Relationship dynamics of trailing spouses before and during a time of crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – This qualitative study explores how trailing spouses form their relationships before and after a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and what patterns can be observed. It explores their significant relationships with friends and extended family, focusing on dynamics and change.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with seven trailing spouses in Malaysia: before the pandemic, in the beginning and at the end of the first year of the pandemic. The authors used longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis (LIPA).

Findings – Being aware of the limits of resources emerged as a key factor in how trailing spouses develop and maintain relationships with friends and extended family. The fact that the pandemic changed the dynamics of their social networks illuminates how crucial these relationships or their absence are in their adjustment and readjustment process. Children play a significant role in these relationships.

Research limitations/implications – Comparative research into the friendships and relationships of different groups of trailing spouses in various locations could capture more specificity of the relationship dynamics.

Practical implications – The explored patterns can promote a better understanding of the relationship dynamics of trailing spouses' networks, which can, in turn, support and facilitate both adjustment and repatriation processes. They can help explain how and what kind of social networks best support trailing spouse transition during a time of crisis or adjustment. These findings could be incorporated into intercultural training programs.

Originality/value – No current study that the authors know of has explored trailing spouses' relationship dynamics in a longitudinal study before and during a crisis.

Keywords Trailing spouses, Relationships, Extended family, Friendships, Crisis, Qualitative longitudinal research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Trailing spouses' adjustment has been a recurring theme in global mobility research. The terms "accompanying partner" and "expatriate spouse" refer to the female or male who follows the expatriate and is also known as a "trailing spouse". The key is that this individual has moved to support their spouse without the intent to work in a foreign country (see also:

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Shaffer and Harrison, 1998; Tahir and Chamas, 2019). Social relations have a prominent role in developing an effective adjustment process and have been extensively researched in the literature (McNulty, 2011, 2012; Gupta *et al.*, 2015; Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; Chen and Shaffer, 2018; Webber and Vögel, 2019; Rashid *et al.*, 2021). Besides acquired social networks, contact with extended family is also important for well-functioning families (Andreason, 2008; Haslberger and Brewster, 2008; Gupta *et al.*, 2015; Shah *et al.*, 2022). However, although exploring the systems of relationships is vital to understanding the social connections formed by trailing spouses, it is a little-studied field of research. Due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, both the development and maintenance of social relations (Chan, 2021; Dahlberg, 2021; Rudert *et al.*, 2021) and contact with the extended family (Eftimie, 2020; Olsen, 2022; Reece, 2022) played a key role. They were also crucial in developing a successful adjustment process and maintaining a successful transnational lifestyle over an extended period, where each family member could identify their own adjustment as successful on an individual as well as on a familial level.

This research explores the relationship network of trailing spouses and how its dynamics change during a crisis such as a pandemic. There has been no such research in the field of expatriate family research.

Social interactions play a significant role in expatriate families' international assignments, as in many cases, 'social communities' are the main or only groups with which trailing spouses and their children interact. There is a need to investigate more about these relationships (Dang *et al.*, 2021).

The study aimed to shed light on the following research questions:

RQ1. How do trailing spouses make sense of their relationships, and how do they maintain their connections?

RQ2. How has the dynamic of their relationships changed after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical considerations

Social network and support

Support is "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient" (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984, p. 1). Social support can be informational, instrumental, emotional, or feedback (Adleman and Kompella, 1988; House *et al.*, 1988). These close relationships can provide a paradoxical relationship of immense positive experiences and, at the same time, provide more social conflict and disappointment (Antonucci *et al.*, 1998; Pietromonaco and Rook, 1987).

Bayraktar (2019) dissected the social support network of expatriates into four categories: home-country nationals, host-country nationals, compatriots (same-citizen expatriates) and foreign expatriates. Expatriates use social networks to reduce uncertainty and cope with stressful situations, especially during adjustment (Albrecht and Adelman, 1984; Liu and Shaffer, 2005). They need intra- and intergroup relations as this adjustment does not happen in a social vacuum (Liebkind, 2008). In expatriates' adjustment processes, social and fictive kin also play an essential role. They provide them with the material and social support that enables newcomers to integrate into a new society (Ebaugh and Curry, 2000). Expatriates with home and host country social networks are more likely to use these to access support (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002; Johnson *et al.*, 2003). Research into the home country as a source of social networks is less developed; more studies have focused on the host country (Ballesteros-Leiva *et al.*, 2017; Mao and Shen, 2015; Shen, 2010).

Based on social support theory, there are three important theoretical perspectives: (1) stress and coping, (2) social constructionist and (3) relationship (Lakey and Cohen, 2000).

Expatriate network characteristics directly and significantly influence expatriate psychological well-being (Wang and Kanungo, 2020). The trailing spouse has a fundamental role in forming expatriate social network support and concluding a successful assignment. (Shaffer and Harrison, 1998, 2001; Tahir and Chamas, 2019). Transnational families' social network support is mainly provided by their extended family and by their friendships.

