

The Pandemic Viewed Through the Eyes of Overseas Filipino Workers in the Emirates: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The majority of the global population has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, a global health emergency. In particular, migrant workers were discovered to be one of the most vulnerable groups among the general population during lockdowns. Hence, the impact of the pandemic on their lives has been apparent. This study was pursued with the purpose to describe the pandemic experiences of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) living and working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In-depth interviews with seven participants revealed that the pandemic was an avenue for insight construction and reevaluation for them in which their values of faith, gratitude, commitment, and responsibility were accentuated. Moreover, these OFWs considered the pandemic a situation where their emotions and aspirations as migrant workers were tested, which led them to seek means and strategies to keep thriving in the midst of the crisis, facing risks to continue working during the pandemic for the sake of their families who depended on them. This experience thus calls for policy-makers to implement measures in response to migrant workers' needs to ensure their safety, well-being, and livelihoods in foreign lands, especially when a crisis like a pandemic arises.

Keywords: *Overseas Filipino workers, pandemic experiences, crises, trauma*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global health crisis that tremendously affected the majority of the population around the world. Since 2020, it spread across countries, threatening their economies, stability, and citizens' welfare and security. In effect, it has emerged as an event of great magnitude that gave birth to unprecedented changes in the lives of people and work environments. As a response to the outbreak of this crisis, governments all over the world imposed limitations on the freedom of travel and access to places of employment. Depending on the pandemic's phase, these restrictions were implemented at various times, although the majority of the world was impacted by the shutdown between March and June 2020 (Anderson et al., 2021). The impact on the lives of migrant workers and laborers has been particularly noticeable (Kumar et al., 2020). Being a marginalized group in society, migrant workers rely on their salaries to make a living, and so when they are in a difficult situation, they require compassion and understanding of the community (Hargreaves et al., 2019).

During the pandemic, these individuals who migrate from one country to a foreign country to live and work were discovered to be one of the most vulnerable groups among the general population during the lockdowns. This was because the lockdowns completely halted many migrants' ability to make a living (Jesline et al., 2021). Ram (2020) reported that a number of migrant workers became unemployed when the lockdown was implemented. Their whole sustenance vanished, and they could not fend for themselves or their families (Chakma, 2020). It was revealed that these migrant workers were especially exposed to the adverse consequences of the economic crisis (Nanda, 2020). Hence, migrants are more likely to experience social, psychological, and emotional trauma in these kinds of circumstances. This fear stems from their concerns about the welfare and safety of their families back in their home countries, as well as the possibility that the local community would ignore them.

For instance in India, in addition to being cut off from their families as a result of the unexpected lockdown, these migrants were also alienated because of the situation. Many of them had no jobs and

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no money, and faced significant economic setbacks (Anderson et al., 2021; Mishra & Sayeed, 2020). As India's population of 1.3 billion people had little choice but to come to terms with imposed social separation, millions of migrant workers had to confront many difficult challenges (Londhe, 2020). As the lockdown affected the entire community and compelled residents to remain indoors, the migrants had to remain in a foreign nation without support or even access to basic necessities (Kumar et al., 2020). As a result, this group of people had to go through more severe economic, social, and psychological challenges than anyone else (Aragona et al., 2020; Singh, 2020).

