nature of external pressures, phenomenology reveals how these pressures are experienced, embodied, and interpreted by individuals in practice. For example, Challenge 25 policies may appear uniform at the regulatory level, yet phenomenological inquiry shows that refusing a sale in a busy supermarket with security support constitutes a different ethical experience from refusing a sale alone in a late-night convenience store. By foregrounding lived experience, phenomenology restores agency to employees and captures the micro-level ethical work obscured by structural accounts.

This integrative approach also aligns with scholarship on street-level discretion, which emphasizes that frontline workers actively shape policy outcomes through everyday judgement calls. Rather than treating compliance as a binary outcome, the study conceptualizes ethical gatekeeping as an ongoing interpretive practice shaped by institutional context but enacted through individual sense-making. This theoretical positioning strengthens the study's explanatory power while remaining sensitive to lived complexity.

Lastly, institutional theory offers a sophisticated approach to interpreting "responsibility." Responsibility can entail observance of a legal requirement (regulative responsibility), observance of a moral norm to safeguard young people (normative responsibility), or doing what is regularly done (routines: "this is just what we do here"). Such understandings can also conflict with each other. For example, a worker might feel that a refusal on a suspected proxy buyer is a moral act but may not have a clear legal justification or may not want to risk criticism by their bosses for "losing a sale." This analytical approach correlates to a study goal to investigate meaning structures, not behavior only.

Institutional ideas like legitimacy and decoupling can also be applied. Organizations can have policies and training to signal legitimacy, and yet practices can differ if conditions make it difficult for them to adhere fully. Workers can then practice "pragmatic compliance" and follow policies selectively to adhere to legitimacy and have transactions under control. Institutional isomorphism also proposes that retailers could mimic practices already widely regarded as legitimate (like ID checks, as per "Challenge 25") because of enforcement as well as because it then becomes the legitimate practice to display one's responsibility.