Transnational families and support. Transnationalism is "a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders" (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1992, p. 9). Family support includes financial and material, practical, emotional and moral, aimed at improving psychological well-being, personal care and accommodation and providing shelter and security (Finch and Mason, 1993). The question is how transnational families are able to care for each other, especially as they are separated by time and distance. Technology has helped to mitigate this problem and gives rise to more frequent and complex multidirectional communication between members (Miller and Madianou, 2012). It is essential that members of these transnational families maintain a sense of family (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2020), despite being physically distant for periods, which does not take away their feeling of belonging to the family (Baldassar, 2010). Thus, the maintenance of these relationships depends on effort and resources in terms of communication and travel (Lubbers *et al.*, 2021).

Friendships and support. Social networks give opportunities for members to establish stronger connections with other members. Social penetration theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) states that people continuously evaluate interpersonal rewards and costs associated with interaction in developing interpersonal relationships. The theory describes the process of the bonding connection that moves a relationship from superficial to more intimate. This movement can be defined by tie strength, the extent to which network members feel close to one another. This close friendship tie can be described by emotional intensity, amount of time spent together, or reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties can provide a sense of emotional support and personal identity (Leonard and Onyx, 2003). However, weak ties, such as acquaintance ties, do not provide these benefits.

Friendship can be defined as a long-term relationship of mutual affection and support (Fehr, 1996; Hruschka, 2010). Exploring the strength of these ties helps us understand the type of relationship that develops. Spencer and Pahl (2018), identifying the strength of relationship ties, categorized several relationship types, such as associates, useful contacts, fun friends, favorite friends, comforters, confidants, help-mates and soul-mates. When we look at relationships in terms of strength, friendship has a broader definition, and each category does not necessarily provide mutual support. According to Apostolou and Keramari (2021), the different levels of reciprocation lead to the degree of friendship one experiences.

Creating strong-tie friendships is not only directed by social network accessibility but led by individual choice. Friendships can be built on similarities (Kupersmidt *et al.*, 1995; Laursen, 2017). Apostolou *et al.* (2021) have found that people make friends for four different reasons (1) to make a supportive network, (2) to have others with whom to socialize and enjoy their time, (3) to help find a mate (4) and to benefit the person in achieving their personal and career goals. On the other hand, Apostolou *et al.* (2021) reveal the reasons why people choose not to make friends: low trust, lack of time, introversion, being too picky, fear of rejection and pragmatic reasons. In the expatriate community, the time has an expanded meaning, as explained by Langkamp (2021, p. 9), "a situationship as often heard in expatriate circles is a friendship marked by a strong sense of respect for privacy and independence knowing that at some point in the future you will geographically part ways, but you appreciate and enjoy each other's company for this moment." Expatriates may confide in friends less but rather find people to enjoy the moment with.

Expatriates, crisis and pandemic

The words crisis and disaster have been combined and used interchangeably. A crisis can become a disaster if ignored or mismanaged (Al-Dahash *et al.*, 2016). Thus, disasters are usually sudden traumatic events that are dangerous and overwhelming (Figley, 1985). Lerbinger (2012) explains a crisis as an unexpected, sudden event with a low probability but high impact. Within the expatriate community, the trigger of a crisis determines if it is an interactional or a reactionary crisis. McNulty *et al.* (2019) describe the interactional crisis as stemming from an expatriate's actions and building on the person-environment fit theory. Fee *et al.* (2013) give trigger examples of reactionary crises that can lead to evacuation, such as (1) medical emergency, including any local pandemic, (2) natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, or fires, (3) irregular man-made crises that include unrest, either military or civil; (4) regular man-made crises such as work accidents. The key to managing any disaster or crisis is sustaining the family and social cohesion while reinforcing all support and self-help networks. Montano and Savitt (2020) argue that the Covid-19 pandemic does not fit into an existing classification of hazardous events, thus requiring an additional category, while according to Caligiuri *et al.* (2020), the pandemic was declared a global crisis and has led to increased cross-border distance problems, travel restrictions and limited international mobility. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic, defined as a global crisis or a new phenomenon, caused the most significant challenge ever experienced to the global movement of people (Collings and Sheeran, 2020) and to transnational families.

Expatriates and social networks in a pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, expatriates who had a more extensive network of close ties reported feeling less lonely than others who had a smaller network (Kovacs *et al.*, 2021). However, during a crisis of this magnitude, social networks start "turtling up," meaning focusing on stronger ties (Romero *et al.*, 2016) and shrinking (Forgette *et al.*, 2009; Shea *et al.*, 2015). The nature of COVID-19 lockdowns and expatriates reaching out for closer ties led to 'digital kinning', which includes calls, text messages and social media posts (Baldassar and Wilding, 2020). Digital kinning characterizes transnational care relationships and kin-like relationships (Baldassar, 2023). It is a process of maintaining support networks through new digital technologies, enabling families to be connected across distance and without physical proximity. These repetitive practices of digital kinning reinforce the bonds of kinship (Wilding *et al.*, 2020). This concept highlights family connectedness that could transcend distance and borders (Sahlins, 2011). Social support is a universal need (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan *et al.*, 2005; Baumeister and Leary, 2017) that is found in these close relationships.