In the same vein, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was one of many countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. O'Neill (2021) reported that the unemployment rate in the UAE in 2020 was 2.45% of the total labor force. The unemployment rate represents the proportion of a nation's workforce that is both jobless and actively looking for employment opportunities. In the same report, the unemployment rate in the United Arab Emirates in 2019 was 2.35%, which was lower than the unemployment rate in 2020, which means that the unemployment rate rose from 2019 to 2020, which was the year when the COVID-19 pandemic started (O'Neill, 2021). Moreover, the *Khaleej Times* reported that UAE companies had started cutting their migrant employees' salaries, and were asking them to work from their home countries instead (Abbas, 2021). Such harsh conditions were being enacted in reaction to losses, which affected the labor force in the UAE.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic disturbed the lives of people living and working in the UAE, including overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), or Filipinos who were legally living and working in that country located in the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. In the UAE, which is a federation of six emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Umm Al-Quwain, Ajman, and Fujairah), data showed that OFWs numbered around 650,000 as of January 2020 (Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, 2020). In the latest report, Filipinos were the fourth largest expatriate group in the country, next to Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis (Global Media Insight, 2023). These Filipinos in the UAE were primarily migrant overseas workers employed in the fields of health science, education, architecture, engineering, information technology, marketing, real estate, business, telecommunications, tourism, and domestic service across all emirates. In light of the pandemic, over 50,000 Filipinos from Dubai and the Northern Emirates have left the UAE since June 2020 for various reasons brought about by the situation. Of the total, the Philippine Consulate in Dubai provided free tickets and assistance to more than 3,500 distressed Filipinos (Tesorero, 2021). Moreover for the Filipino community, the annual unemployment rate in 2020 reached a record high of 10.3% compared to 5.1% in 2019. This was equivalent to 4.5 million Filipinos losing their jobs during the pandemic (Varcas, 2021). This intensified the assertion that the pandemic affected millions of families around the world, and tens of thousands of families who had ties to OFWs. These families faced struggles impacting their livelihoods, well-being, and financial stability (Cleofas et al., 2021). In a study by Pogoy and Cutamora (2021), the experiences of Filipino intensive care unit nurses in Dubai were explored. The findings revealed that various challenges tested the will and dedication of these nurses as they practiced their profession in the riskiest of times. However, as they faced homesickness and concern about their health and safety, they also built up resilience by seeing how vital their jobs were during the pandemic.

Various researchers across the world have dealt with how the pandemic affected the lives of various institutions and employees (e.g., Abbas, 2021; Pogoy & Cutamora, 2021; O'Neill, 2023; Varcas, 2021). However, no significant research has been undertaken to delineate the effects of the pandemic as a psycho-social experience for OFWs living and actively working in the UAE. Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos viewed this region as a place to improve their prospects. Using a qualitative method of study, this investigation allowed researchers to examine the job conditions and experiences of Filipino migrant workers during the pandemic. While it is arguably true that many, if not all of us, have succumbed to fear and been afflicted in one way or another, in this paper it is argued that despite their vulnerability, OFWs have remained persistent in various ways due to familial obligations and personal aspirations. Therefore, using a phenomenological design, this study aimed to explore the saga of OFWs in the UAE during the pandemic, which the researchers held was a unique psychological and social experience for migrant workers. Investigation, understanding, and analysis of the

difficulties, coping strategies, and insights that migrants held and experienced during the pandemic were essential steps toward appreciating them for their sacrifices to live and work away from their native land. Furthermore, to raise public awareness and offer new measures that can be used to generate better approaches in responding to migrants' needs, it is necessary to record and analyze their experiences. The findings obtained could paint a picture of how the UAE and the Philippine governments could support these people who are making significant contributions to the development of both countries. The findings gathered during this study may suggest more ways to ensure their safety, well-being, and livelihoods in a foreign land, especially when a crisis arises.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative design, relying particularly on phenomenology. Through a qualitative research design, researchers can produce narrative or textual descriptions of the phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Johnston & VanderStoep, 2009). Therefore, in order to achieve the purposes outlined for this research, the researchers employed a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology makes it possible to objectively analyze data and information that is naturally subjective (Sousa, 2014).

The study was conducted in various emirates of the United Arab Emirates. The participants were seven overseas Filipino workers gathered through a snowball sampling method (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). In identifying eligible participants, a set of inclusion criteria was employed. A participant must be an OFW with a valid working visa in the UAE; must have been living with their family (spouse/kids) in the UAE since the pandemic started in March 2020; and must be willing to volunteer for inclusion in the study. Initially, the researchers posted a "call for participants" poster in a Facebook group for UAE OFWs. After a week, three people responded, and after screening and verifying their eligibility, they were identified as participants. Two of these participants recruited two more participants each, which resulted in a total of seven participants for this study.