## 7. Conceptual Framework

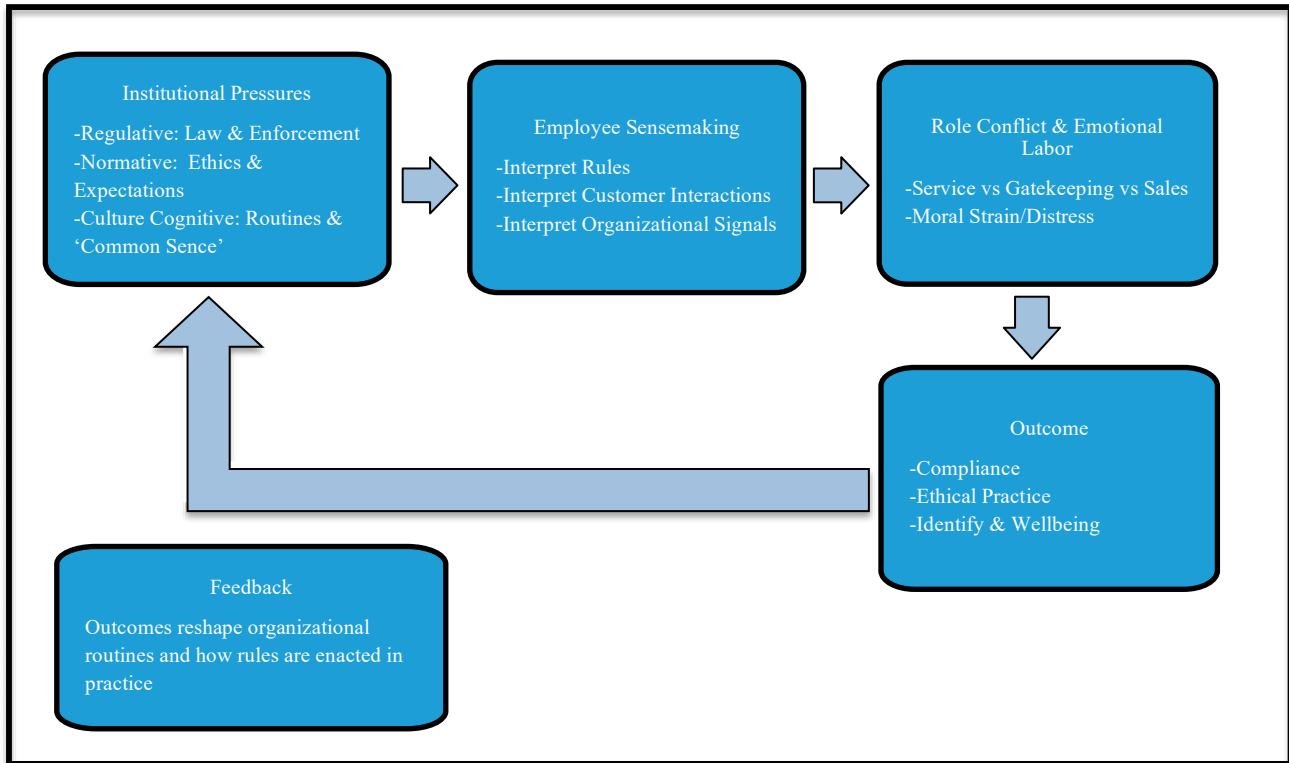


**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Institutional Pressures, Employee Sensemaking, and Outcomes.**

The conceptual framework linked to Figure 1 explains how institutional pressures, employee sensemaking, and emotional dynamics interact to shape ethical gatekeeping in UK tobacco retail. At its core, the framework proposes that frontline staff do not simply execute rules but actively interpret and negotiate them under conditions of institutional complexity, where commercial and public health logics coexist and sometimes clash.

At the left of the framework, institutional pressures are organized through Scott's (2014) regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars, capturing laws and enforcement, expectations of responsible retailing, and taken-for-granted routines and "common sense" about selling tobacco and vaping products. These layered pressures send mixed signals about what counts as "doing a good job," for example prioritizing speed and customer satisfaction while simultaneously demanding rigorous age verification and refusal of risky sales. Such contradictions are intensified by contemporary policy shifts, including display restrictions and vape regulations, which continually reshape what is required at the point of sale.

In the center, employees engage in sensemaking, interpreting rules, customer interactions, and organizational signals in real time to decide how to act in specific encounters. This involves drawing on training, peer norms, and prior incidents to judge when to check ID,

how strongly to challenge suspected proxy purchases, and whether managers will support unpopular refusals. Because these judgments play out in face-to-face interactions, they are saturated with emotional labor and role conflict: workers must present themselves as friendly service providers, effective sales contributors, and responsible gatekeepers, often simultaneously.

The bottom right side of the framework sets out key outcomes: patterns of compliance and non-compliance; the quality and consistency of ethical practice; employees' professional identity (for example, seeing themselves as "responsible protectors" or "just cashiers"); and their wellbeing, including moral strain and stress. These outcomes are not endpoints but feed back into the institutional and cultural environment: repeated confrontations, for instance, may normalize shortcut practices, encourage avoidance of strict enforcement, or, where support is strong, reinforce robust refusal norms. By highlighting these feedback loops, the framework guides the study's phenomenological design, focusing data collection and analysis on how staff narrate decision moments, tensions, and coping strategies through which institutional pressures become lived ethical experience.

## **8. Research Methodology**

### **8.1 Paradigmatic Foundations (Interpretivism)**

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm because ethical responsibility in tobacco retail is not experienced as a fixed rule-bound activity but as a situational and relational practice. Frontline employees do not simply 'apply' regulation; they interpret it in real time, often under pressure, while balancing legal obligations, customer expectations, and their own sense of fairness. Understanding ethical gatekeeping therefore requires attention to how employees themselves understand what they are doing and why.

Ontologically, the research assumes that multiple realities coexist within the same regulatory framework. A refusal enacted confidently in a well-staffed supermarket may be experienced very differently from a refusal made by a lone worker late at night in a small convenience store. These differences matter because they shape how responsibility is felt, justified, and sustained over time. Epistemologically, the study adopts a constructivist position, recognizing that knowledge about ethical responsibility emerges through dialogue between researcher and participant rather than being discovered as an objective fact.

The study adopts a subjectivist/constructivist epistemology. Knowledge about "ethical gatekeeping" is generated through dialogue with participants and through interpretation of their accounts. Interviews are treated as meaning-making encounters in which participants articulate experiences and the researcher interprets the significance of those experiences. Rather than seeking universal laws, the goal is to develop rich, credible, and transferable

understanding of how employees make sense of ethical responsibility under institutional complexity.