Method

Research design

The research is based on a three-phase qualitative method. The research design has evolved, drawing on the nature of a pandemic. The original research design aimed to explore transnational families' successful adjustment to the host country and their social network dynamic during their international assignment. The data collection started at the end of 2019. However, once the pandemic emerged, we adjusted the research design to the global phenomena and decided to follow up on the experiences of trailing spouses prior to and in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data gathered before and after a particular event can be applied to capture experiential transition and enables researchers to structure the dynamics of the participants' experience (Farr and Nizza, 2019). It also brings into focus new phenomena tied to one or more time points.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants. In the first phase, based on the original research design, in-person interviews were conducted at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. In the second phase of the research, as part of the adjusted

research design, interviews were conducted online at the end of March 2020 and the beginning of April 2020, when the Movement Control Order (MCO) [1] was put in place in Malaysia. In the final third phase of the research, interviews were also conducted online at the end of December 2020. Even though the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) [2] was in place, four participants had already moved to another country, either temporarily or permanently. Interviews were conducted in English by the first author.

We used snowball sampling as a non-probability sampling technique, drawing on expatriate networks in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 'Snowball sampling consists of identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers to other respondents' (Atkinson and Flint, 2001, p. 1).

To best capture the relationship dynamic of trailing spouses, we applied longitudinal interpretative analysis (LIPA), adding a temporal dimension to standard designs by gathering data at multiple time points (Farr and Nizza, 2019). Multiple interviews with the same participant can be applied to investigate change longitudinally. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is used to explore the lived experience of individuals in a particular context.

The study received research ethics permission granted by ELTE Eötvös Loránd University. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality has been protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Sample

The research participants were clearly defined at the beginning of the study. A purposive sample was recruited based on the IPA methodology (Smith *et al.*, 2022). IPA requires a homogeneous and small sample (Brocki and Wearden, 2006; Oxley, 2016). Before the pandemic, the original study aimed to explore transnational families' relationship dynamics. We had started to recruit participants, but as the pandemic started, instead of recruiting new participants, we decided to follow up with the original participants; hence the final number is seven. The seven interviewees can be considered homogenous from the perspective of being a trailing spouse, having at least one child in the international primary education system and living as an expatriate family in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, at the time of the first and second phases of the research (Table 1).

Data collection

We conducted the interviews with seven participants at three-time points: (T1) pre-pandemic, at the end of 2019, beginning of 2020; (T2) one-two week after MCO in Malaysia; (T3) at the end of 2020, when RMCO was in place in Malaysia.

The sample size was determined by practical restrictions, the richness of individual cases and the strength of commitment to a case-by-case approach (Smith and Osborn, 2007). The primary concern of IPA is a detailed account of individual experience. The issue is quality, not quantity and given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases (Smith *et al.*, 2022, p. 59).

Data analysis

Analysis followed the steps suggested by Smith and Nizza (2022) and Smith *et al.* (2022), and we utilized the modified and slightly refined new terminology for the analysis.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was analyzed independently before moving on to the next one. The transcript was read several times, and then exploratory notes were made. These notes were next structured into experiential statements (Smith and Nizza, 2022), then patterns and relationships between these statements were clustered.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Spoken languages	Number of children	In Kuala Lumpur (years)	Location at the time of the third interview
Ben	Male	35	Hong Kongese, previously Philippines	Hokkien, Cantonese, Fujian, Mandarin, English	2	2	Malaysia
Fatima	Female	33	Indian (Karnataka)	English, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam	2	2	Malaysia
Kiara	Female	39	Indian (Chennai)	English, Tamil, Hindi	2	2	India
Emma	Female	40	Italian	Italian, English	2	9	Malaysia
Violet	Female	40	Australian	English	3	2	Australia
Sandra	Female	36	Canadian	Cantonese, English	2	5	United States
Maria	Female	47	German	German, English, French	2	3	Switzerland

Table 1.
Distribution of demographic variables of trailing spouses

Subsequently, a second-order cross-case analysis was conducted, and group experiential themes (GETs) were developed. Particular attention was paid to differences between the personal experiential themes from the first, second and third interviews, as we were interested in how participants' experiences changed over time.

The following research question was formulated: How do trailing spouses experience/make sense of their social relationships before and during a pandemic?

Results

Three GETs (Smith and Nizza, 2022) were developed with nine additional subthemes (Table 2):

(1) The formation of trailing spouses' friendships – from reaching out to bonding;

(2) Being aware of the limits of resources – from having a choice to no choice in time allocation;

(3) Back to the roots – from routine connection to adapted connection.