Permission from the research committee of the Philippine Emirates Private School was secured to commence data-gathering procedures. Then the participants, after having received a comprehensive description of the study, expressed their willingness to join through submitting signed letters of consent. A semi-structured interview guide, validated by five research experts, was utilized during interviews conducted via Microsoft Team. The questions asked were grounded in the OFWs' perceptions of living and working in the UAE while the pandemic was going on, plus their challenges, opportunities, and the coping mechanisms they used. In analyzing the information, this study utilized data analysis methods prescribed by Moustakas (1994). In the coding process, the researchers employed horizontalization (i.e., this involves significant statements, sentences, or quotes that highlight the phenomenon being studied). These features were found in recurring patterns, concepts, and/or ideas in the excerpts. On the side, careful judgment and reflection on the part of the researchers were employed so all coded statements were clustered according to themes. These significant statements and themes were then used to develop the textual and structural descriptions. From the textual and structural descriptions, the researchers then wrote a composite description that presented the essence of the phenomenon (the essential, invariant structure or essence). The main themes of the study were derived from this approach. After analyzing data from the seven participants, the theoretical saturation point was reached, i.e., no further themes or new concepts were discovered after evaluating successive data for a category under investigation. Hence, the recruitment of participants was then halted. In the end, the precision of the data analysis was confirmed by five external research reviewers. In the same way, the researchers maintained an audit trail and kept a reflective record during the entire course of the study, and ensured that this study's findings were based only on the gathered data, and that discussion was based on sound theories and prior research.

Results and Discussion

The participants' profiles are detailed in Table 1. Of the seven participants involved in this study, two were working in the emirate of Dubai, three in Abu Dhabi, and two in Ras Al Khaimah. On average, the participants, who were 46 to 58 years old, had been in the UAE between 20 to 36 years. All of them were married, with kids, and legally working in the country. Most notably, the OFWs had onsite jobs during the pandemic. Hence, despite the health restrictions, they had to come to work physically. To ensure anonymity, each participant was referred to as OFW1, OFW2, and OFW3 to OFW7.

Table 1 *Profile of the Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Job Field	UAE Location	Age	Marital Status	Years in UAE
OFW1	Male	Sales	Dubai	48	Married with 3 kids	23
OFW2	Female	Sales	Abu Dhabi	55	Married with 4 kids	35
OFW3	Male	Nursing	Ras Al Khaimah	46	Married with 1 kid	20
OFW4	Male	Engineering	Abu Dhabi	52	Married with 3 kids	30
OFW5	Female	Nursing	Abu Dhabi	49	Married with 2 kids	24
OFW6	Male	Sales	Ras Al Khaimah	55	Married with 3 kids	31
OFW7	Male	Food Industry	Dubai	58	Married with 2 kids	36

Following a thorough and careful examination of the transcripts, essential themes were developed to shed light on the lived experiences of OFWs in the UAE during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes illuminated various aspects of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The excerpts provide a variety of perspectives and allow the participants to speak for themselves.

The Pandemic: An Insight Constructor

Embracing Realities and Gratitude. The participants expressed that working in a foreign country and being away from their families during the onslaught of the pandemic made them gain total awareness of how difficult and awful the situation was that affected their routines and daily circumstances. Nevertheless, they expressed their gratefulness for the opportunity to keep their jobs. This went with acquiring the insight that they should always treat having the capability to work as a daily blessing. As they acknowledged, their jobs were their main source of income that sustained their daily needs despite the fact that, during the pandemic, many professionals and skilled workers in the UAE lost their jobs after their companies closed. Also, participants realized that changes and difficulties were happening during the pandemic. Some found it difficult and worried that they might lose their jobs, as well as become infected. Hence, they were well aware of the situation that was unfolding around the globe.

These thoughts are reflected in the following quotes: “When it was discovered and many people suffered from this pandemic, all about our life was changed. And imagining the chaos and the suffering of the people, and then our daily routine was changed also” (OFW#1); “It’s just yourself that will be your motivation in facing this time of the pandemic, especially at our work right now because we are far away from our family, so we will . . . serve as our own motivation” (OFW#4); and “We know that lots of people lost their jobs, so we need to love our jobs and then save more money, because we don’t know when we will lose our job or we will end the contract” (OFW#5).