Interpretivist research recognizes that values are present in the research process. Tobacco retail is ethically sensitive: the topic sits at the boundary of legal commerce and health harm. The researcher's assumptions about tobacco control, corporate responsibility, and public health can shape what questions feel important and how accounts are interpreted. Axiological transparency therefore requires explicit researcher positionality and reflexivity. In this study it acknowledges that tobacco retail as a regulated "harmful product" context and that is sympathetic to public health goals such as reducing youth access and deormalizing smoking. It also recognizes that employees may hold different values, including viewing tobacco as a legitimate product and the job as ordinary service work. Reflexivity will be maintained through a reflexive journal, documenting emerging assumptions, emotional reactions to accounts (e.g., frustration at unethical practice or sympathy for difficult interactions), and analytic decisions. Bracketing will be used not to eliminate values (which is unrealistic) but to make them visible and to prevent premature closure in interpretation.

The interpretivist logic is inductive and iterative. Data collection and analysis proceed together: early interviews inform subsequent prompts, and analysis is refined as patterns and contrasts emerge. The emphasis is on depth rather than breadth, aligning with phenomenological aims to understand lived experience.

The study will use interpretivist criteria for quality such as credibility (do interpretations fit the data and make sense to participants), transferability (are contexts described so readers can judge applicability), dependability (is the process documented transparently), and confirmability (are findings grounded in data rather than researcher preference). Strategies include: (1) thick description of context and participant roles; (2) audit trail documenting recruitment, interview decisions, and coding steps; (3) peer debriefing with supervisors or research peers to challenge interpretations; (4) member reflection (inviting participants to comment on a brief summary of emergent themes, where feasible); and (5) careful attention to negative cases and contradictions, treating them as analytically valuable rather than as "noise."

In reporting the findings, the study will prioritize thick description to enable readers to assess transferability. This will include detailed accounts of store context, role expectations, and interactional settings (such as peak trading periods, lone-working conditions, and levels of customer familiarity) that shape ethical decision-making. Attention will also be given to negative cases and disconfirming evidence in order to avoid imposing a single or overly coherent moral narrative onto participants' accounts. These strategies are particularly important because ethical responsibility in tobacco retail is often ambivalent and contextually negotiated. Interpretivist transparency therefore requires

explicit demonstration of how interpretations were reached and where tensions remain unresolved.

The researcher brings personal familiarity with retail and service environments, including observation of how age-restricted sales can generate awkward or tense interactions. This familiarity supports empathic interviewing but also presents a risk of over-normalizing certain practices or assuming shared meanings. To mitigate this risk, reflexive interviewing techniques will be employed, such as inviting participants to explain taken-for-granted routines and assumptions. In addition, sampling will deliberately include variation across store formats and job roles to reduce the likelihood of a single experiential perspective dominating the analysis. Analytic memo-writing will be used to distinguish participant meanings from the researcher's expectations.

Within an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher functions as the primary instrument of inquiry. Consequently, assumptions will be made explicit and managed through disciplined reflexivity. Prior to data collection, a positionality statement will be produced to document baseline views on tobacco control and retailer responsibility. During fieldwork, bracketing notes will be used to separate immediate reactions (for example, emotional responses to accounts of sales-to-minors) from participants' intended meanings. Following coding, these notes will be revisited to assess whether emergent themes are grounded in the data or influenced by the researcher's preferences, and any shifts in interpretation over time will be documented.

Overall, the interpretivist paradigm is well aligned with the study's aims: to capture employees' lived ethical experiences, to interpret how institutional pressures are understood and enacted in everyday practice, and to generate a conceptually informed account of ethical gatekeeping in UK tobacco retail.

Institutional theory will be used as a sensitizing framework rather than a deterministic analytical template. Scott's (2014) regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars will function as prompts for analytical attentiveness. Specifically, analysis will attend to how participants describe formal rules and sanctions (regulative pressures), expectations from managers and customers (normative pressures), and taken-for-granted assumptions about smoking, vaping, addiction, and responsibility (cultural-cognitive pressures). This approach facilitates linkage between lived experience and wider institutional forces while preserving inductive theme development.

Given that frontline enforcement frequently involves discretion and negotiation, insights from street-level bureaucracy will also inform the analysis. This body of work supports an interpretivist focus on how employees manage limited time, competing objectives, and ambiguous situations at the point of sale. Methodologically, it encourages examination of "decision moments," such as responses to failed identification checks, customer agitation,

or conflicting guidance from management and regulation. Analysis will focus on how discretion is justified and stabilized into routine practice.