The formation of trailing spouses' friendships

Escape from struggle and boredom. Emma got pregnant immediately after moving to Malaysia. She felt lost and desperately wanted to connect with someone, to belong to her new place. Before moving to Malaysia, she had a job, colleagues and friends, but all were missing here. She emphasized the differences between herself and her potential connections, yet all she wanted was to meet up with others.

> I was just meeting people and my neighbors who are a bit older than me, we were going out for lunch . . . they were getting drunk . . . I really felt like I couldn't find my dimension because I could not meet anyone with the same interest at that moment (Emma, T1).

Violet initially made a "kind of connection", yet she struggled. Being reachable at the very beginning is crucial. If there is no opportunity for that, such as in an empty condominium, it

Group experiential themes	Subthemes	Quotes
1. The formation of trailing spouses' friendships	1. Escape from struggle and boredom MEET	One of my neighbors is my mom's age, so she was a few years older than me, but . . . I just wanted to meet someone and not struggle, because otherwise, it was so boring. (Emma, T1)
	2. Sharing struggling moments, sharing experience SHARE/TALK	About the time we started hanging out with the Indian expatriates, I also started making friends . . . so it ended up being a fun . . . bunch. (Kiara, T1)
	3. Friends feeling like home, feeling like family QUASI FAMILY	But once you go to church, they all serve . . . Family gathering. Celebrate Christmas, birthdays together . . . So, it's just like our family. (Sandra, T1)
2. Being aware of the limits of resources	1. Awareness of time To invest or not to invest in being together	I won't do this now because we are leaving then anyway and like not worth making any new friends because we are leaving anyway. (Maria, T1)
	2. Awareness of personal wellbeing Invest in personal well-being, where friendship is a by-product	My closest friend here, who is Malaysian, I met her through sports, and now we just meet outside. (Emma, T1)
	3. Awareness of meaningful connections What if there is not enough time No choice in time PRECIOUS TIME	I've been messaging more. So I've been more aware of the . . . the preciousness of time. So I've been more engaging with my Mom. (Ben, T3)
3. Back to the roots - from routine connection to adapted connection	1. Maintaining family connections, care and support; creating memories ROOTING	All I did was go out with them, meet these cousin's sisters . . . I pretty much relaxed for three days. He [husband] took the boys to his cousin's place and they had a blast as well. (Fatima, T1)
	2. Missing Re-establishment RE-ROOTING When well-known routines have obstacles	Like just having people in your home, sitting down sharing a meal, is a much easier way to kind of re-establish yourself and re-establish your life back here than doing it over you know a computer, or behind a mask or whatever we had to do . . . The pandemic has like permeated everything in our lives and just made it a little bit more complicated (Violet, T3)
	3. Social connections through kids LINK-ROOTING Kids as facilitators in connections	But it was when [daughter] was born, my life has changed . . . I started going to playgroups, I met other moms of the same age, so they had the same problem as me . . . I was starting a proper life, with people, social life. (Emma, T1)

Table 2.
Summary of group experiential themes and subthemes

creates obstacles in initial adjustment. Timing can also be significant in planning the settling-in period.

> We rationalized that if we had the school holidays, we could settle, the kids could explore Malaysia and have fun . . . but actually, what ended up happening was that everyone was away, that even in our local neighborhood, there were no kids around (Violet, T1).

Proximity can be defined as nearness in space in the living environment, but it can also occur in a connection. Spouses' colleagues are a common source of first friends and can be the only connection initially. Newly arrived trailing spouses aim to discover all the potential sources to meet people and connect, often based on interests or nationality. Experiencing the absence of friends can be an obstacle in settling in.

Nevertheless, none of these connections were identified as close or significant but reachable. One of these connections that all participants mentioned was a coffee-lunch social network. They spent time together during the day when their children were in school and their spouses were at work. It became a routine. However, as the pandemic significantly impacted their routines and their freedom to socialize, their daily social network changed. It switched from group to one-to-one modality, from daily chats to video connections. It also created an ambivalence, captured perfectly in Kiara's narrative. She mentioned that as they did not know each other that intensely, as their friendship was new, she did not have online group calls with them.

> So, my online friends, I'm not missing, but my offline friends, the coffee dates and the lunch hanging out, and the things that I am really missing . . . Like I've known them for maybe one or two years, so we have not really struck that kind of friendship where we talk and do stuff online (Kiara, T2).

Sharing struggling moments, sharing experience. After creating their first connections in their new countries, participants explained how they shared their daily lives with others. It could still create a profound bond between them; however, simply going through it together does not mean establishing a meaningful friendship.

One typical experience the participants mentioned was being part of an expatriate bubble, a community that is easy to reach and live in because members are in similar circumstances.

> I think it's a bit everywhere the same that you are a bit in a bubble . . . I think I got very used to that and maybe, in the end, it's easier to have friends who are not local because . . . that's more your lifestyle and they have more the same problems that you (Maria, T1).