The statements brought forward by OFWs suggested that the pandemic has in a way prompted them to form positive perspectives in the face of the many challenges around them. They might have had to put up with a damaging and serious situation because their normal activities and lifestyle had been disrupted by this predicament. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, they knew that the environment around the world was unpredictable and dangerous not just for them, who had to keep working, but also for the members of their families. Nevertheless for these OFWs, the pandemic was not a totally negative experience, as insights formed from their experiences taught them valuable lessons as workers in a foreign land. This finding is supported by insight learning theory, which states that in constructing an insight, the entire situation seems to take on a new form, changing the individual's perception of the situation and giving it a more meaningful and appealing appearance (Ash

et al., 2012; Windholz & Lamal, 1985). A sudden flash of insight allows a person to organize and establish relationships between things in new ways, adding an emotional touch. In the case of OFWs, the concept of appreciation took on added significance in making them move forward amid their problematic situations. That is, they were thankful for being able to keep their employment and realized that they should count each day that they were able to work as a gift from God. This suggests that, despite their predicaments, these OFWs had opted to look on the brighter side, counting their blessings that they still had jobs, while more than 200 million jobs worldwide were destroyed (Hassan, 2021). Hence, the participants felt thankful as their relatively mild predicaments seemed to be a light amid the darkness. Having the opportunity to work meant they were still able to provide for their families' needs and continue with their journeys abroad. For them, even in the midst of difficulties, stresses, and overwhelming circumstances, gratitude served as a reminder of how precious life is. As Jans-Beken (2021) puts it, an attitude of mature gratitude was able to aid people in adjusting to the new risks and limitations introduced by the pandemic.

Realizing the Responsibility. The study's participants, OFWs in the UAE, appeared to have fathomed well how preventive and safety measures needed to be followed, and these things had a great impact on their lives. While it was a challenge for them to continue working onsite while strictly adhering to all government rules and regulations in an effort to stop the spread of the disease, they understood that this was the very essence of their socio-civic responsibilities. These sentiments were expressed in a number of statements, some brief and others more extended. OFW#4 made the following statement: "It is our part to help to prevent COVID-19 from spreading We must help one another, our governments, ourselves most importantly That's what Filipinos are after all – united." Two more expansive comments gathered were as follows:

All the precautionary measures that must be adhered to and applied I must abide strictly, together with my family We are foreigners here who are thankful to this host country for the job opportunities, greener pasture. Obeying the rules is just the least we could do" (OFW#2).

It's very hard and challenging because we all know that this pandemic or specifically, this viral infection is, very fatal, it's very deadly, so all the precautionary measures must be adhered to at all times . . . we need to take care of ourselves from the virus for our family and for the future" (OFW#6).

The participants realized that when a population as a whole adopts preventative and protective behaviors, it lessens the likelihood of illness being passed from person to person, and so the disease curve will flatten out and everyone will benefit. Here, it is gleaned that an OFW's commitment, motivation, and ability to understand accountability toward others played a major role in impacting the participants' lives as the pandemic went on. They found themselves as their own motivators in following every safety protocol mandated by the government in order to keep everyone safe. They embraced the responsibility that while living in a country that was not theirs, they must be responsible individuals, so that other nationalities may follow. After all, they lived in one community.

Additionally due to the dire times, OFWs gave importance to prioritizing the safety of their families, who were either with them in the UAE or in the Philippines. The participants encouraged their family members to abide by the guidelines and to keep safe, so they were actively in contact with them. Communication was regular, if not constant, among them and their family members. For the participants, working abroad was grounded on the desire to earn on behalf of their families. Hence, they had to protect and guide them at all costs. These feelings and initiatives were evident from a number of statements: "We talk, pray, and keep on educating them on how to prevent the virus or the infections, how to clean their hands, and how to do social distancing" (OFW#2); "I'm advising them to obey or abide by the protocols in the Philippines. Most of the time they're just at home, and just go out when there are things to buy" (OFW#7).

Most of the time, we would always stay at home and if we are going out, we need to wear face masks...and maintain social distancing. Okay, double masks—always we are wearing double masks nowadays. And all the members of our family are already vaccinated." (OFW#5)

It can be gleaned from the findings that the OFW participants accentuated their socio-civic responsibilities by abiding by the rules and regulations of their host country regarding the pandemic.