To strengthen methodological rigor, an explicit audit trail will be maintained. In addition to reflexive journaling, dated analytic memos will document sampling decisions, revisions to the interview guide, coding choices, and the evolution of interpretations. Peer debriefing will be undertaken through discussion of codes and themes with an academic peer or supervisor. In addition, participants will be invited to provide brief reflections on summary interpretations (member reflections rather than formal validation) to assess resonance and surface alternative meanings. Collectively, these strategies support credibility, dependability, and confirmability in line with established qualitative quality criteria.

The concern for phenomenological analysis is that participants will be those who experience the phenomenon first-hand. The sample for this study will be comprised of employees who are tasked with age verification and the sale of tobacco and nicotine products on a regular basis. The sample justification will be one of “information power,” in which the subject matter expertise and the data analysis will be theoretically grounded such that a limited sample pool will be acceptable. The study will measure whether further interviews will provide a significantly deeper understanding than already has been achieved.

These interviews will be analyzed in terms of a co-construction. Individuals may first respond with organizational scripts (“we always operate according to the rules”), though an interpretivist interview is designed to assist them in expanding upon these with everyday illustrations. From general to specific (from “How does responsible selling mean here?” to “Can you give me an example of the last occasion when you turned a sale down and what were you thinking of at that point?”).

Ethical sensitivity and positionality in the analysis. Since cigarette retailing also carries the potential for stigma and moral classification, the analyst must resist the tendency to construct the researched subjects as either “good” or “bad” conformers. The analyst shall critically evaluate the positionality in the study by considering the positions taken in the study or the publication regarding public health issues or responsible retailing practices.

## **8.2 Creswell’s five approaches and choice of phenomenology**

Creswell describes five qualitative approaches—narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study—each suited to different research purposes. Selecting an approach is not a technical afterthought; it shapes what counts as data, how participants are engaged, and what kind of knowledge is produced.

Narrative research focuses on the stories of individuals and how those stories are constructed across time. It would be suitable if the main purpose were to produce detailed life histories of tobacco retail workers or to trace a single individual's career trajectory. While stories will certainly emerge in interviews, the primary aim here is not biographical narrative but the shared meaning of ethically complex sales encounters.

Grounded theory aims to generate a process model or theory that explains a social phenomenon across cases. It relies on theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and often larger sample sizes. Grounded theory could be appropriate if the objective were to build a formal theory of "compliance decision processes" that could be generalized across retail sectors. However, the present project prioritizes depth of lived experience and aims to understand meaning in context rather than to build an abstract, formal theory intended for broad explanatory scope.

Ethnography focuses on shared culture and patterns of behavior within a group, typically using extended fieldwork, participant observation, and immersion. Ethnography would be powerful for understanding the culture of a particular retail chain or store as a "community of practice." Yet practical and ethical constraints (e.g., observing illegal proxy purchases or conflicts, access to sensitive compliance areas, and the feasibility of long-term immersion across multiple store formats) make full ethnography less appropriate for this stage. Furthermore, the research interest is not solely cultural patterning but the experience and meaning of ethical tension.

Case study examines a bounded system in depth using multiple sources of data. A case study could be suitable if the project were framed around a specific retailer or region and sought to triangulate interviews with policy documents, training materials, and observational data. While case study logic may be useful as an optional supplementary strategy (e.g., using organizational artefacts), the core phenomenon of interest—employees' experience of ethical responsibility—does not require a single bounded case.

Phenomenology provides an appropriate methodological orientation because it focuses on lived experience rather than abstract policy intent. As Creswell and Poth (2018) argue, phenomenological inquiry is particularly valuable when the aim is to understand how people experience and make sense of complex phenomena. In this study, the phenomenon is ethical responsibility as it is enacted at the retail counter—often in moments of tension, uncertainty, or confrontation.

A hermeneutic phenomenological stance is adopted to acknowledge that employees' experiences are always shaped by context. Refusing a sale is not experienced in isolation but within organizational routines, regulatory scrutiny, and culturally embedded expectations about service work. Rather than attempting to bracket out these influences entirely, the analysis attends to how they enter into participants' sensemaking. Reflexivity

is treated as an integral part of this process. The researcher's assumptions and responses will be documented through reflexive journaling to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed moral positions.