Kiara mentioned that living in an expatriate bubble is a 'mind-blowing' experience, yet she initially struggled to create her social life. She connected with compatriots where their nationality was the facilitator. This connection gave her support, courage and a bridge to be able to reach out to other expatriates outside her initial bubble as well as other nationals.

Participants tended to maintain friendships even after being based in different countries as their mutual experience provided the strength and desire to continue these friendships even across borders. Spending time with others or having the same interest can also create a 'just to talk to someone' friendship.

> Became helpful when I got depressed . . . I remember one friend we went for an 8-hour hiking, and we were just talking about my struggle for that eight hours (Ben, T1).

How have these relationships changed after the pandemic? A sudden event can change the function of an existing group, and it can become a venue for talking about their struggles because they are experiencing the same challenges. Kiara explained how her parents' group unexpectedly changed from inactivity one moment to the next and suddenly had a lot more "chatter".

At the time of the second interview, none of the participants mentioned that they would seek new friends. They connected with more of their friends with whom they had deep relations,

either in their location or other locations, including their home country friends. While it is common to chat widely in normal times, they aimed for meaningful connections in times of crisis.

Experiencing restrictions and uncertainty also led participants to be more cautious with in-person meetings, and, despite their freedom in movement and socializing, they avoided meeting in their usual way. Outdoor meetings and activities such as hiking with talking seemed a safe option to stay connected.

Friends feeling like home, feeling like family. As the relationship becomes more profound and becomes a meaningful connection with an accumulated meta-meaning, it can extend to a "feel like family" or "feel like home" level.

In their previous community, Sandra and her family had a deep and strong connection to their church. She perceived this community as a big family with strong connections and support.

> It's very amazing. Like always, 'uncle' and 'auntie' we call them uncles and aunties . . . Family gathering. Celebrate, you know, Christmas, birthdays together . . . So, it's just like our family (Sandra, T1).

However, just being a community member, even for a long time, does not necessarily mean they can create this special bond. After five years in her new community, Sandra still had no friends in her "new" church.

Emma felt at home in Malaysia from the moment she created a profound friendship. Having someone she could call even during the night without guilt made her feel at home. She intends to provide the same support to newcomers to help their adjustment. While socializing could work by routines, deepening a relationship takes time and effort. Creating a special bond is never easy and can also highlight aloneness.

> I think the hardest is finding new friends that you . . . really friends . . . not just superficial contacts (Maria, T1).

Mutual experience and support can deepen a solid relationship during a crisis. Even a collegial relationship can provide a higher level of connection, a feeling of safety and support. Sandra named this special bond with one of her neighbors as similar to the one with her parents. As Sandra's parents live in another country, this connection acts like a substitute local family, a quasi-family.

> My neighbor was very, very kind . . . Always willing to hug each other, and very caring, especially with our family. You know, just like our, you know, just like my, just like our parents in the States, you know (Sandra, T3).

The uncertainty caused by a pandemic can completely overwrite earlier settling-in patterns and bonding processes. Kiara felt neither safe nor comfortable reaching out to her friends, who could have helped facilitate her perception of feeling at home.

> Do I feel safe even hanging out with friends who are a very big part of defining home for me earlier? No. Not physically anymore . . . If we just wanted to meet people, there are plenty of people that we could've met, otherwise, in normal times. But because this is our normal now, there is zero socializing; we haven't even reached out to them (Kiara, T3).

Being aware of the limits of resources

Awareness of time – to invest or not to invest in being together. Time as a resource was not directly investigated in this longitudinal research, yet it became one of the most important elements of in-person social connections. Expatriates' concept of time is most likely temporary, as is their peers', which means that 'sooner or later, either I leave, or you leave'. Therefore it is difficult to plan, and it is challenging to implement a cost-benefit analysis of a friendship surrounded by uncertainty. As Maria mentioned, it almost feels like it is not even worth investing time in a new friendship.

> Because then you sort of get like yeah, but I won't do this now because we are leaving then anyway and like, not worth making any new friends . . . Yeah, so you almost don't want to know too long in advance (Maria, T1).

Establishing meaningful relationships needs time. In this context, anyone can make a voluntary choice. Violet questioned whether short-term relationships could reach the richness and depth of friendships created within a long-term community bond.

> We have friends, but they are probably more "outer circle" than friends that have been in my life for several years, which is what you get when you grow up in one community (Violet, T1).

Proximity and frequency could create a more profound friendship, but not necessarily. If there is no alignment, they will not facilitate new relationships. As Sandra mentioned, within her new church, she could not create the same bonds as in her previous church. The lack of participation and involvement and the size of the community can be an obstacle.

At the beginning of the pandemic, participants refused to invest any time into new, short-term relationships. They focused on maintaining their long-term relationships instead of creating new connections. However, in the last phase of the research, they again started to invest time and energy into new-location friendships.