They were very much aware that working onsite due to the nature and demands of their jobs was a high risk for them and their families; hence, one thing that they could do was to be totally responsible for their actions. The participants by their actions were able to instill in their family members the necessity of maintaining safety and security throughout the health crisis caused by the pandemic. Through regular communication with their families, they constantly reminded and instructed them to be as cautious and watchful as possible. With these actions, it can be implied that the OFWs' commitment to being responsible members of the community and caring parents of their families resulted in a small contribution to lowering the number of COVID-19 cases for their benefit and that of all those around them. In contrast, in the study of Khatatbeh et al. (2021), Jordanians' commitment to health measures, such as face mask use, hand washing, and physical separation, was not optimal, which may explain the substantial spike in the infectivity rate of the COVID-19 virus across that nation. Hence, it may be suggested that a greater commitment by citizens' to abiding by the health promotion guidelines and even stricter legislation is necessary.

Reflecting on the Situation. For the participants, developing positive, helpful community benefiting attitudes during the pandemic was a progressive phenomenon brought about by learning first-hand the seriousness of the pandemic and the necessity of coping with the situation. They likewise expressed advice for other OFWs in response to their difficult journey during the pandemic. Based on the analysis of their comments, they had a common caring response expressed through their desire to share an understanding of what they had experienced during the pandemic. This allowed participants to learn from their and others' experiences and stand on their own feet, and it assisted them in getting through the pandemic. Several comments reflected these conclusions as follows: "You can share knowledge, experience, and even emotional/financial support" (OFW#3); "To other people, while they are working, they need to start saving money for the future so that when they lose their jobs, they have savings" (OFW#4).

Whatever happens if that is a pandemic or something like a disaster or a big problem or whatever it is, the most important thing for you to do is to realize the lesson from it and reflect on it. Another thing, the saying "experience is the best teacher" means not only learning from your own experiences, but also from others' situations and experiences." (OFW#5)

During the course of the pandemic, participants were able to appreciate the life lessons gained that they now considered to be fundamental to who they are and what they prioritize in their lives. As they shared about how they could support others, adjust to the situation, advise others about saving strategies, and consider experience as the best teacher, they actually implied that going through the pandemic was not a totally atrocious experience. Rather, it has been an experience for many OFWs that widened their philosophical horizons and personal values. Changes might be inevitable, but the individuals who adapted to and understood the basis for the societal changes occurring and subsequently made personal adjustments ended up bettering themselves as a result of the pandemic. This suggests that understanding the implications arising from a challenging event and making appropriate adjustments helped these OFWs cope with the unfolding situation, and thus enabled them to move forward. As Velazquez (2020) opined, as destructive as it appears, the present health catastrophe has enlightened people on the frailty of humans, the helplessness of humans, the limited effectiveness of technological advancements, the rediscovery of the common good and human unity, and the unavoidable power of death. With such lessons, the world can be more than ready to face any other cataclysm in the future.

Wising up on Finances. The participants talked about some methods that they utilized in order to handle necessary expenditures. The participants also expressed that the pandemic had taught them that they had far more potential for good than they gave themselves credit for, such as they could not afford to go out to restaurants, stores, bars, theatres, concerts, etc. They saw how much money they could save if they refrained from indulging in these activities as often as before the pandemic. They learned from their everyday experiences that they should never assume that their income would continue indefinitely and that they should create a lifestyle budget to prepare for unexpected expenses. These conclusions were based on the following comments: "The pandemic has taught me

more about budgeting in a more effective way. Thinking that maybe anytime we need it . . . we [incur] expense, I have to put in mind the needs, not the wants. So, I minimize going shopping” (OFW#1) and “So I calculate my expenses. Then, of course, I limit my budget, for example, this month I’m just going to use 3000 to 4500 dirhams (UAE currency) for the whole family, and that’s the budget set; it shouldn’t go over that” (OFW#6).