To operationalize hermeneutic phenomenology, this study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as articulated by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). IPA is concerned with exploring how individuals make sense of significant experiences and is characterized by an idiographic focus, detailed engagement with individual cases, and a commitment to interpretation. This makes IPA particularly well suited to examining how tobacco retail employees construct meaning around ethical responsibility within institutional complexity.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) involves a double hermeneutic; participants attempt to make sense of their own experiences, and the researcher, in turn, interprets these sense-making efforts. This is especially appropriate in the present study, where employees reflect on ethically charged moments—such as refusing a sale to a potentially underage or aggressive customer—and articulate how they justified their actions, managed emotions, and evaluated their responsibilities. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enables these accounts to be analyzed not simply as descriptions of behavior but as expressions of lived ethical meaning.

Alternative qualitative approaches were considered but rejected for theoretically informed reasons. Narrative research was not selected because the aim is not to produce individual life histories but to identify shared experiential patterns across participants. Grounded theory was rejected because the study does not seek to generate a new formal theory of compliance; instead, institutional theory already provides a sensitizing framework. Ethnography was considered inappropriate due to practical and ethical constraints surrounding prolonged observation in regulated retail settings and because the primary interest lies in experience rather than culture. Case study was not adopted because the phenomenon of interest extends across organizational contexts rather than a single bounded case.

While IPA traditionally recommends small samples (typically 5–10 participants) to enable deep idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2009), this study proposes a sample of 15–20 participants to allow comparison across different retail formats (e.g., supermarkets, convenience stores, forecourts). This decision introduces a recognized tension between depth and breadth. To mitigate the risk of superficial analysis, the study will prioritize detailed engagement with each transcript before conducting cross-case comparisons, ensuring that idiographic depth is preserved.

The research adopts a phenomenological thematic approach. Semi-structured interviews will invite participants to describe concrete episodes (e.g., “tell me about a time you refused

a sale”) and to reflect on what those episodes meant to them (e.g., “what did you feel responsible for in that moment?”). The analysis will proceed through iterative reading, coding, and theme development, with emphasis on capturing the texture of experience (emotions, bodily reactions, sense of risk, moral evaluation) and the interpretive frames participants use (e.g., “I’m just doing my job,” “I’m protecting kids,” “the manager cares about sales”).

Creswell highlights that in phenomenology, research often predominantly consists of a few people who have had a personal experience of the phenomenon, and the researcher will describe the experience and the manner of this experience for the subjects. In specific accordance with this, the sample will be purposely selected and will consist of people who work in the sales of tobacco and people who have had age-restricted transactions. The final product will yield descriptions and an interpretation about the structures of meaning for gatekeeping ethics.

The proposal already has good regulatory contextualization and a great ‘ethical gatekeeper’ framing. Phenomenology is good for enhancing it by grasping the lived ethical space of counter encounters where the elements of compliance, services, and selling come together. Phenomenological research allows for a focus on the elements of uncertainty, tension, and employee strategies that could help in policies of organizational support.

Creswell emphasizes that phenomenological description focuses on what and how participants experienced a phenomenon. This study extends that by interpreting experiences through an institutional lens. The analysis will thus attend to how participants reference rules (regulative), values and expectations (normative), and routines or “common sense” (cultural-cognitive). It will also identify how competing logics are narrated—for example, when participants describe being “friendly” and “strict” simultaneously, or when they justify bending rules to protect relationships. This approach allows for theoretically informed interpretation without trying to force data into pre-set categories: institutional theory is used as a sensitizing frame, not as a rigid coding scheme.

Other methods were not chosen because this approach is not grounded theory and not full ethnography is that this project is not trying to formalize a process model with theoretically guided sampling and constant comparison to theoretically saturate that process model. This project also is not full-blown ethnography since this research will not be doing any extended participant observation at a single site. Rather, this current research aims to conduct an interpretive phenomenology that aims to capture a common meaning and tension of ethical gatekeeping amidst retail settings yet also considers the uniqueness of each participant’s lifeworld.

### 8.3 Research Design and Methods

**Sampling Strategy:** The study would use purposive sampling to recruit 15–20 tobacco retail employees working in the UK. Participants would be selected to ensure variation across store types (independent convenience stores, supermarkets, forecourts), roles (cashiers, supervisors), and levels of experience. Inclusion criteria include: (1) current employment in a UK retail setting selling tobacco or vaping products; (2) a minimum of six months' experience with age-restricted sales; and (3) direct involvement in age verification and refusal practices. Recruitment would occur through professional networks, store manager contacts, and snowball sampling, with participation emphasized as voluntary and confidential. Although IPA typically recommends small samples of 5–10 participants to allow for idiographic depth (Smith et al., 2009), this study proposes a sample of 15–20 participants to enable comparison across store formats. This creates a potential tension between depth and breadth, mitigated by intensive within-case analysis prior to cross-case synthesis.