Awareness of personal well-being - invest in personal well-being, where friendship is a by-product. Friendship can be formed not only through voluntary direct actions but also through indirect actions motivated by different drives. As part of the adaptation process, trailing spouses seek out diverse activities they can start or continue in their new location to maintain mental-physical well-being. By maintaining their well-being, investing time in themselves, and deeply connecting to themselves as a by-product, meaningful friendships can evolve.

> Well, at that time, I just wanted to go hiking. I didn't . . . no objective . . . so that I can go hike . . . And then, friends were secondary at that time (Ben, T1).

Activities such as sports, music, or practicing spirituality can also provide an opportunity to step out of expatriate bubbles and meet host nationals. Again, it is not directed by a prime motivation but is led by self-needs and brings a secondary outcome.

> . . . of course, my closest friend here, who is Malaysian, I met her through sports, and now we just meet outside (Emma, T1).

Awareness of meaningful connections - what if there is not enough time. Before the global pandemic, opportunities were taken for granted. Freedom in travel and socializing with friends and families gave safety and comfort to expatriates. What happens if they lose their freedom to travel and cannot decide when and how to meet their families? This is a fundamental question – especially if a special or sudden event or health issue occurs in their extended family. The pandemic brought a new lens to expatriates' perspective on their extended families and the preciousness in their concept of time. It led them to squeeze the most out of their meaningful connections and physical co-presence with their loved ones.

Before the pandemic, Ben did not have a good relationship with his family; they did not even talk.

> The family . . . it fell apart . . . for me to communicate with her [mother], it's to visit Manila. I don't wanna visit Manila because of everybody else (Ben, T1).

During the first lockdown, Ben talked to his friend about this situation. Going through a pandemic and sharing thoughts and struggles with close friends led Ben to a change, and he called his mother after four years.

> One of the friends I was talking to . . . I haven't talked to her, to my mom, so she kind of pushed me to talk to her. About two days ago, I called my mom for the first time in four years, I think, I called my mom (Ben, T2).

As an outcome of the global situation, he realized the value of time and connections and that time is precious and is not unlimited. That led him to be more engaged with his mother.

> I still don't talk to them . . . I've been messaging more. So I've been more aware of the . . . the preciousness of time. So I've been more engaging with my Mom. I would respond faster now on WhatsApp rather than before I would delay (Ben, T3).

Travel restrictions impede expatriates from meeting their extended families, especially their parents. Not being able to be present and support their parents is a challenging struggle. In case of a severe illness, it can even impact the creation or loss of last memories together.

Participants experienced challenging situations in their life, yet they could not travel. For Fatima, being the only daughter and her father being the only parent alive, it was crucial to be present.

> My dad is going to retire from work in February. So he's very depressed. I'm very depressed in the sense that I haven't been able to see him . . . I'm desperately hoping in May or June I'll be able to go and bring my father . . . there have been nights where I've really cried thinking of my father. It's hard, it's really hard (Fatima, T3).

Emma's father got severely sick, but because of travel restrictions in Italy and Malaysia she was not able to visit him.

> My father who had another surgery, and unfortunately, the stomach cancer is back, and there's nothing they can do anymore . . . this is the most horrible thing I could ever think of. I'm trying to go and say goodbye to my father, and I can't. So, this really badly affected me, of course . . . I want to go with the kids and still spend some quality time with their grandfather (Emma, T3).

Back to the roots - from routine connection to adapted connection

Maintaining family connections, care and support. Expatriate families create a well-established routine to maintain connections with their extended families, which follows a regular schedule and is tailored to the family. Since technology improved, the connection has become more accessible and frequent online. They also arrange in-person meetings more times a year as (1) visits to the home country, (2) visits by the extended family in the host country and (3) gathering in a third, neutral place, which is not the home of any of them. These visits can take turns within families, allowing the relocated family to grant their extended family a deeper insight into their current life. However, the uncertainty of the pandemic questioned the entire system and brought changes. It caused extra worries and an urge to provide more care to their extended families.

Spouses also support meetings with each other's extended families as an integral part of their life. However, it can also create tension between spouses if they have different family connections. Providing shelter as part of their care also occurs. They might move their parents into their home country house or host their visitors in the host country.

Maintaining extended family connections includes siblings or cousins as well. Some families have well-established, close connections with wider extended families; others concentrate more on their nuclear family. Besides regular meetings, they also reach out to family members on a case-by-case basis.

Visits by the spouses can also occur separately. One spouse with children visits their home country, or they visit together but spend their time separately.

> Literally, for three days, all I did was go out with them, meet these cousins' sisters . . . I pretty much relaxed for three days. He [husband] took the boys to his cousin's place, and they had a blast as well (Fatima, T1).

The absence of togetherness can be disruptive in a host country. Emphasizing the community and its connection became a more substantial need. Violet focused on the missing element of the connection (T1), yet she felt no urge to connect more frequently. However, after the pandemic (T2), she started to take action and reached out to family members and close friends more frequently, with a different modality, such as more video calls.