The pandemic has compelled the OFWs to become cautious in handling their expenditures and finances; this includes prioritizing their needs over their wants as individuals and/or as a family, and preparing emergency funds in case of an unexpected situation emerging. Another way that the OFWs handled their finances during the pandemic was by setting a limit on how much they planned to spend in a month, as well as calculating their planned expenditures in such a month. The economic pressures arising on account of the coronavirus outbreak led to OFWs putting off about 43% of major purchases, 31% reduced spending on food, and about 28% used their savings or increased their credit card debt (Karpman et al., 2020). The devastating economic effects of the pandemic have required many people to reevaluate their finances and cut back on expenses. Some found small ways to save, such as canceling unnecessary subscriptions, while others had to make bigger shifts, such as moving in with family members to save money on housing (Schnalzer, 2021).

The Pandemic: A Psychological Battleground

Putting up with Negativities. The COVID-19 pandemic may have long-term implications for OFWs’ mental situations. Increased anxiety symptoms and poorer access to care and resources for people with pre-existing mental health conditions resulted from the pandemic, as well as a decline in the accessibility of certain family, social, and mental support services due to the physical/social distancing requirements. The negative attitudes and behaviors that OFWs felt during the pandemic were highlighted in their statements. It is undeniable that these OFWs experienced negativities as a result of this untimely occurrence. This is reflected in the following comments: “When we heard some news that some of our colleagues were positive and they [were] becoming sick, admitted, and isolated . . . when my whole family was sick because of this COVID, I was very depressed . . . I couldn’t perform well at work” (OFW#3); “It’s really hard since the communication between students is being done through online platforms. And not doing that for so long at some point, there would be the feeling of loneliness . . .” (OFW#6); “Anxiety, stress, scared, and other negative thoughts. Worried that we might get infected every time we go outside for groceries and worried for their family . . .” (OFW#7); and

There is sadness because I thought what if there was no pandemic? How will the outcome be for my work, what are the possibilities? Who are the people that we can possibly meet? There is sadness in thinking about these “what ifs.” (OFW#5)

The OFWs felt negative emotions such as anxiety, worry, and loneliness due to the unsafe and uncertain conditions of the surroundings with respect to the pandemic. On top of those, OFWs felt deep concern for their family and relatives; thus, they felt uneasy and disturbed even during work hours. This uncertainty about what might occur in the coming days truly added to every person’s fear in the midst of the pandemic (Jiwani et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Karatas & Tagay, 2021). Moreover, during the health crisis caused by the pandemic, the potential and invisible threats may have magnified anxiety-related responses, such as worry. The nature of the threat caused by the pandemic led to uncertainty and a perceived lack of control, as well as increased anxiety (Taha et al., 2014; Sadiković et al., 2020). When the cause or progression of the disease and outcomes were unclear, rumors sprang up and close-minded attitudes tended to eventuate (Ren et al., 2020; Shi, 2020). Likewise, it is notable that multiple stressors—including movement restrictions, separation and/or isolation from family and friends, the uncertainty of the future, fear of being infected, stress from the continuous environmental changes, the constant feeling of weariness and boredom, and financial loss are a few of these factors—may have exacerbated negative psychological impacts and played a role in aggravating poor mental health (Marzo et al., 2021; Serafini et al., 2020). It is undeniable that many facets of people’s lives, including their livelihoods, were disrupted as a result of the movement

restrictions and quarantine, on top of the potential to set off a wide variety of psychological problems and responses, which could be lasting or—worse yet— permanent (Respati et al., 2021).

Overcoming Emotional Burdens. The participants revealed various ways in which they adapted to cope with changes in their psychological well-being as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants had various coping mechanisms. Nevertheless, they commonly shared the desire to survive and get through the experience. In the same way, they intended to help themselves fight stress while also increasing their control over their behavior and attitudes. Participants' comments indicated that they were able to cope by accepting and acknowledging the situation with optimism and faith, developing a more hopeful perspective on the world, and establishing deeper connections with their families. These thoughts are evident in the following excerpts: “I had a lot of ‘what ifs,’ I had a lot of thoughts, I just sort out my thoughts, why I am here, and just keep on having positive thoughts. Be stronger than your emotions” (OFW#5); “I always communicate via Zoom every week with my sister in the Philippines . . . that makes me strong and inspired . . .” (OFW#6); “We spend our time at home watching movies, eating more, playing tennis, and exercising . . .” (OFW#7); and