**Data Collection:** Respondents would be asked to participate in a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting around 45–60 minutes. Interviewing would occur at the convenience of each participant or virtually. The questions would move sequentially from the more descriptive questions (for example, "Can you describe a typical workday?"), followed by narrative questions ("Tell me about a memorable refusal"), and then finally more exploratory questions ("What were responsible selling behaviors to you in that situation?"). The interviews would be audio-recorded with the participants giving consent.

**Data Analysis:** Analysis would follow the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis outlined by Smith et al. (2009): repeated reading of transcripts, detailed initial noting, development of emergent themes within each case, and careful cross-case analysis to identify shared and divergent patterns. Throughout analysis, institutional theory would be used as a sensitizing framework rather than a rigid coding template, enabling linkage between lived experience and regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures.

**Trustworthiness:** Trustworthiness would be established in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility would be supported through prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, and member reflection, whereby participants are invited to comment on brief summaries of emergent interpretations. Transferability would be facilitated through thick description of store contexts, roles, and interactional settings, enabling readers to assess relevance to other regulated retail environments. Dependability would be ensured through a transparent audit trail documenting sampling decisions, interview development, coding steps, and analytical shifts. Confirmability would be addressed through reflexive memo-writing and peer debriefing, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in participant accounts rather than researcher assumptions.

## 9. Ethical Considerations

This research is based on the lived experiences of ethical responsibility of tobacco retail employees within a regulated and possibly contentious workplace context. Ethical conduct has been treated as a central and ongoing concern throughout the research process, given the sensitivity of discussing refusal of sales, customer confrontation, and moral tension in everyday work. Ethical approval was granted by the appropriate university ethics committee prior to data collection.

Ethical decision-making was guided by Seedhouse's Ethical Grid (2007), which offers a structured yet reflexive framework for engaging with ethical complexity in context-dependent human situations. Seedhouse's approach was selected over more principle-based frameworks, such as Beauchamp and Childress' principlism, because it ties in more with the interpretivist bent of the study and the emphasis placed in it upon "lived experience," "morality as ambiguity," and "situated judgment." As Gallagher (2009) argues, ethical practice in complex settings benefits from "slow" and reflective engagement rather than prescriptive ethical certainty. Accordingly, the grid was used as a reflective tool to support transparent, context-sensitive judgement throughout the design, conduct, and reporting of the study.

External factors in this context comprised legal and institutional requirements. The study adhered to data protection laws in the UK (UK GDPR), as well as university policy governing research studies. There was consideration for participants' vulnerability in an employment relationship, entailing risks of repercussions on various levels. The recruitment of participants occurred independently of an employers' role, and data regarding an organization wasn't gathered. The assessment of participants addressed interpretations of experience from an ethical sensemaking framework in an epistemological approach rather than activities verifiable via compliance.

The consequential layer is there were possible consequences for the individuals involved, as well as society at large. Although there were no foreseeable physical repercussions, the reflection on the unethical and conflicted pieces carried the risk of emotional disturbance and/or moral struggle on the part of the researcher. Awareness of possible psychological impacts, including moral distress, informed a cautious and supportive interview approach (Litz et al., 2009).

At the level of duties and motives, the researcher recognized a moral obligation to act with integrity, honesty, and care. Reflexivity was treated as an ethical practice, with explicit attention to researcher positionality and power asymmetries that may shape what participants felt able to disclose (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Reflexive journaling and supervisory dialogue were employed to engage with morally significant events during fieldwork.

Concern for persons was an important consideration throughout. Informed consent was obtained by providing a comprehensive information sheet. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms, removing organizational identity, and selectively concealing or breaking up background data in such a way that it was not possible by deduction to identify an individual. Reporting was done in accordance once again with Seedhouse's grid of ethics, treating insight into Nursology throughout not by offending another's personhood, focusing instead organizational constraints.

## **10. Findings**

Data collection is scheduled to take place between February and April 2026. While this study does not present empirical findings at this stage, the anticipated results are expected to illuminate how frontline retail employees describe and make sense of ethical responsibility in the context of tobacco sales. In particular, findings are likely to highlight how employees construct ethical responsibility not merely as regulatory compliance but as a situated moral practice shaped by customer interaction, organizational expectations, and perceived personal risk.