Maintaining online family connections can involve many participants in one group chat. These groups can include different generations within the family and sometimes be separated by gender or connections. The contents of their conversation could vary from information sharing to deep support, from chatting to care and from general politics to daily life.

The online connection can change over time for many different reasons, such as time zone issues. Sandra used to talk much more with her family when they lived in close time zones, but from Asia, she feels it is complicated.

> I'm being too lazy to make the call. I don't know, but I remember I used to keep very close, calling my parents' side, my father, mother, you know, when I was in the U.S. (Sandra, T1).

However, this "laziness" immediately changed after the onset of the pandemic. Extra care was essential to check on parents, and there were more opportunities for weekend calls, as they all had more time. Substituting the individual calls with family group calls, including siblings' families, provided a more profound togetherness.

Spending time together also provides space for making and creating memories together. It allows further sharing to guard their memories of "home life". This creates a connection between past and present, which can be facilitated by home visits.

> I always go and visit everyone in their home ... I want the kids to have precious memories of everyone ... If we go to my aunt's place, they will ask to go to the storage room and look for the toys of my cousin when they were children (Emma, T1).

After the pandemic, families could not travel and were surrounded by uncertainty, so they created new modalities for family connections. They also forced their children to undertake more frequent and prolonged conversations on video with their grandparents.

> I really make an effort to tell the kids that 'now your turn and you call the grandparents and now it's your turn'. A lot more that we basically never done this before (Maria, T2).

Some grandparents were tech-savvy and had already used different technologies, while others were less informed and knowledgeable. During the pandemic, families were urged to support and teach them to facilitate their connection. They switched from individual connections to group conversations, which brought potential obstacles in their communication fluidity.

Their family connection during the pandemic also depended on the local situation. As Maria mentioned, they gave extra support to the paternal grandparents, but not her parents, as her parents' daily lives had not changed that much compared to their pre-pandemic life.

Missing Re-establishment. The global pandemic caused significant disruption in the adjustment process. During the third interview, four of the seven participants were in a different location.

Kiara moved back to a different state in India, where states are so diverse that she felt in between, neither being a foreigner nor local. This created an extra burden on her adaptation. She was losing well-established patterns of readjustment and questioned the process.

> Because I've returned to my home country, I need to figure out do I need social connections, do I want to re-establish the network with my family for example. What is it that I need to do? (Kiara, T3).

Violet identified the missing milestones in transition, such as "proper farewell" and "reception". She moved back to her home city, yet she perceived this readjustment process as difficult.

> I missed having everyone over and having the proper catch-up and you know it's not the same when you do it on Zoom . . . Like just having people in your home, sitting down sharing a meal, is a much easier way to kind of re-establish yourself . . . I think definitely the pandemic has like permeated everything in our lives and just made it a little bit more complicated (Violet, T3).

She also "slightly bent the rules" to facilitate her readjustment, as local pandemic regulations restricted visits to others, yet her mother visited them. Maria reached even an "illegal" level of gathering to facilitate her adaptation, as creating new connections was seen as essential.

> The other weekend they [her husband] went cycling together with the man and I was baking with my friend and then we had a little illegal lunch (Maria, T3).

Being in another location during the pandemic can create an extra level of caution. Sandra was physically close to her previous friendship network, yet they were afraid of an unexpected event and avoided any meetings.

Connections in a specific place or being close to the family during a pandemic can be supportive and comforting. Conversely, the pandemic changed participants' approach to creating new connections. They acted out routines in first-time socialization but with no confidence creating significant obstacles to the settling-in process. Maria continuously questioned herself, she did not have any anchor points. Neither her new connections nor her husband had a straightforward manual for reaching out to others.

> Let's just do it! But you wonder, even if it wasn't forbidden, you still think can I go into the house of other people and see them in their house and sit there without a mask? But we just did it once. I wish I could have more content and feel confident about having more contact (Maria, T3).

Social connections through kids. Children are one of the most significant social connection facilitators with outside connections and extended family. The latter became especially important during the pandemic when they could not regularly visit their grandparents. As gatekeepers, parents forced the virtual connection between grandparents and grandchildren to keep and maintain their roots for fear of not having more opportunities to create memories together.

Child-based social connections depend on the children's age. It seems easier to be more involved in their social life when they are younger. Having the same experience and problems as other parents can be beneficial in creating more meaningful connections and facilitating a social life. Emma explained this as a turning point in her social life.

> I started going to playgroups, and I met other moms of the same age, so they had the same problem as me . . . I was starting a proper life, with people, social life (Emma, T1).

Children can also be forced into a friendship by their parents' family social network.

> They're called family friends, where the children are forced into that friendship primarily because the parents connect with each other (Kiara, T1).

Before the global pandemic, participants took this socializing for granted. However, as they felt their health and mental well-being threatened, they paid more attention to their children's social networks and supported them in maintaining their friendship connections. Connections were affected by children's age, use of technology, or learning online conversation etiquette. This support could have also been facilitated by parents in the hope of regaining their own social life. Parents were also more permissive.