I am holding on by accepting the reality, by preparedness and awareness given by the DOH here in Abu Dhabi, and by prayer . . . I don’t overthink about these things anymore, and I put my trust and belief in God, since He is bigger than COVID-19.” (OFW#4)

While OFWs described their emotional burdens in the midst of the pandemic, they were—on the other hand—positive in facing the situation by maintaining proper, regular, and quality communication with their loved ones, embodying an optimistic outlook, and having faith in God. They implied that with the conclusion of the pandemic still in question, they could use this time to strengthen their relationships with their families and teach their children valuable lessons. Evidently, with these coping mechanisms, the OFWs were able to establish values of hope, resilience, and connection. Moreover, it was also revealed that family relationships could be fostered by engaging in home sports and healthy lifestyles in the form of exercises. For these OFWs and their families, their new routines were considered a wonderful avenue for opening up to one another and thus seemingly forgetting the pains and travail the world was going through because of the pandemic. Kaur et al. (2020) indicated that mental health problems were reported during the early stages of the pandemic. Many, however, shifted their focus to home activities, which substantially aided in regaining their mental and physical health. Elsewhere, the pandemic also led to increased communication between family members (Cleofas et al., 2021), similar to the case of the OFWs and their families in the UAE or in the Philippines, which then lightened the inconvenience caused by the afflictions encountered. Despite the fear that comes from not knowing how a pandemic will play out, and in the face of fatigue towards policy responses to that uncertainty, optimism helped people to find a way out of the darkness and to deal better with the pandemic's impacts (Eva et al., 2020). Meanwhile, as another way to cope with the COVID-19 epidemic, it is believed that religious activities and belief systems played a vital part in the lives of OFWs. In accordance with previous research, individuals could be observed improving their coping by assigning religious significance to such cataclysmic circumstances (James et al., 2019; Munawar & Tariq, 2018; Zahra et al., 2021).

Conclusions

The findings and discussion of this study have led to unfolding the experiences of OFWs in the UAE amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. From this study, it was concluded that the pandemic impacted different life aspects of the OFWs, who learned different necessary safety and precautionary measures in order to stay safe. Moreover, due to the pandemic, the financial situation of the OFWs was affected. Hence, they resorted to being more cautious and smarter in spending their finances by applying methods, such as budgeting and having emergency savings, in order to better stabilize their financial state. Additionally, the psychological health of the OFWs was affected. They experienced negative emotions such as anxiety, loneliness, and fear, but they still found ways to cope by keeping a positive mental attitude and keeping in touch with family and close friends. In general, the present researchers concluded that the experiences of OFWs in the UAE were not distinct from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, these OFWs were more isolated, unable to travel home, and thus were more stressed given the accountabilities they had towards their families back in the Philippines. This study then accentuated that the choice to work in another country, like the UAE, required a significant amount of sacrifice and compromise, most especially when there was a crisis. Like many migrant workers in the world, being away from one's family for an extended period of time, especially when there was no clarity about what lay ahead, including the dangers abroad, was excruciating for both the body and the mind. Nevertheless, what is worth emphasizing from the experiences of OFWs was their faith in God and in themselves. Likewise, the values of optimism, family spirit, and persistence to keep going amidst a public health crisis are qualities that must be embodied by anyone who would dare to migrate and work away from their native land. Hence, not only is this research relevant to Filipinos, but the study's findings could also provide a perspective into the working lives of UAE migrants from other nations.

Our findings could benefit the general public as they become more cognizant of the experiences and position of OFWs during the recent health catastrophe. Likewise, as the objective of this study was to understand and give meaning to the experiences of OFWs in the UAE, it could be concluded that the findings of this study could raise awareness of future plights that OFWs might have to endure while being committed and dedicated to their overseas jobs amid a cataclysmic circumstance.

Nonetheless, since the focus of the researchers was on analyzing the lived experiences of selected OFWs in the UAE, the data collected cannot be generalized beyond the specific group studied. A wider demographic, such as other expatriates of diverse nationalities, may yield significant and intriguing findings. Their lived experiences might vary from those of the OFWs. Thus, the researchers recommend future studies to explore this area and to include aspects not included in this study.

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