Anticipated themes include the situational factors influencing discretionary judgements, such as store format, staffing levels, time pressure, and prior experiences with customer aggression or support from management. The emotional dimensions of refusal are also expected to feature prominently, including feelings of anxiety, moral discomfort, confidence, or emotional exhaustion when enforcing age-restriction policies. Variations in organizational support, training quality, and managerial backing are likely to shape how confidently, and consistently ethical gatekeeping is enacted. Together, these anticipated findings will foreground ethical gatekeeping as a lived, relational, and emotionally mediated practice rather than a purely procedural task.

## **11. Discussion Framework**

The discussion will interpret the study's findings through the lens of institutional theory, street-level bureaucracy, and emotional labor scholarship, situating employee experiences within the UK tobacco regulatory context. Findings will be examined in relation to institutional pressures, highlighting how regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive logics are interpreted and negotiated at the frontline rather than simply imposed.

Street-level bureaucracy literature will provide a complementary lens for understanding discretionary judgement, coping strategies, and the moral agency exercised by employees when enforcing age-restricted sales. Emotional labor scholarship will be used to analyze how feelings are managed, suppressed, or expressed during refusal encounters, and how sustained emotional demands shape wellbeing and professional identity.

The discussion will identify points of convergence and divergence between this study's findings and existing compliance-focused literature on tobacco retail regulation. In doing so, it will demonstrate how interpretive, qualitative insights extend dominant outcome-

oriented accounts by revealing how regulation is enacted, experienced, and sometimes contested in everyday retail practice.

## **12. Limitations**

The research will be deep but not broad, with results being specific to context and not statistically generalizable. However, thick description for linkage with institutional theory might help in achieving transferability to a similar retail setting in a regulated category like tobacco. The research will be limited in recruitment by ease of access to participants and by their fear of speaking their minds; this will result in a biased sample of participants who feel relatively safe speaking freely on their concerns. Interviews will be self-reported data based on participants' recall of their experiences, especially in relation to compliance with regulations, which might be influenced by memory constraints or social desirability biases. The researcher will act as an interpreter, with all interpretation strategies by the researcher being influenced by their personal values in relation to tobacco control. Lastly, researching mainly by interviewing will result in a lack of representation of non-verbal communication at point of sale, including observation of such a setting in future research.

The study also has limitations in its scope of sources. As it relies mainly on interviews, it will not observe point-of-sale interactions directly or review organizational training documents unless these are shared voluntarily. The data from observation or documents can strengthen triangulation, but they raise other challenges given the access and confidentiality issues in regulated retail. Finally, the rapidly changing policy environment—for example, new vaping rules—means that experiences can vary over time; as a result, the study will document the timing and context carefully but cannot capture all future policy shifts.

Another limitation might be where research participants engage in self-censorship in order to appear responsible, especially when dealing with so sensitive a topic. It is important that a good rapport is established, that confidentiality is guaranteed, and that researched individuals are asked about common dilemmas instead of "rule breaking" in order to permit openness. Nonetheless, it is important that the research results are not considered an indication of objectivity regarding compliance.

## **13. Conclusion**

This research has several important contributions to knowledge and practice. Theoretically, it extends institutional theory by foregrounding frontline lived experience and individual sensemaking, demonstrating how institutional pressures are interpreted and enacted through discretionary judgement rather than passively absorbed. By integrating phenomenology with institutional analysis, the study highlights the centrality of agency, emotion, and moral interpretation in regulatory environments.

Empirically, the research offers the first UK-based interpretative phenomenological account of ethical responsibility in tobacco retail, providing rich insight into how employees experience and negotiate ethical gatekeeping at the point of sale. These findings address a significant gap in a literature dominated by compliance metrics and organizational perspectives.

Practically, the study has implications for retailer training, managerial support, and policy implementation. By identifying the emotional and situational challenges faced by frontline employees, the findings can inform more effective training, clearer organizational support structures, and safer working practices for those responsible for enforcing age-restricted sales.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of interpretive qualitative approaches, particularly IPA, for examining regulatory enactment and ethical responsibility in frontline settings. It shows how phenomenological inquiry can complement regulatory and institutional research by revealing how rules are lived, felt, and sustained in everyday work practices.

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