> I try to remind him [younger son] to read in between, but yeah . . . he has started, which he didn't do so much before, to actually play on the Xbox with friends together so at least they have some . . . a bit of conversation (Maria, T2).

The pandemic also affected the resources they previously used efficiently, such as their children's school, which became either a facilitator or an obstacle.

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence for how the relationship dynamics of trailing spouses develop and change during a crisis. In this longitudinal phenomenological analysis, we applied two main methods of analysis, bringing a different temporal dynamic (Farr and Nizza, 2019). In themes spanning time (1), each theme describes the progress over multiple time points of a specific aspect of the participants' experience. In our study, an excellent example of this is Ben's experience, where his concept of time changed utterly, moving from isolation to the concept of precious time, in which he overcame his anger and the importance of relationship came to the fore.

The second method is themes tied to points in time (2). An example is the sub-theme of new relationships, which was entirely relegated to the background during the second interview, and the topic of old friendships and family relationships came to the forefront.

Previous research has shown that the establishment and maintenance of family relationships (Andreason, 2008; Haslberger and Brewster, 2008; Gupta *et al.*, 2015; Shah *et al.*, 2022) and social connections (McNulty, 2011, 2012; Gupta *et al.*, 2015; Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; Chen and Shaffer, 2018; Webber and Vögel, 2019; Rashid *et al.*, 2021) play a significant role in the successful living abroad experience. However, there has been no example of research tracking the change in trailing spouses' relationship dynamics in a crisis.

Our study aimed to shed light on the following research questions: (1) How do trailing spouses make sense of their relationships, and how do they maintain their connections? (2) How has the dynamic of their relationships changed after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Social networks are vital in the adaptation of the expatriate family. Our research also draws attention to the essential dynamic of trailing spouses' friendships, taking into account the most critical feature, temporality. Similarly, research conducted with trailing mothers shows that time perception significantly shapes their emotions, motivations and behaviors (Slobodin, 2019). Lack of time is one of the obstacles to creating friendship (Apostolou and Keramari, 2021). Conversely, quality time spent with significant relationships plays a very strong supportive role, especially during a crisis such as a pandemic. Time is an important motivation factor as well, with preference given to creating and maintaining relationships in co-presence over digital kinship, and the investment of time into a new friendship conducted through physical presence. An individual circle of friends can be developed not only by a direct time investment but also as a by-product of a trailing spouse fulfilling their own well-being needs, such as sports, music activities, or practicing spirituality. This can also be important in designing programs to support their subsequent adjustment. Intercultural training curricula should be extended to include knowledge and practical information about maintaining extended family relationships and friendships, as well as social network resources and methods of creating new relationships.

Furthermore, it is essential to emphasize that friendships can reach the level of "feeling at home", "feeling like family" or quasi-family - which can lead to a more profound adaptation - as an important turning point in their adjustment. This can also be very helpful and supportive during a crisis.

Family relationships play a significant role in repatriation, and when they are impeded, such as during a pandemic, it causes a particularly difficult re-establishment. Spouses and children need to keep in touch with family and friends back home (Shaffer and Harrison, 1998). At the same time, transmitting memories to the next generation is paramount, and since these families do not spend most of their time in their home country, this process needs to be facilitated and re-enforced. In cases of impediment, an enhanced virtual connection was observed.

Social relationships created and facilitated by children and the support of children's relationships also play a crucial role. During a pandemic, there is a fear of losing the social connections maintained by or through the child. Supporting children's relationships appears in both friendships and extended family relationships. However, the family life-cycle stage (e.g. no children, school-aged children) (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002) is an essential factor.

Further research should explore how these relationship dynamics may change after the pandemic and which patterns may remain for the long term. It should also investigate more deeply how knowledge about transnational spouses' relationship dynamics can be used to support their adjustment process. Further investigation should also reveal new information about transnational spouses' motivation, priorities and planning processes through their transition journey. This knowledge should underpin the content of intercultural training to facilitate transnational spouses' adaptation.

Notes

1. MCO (18 March 2020–3 May 2020). Restricts movement and gatherings, including travel bans (unless necessary to procure or supply essential goods and services such as food, daily necessities and healthcare) and international travel bans. Gatherings for any purpose were prohibited. All educational institutions and government and private premises were required to close. From 1.4.2020 stricter travel restrictions were implemented, including restricting travel for food, daily necessities and healthcare to only within a radius of not more than ten kilometers from a person's residence, and such travel was restricted to only one person at a time.
2. RMCO (10 June 2020–31 March 2021). Travel and gathering bans are removed. Still prohibited:sports events and tournaments with spectators in attendance, outbound tour activities by a citizen and inbound tour activities involving foreign tourists, activities in pubs and nightclubs and any activity with many people in attendance with difficult social distancing.

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